



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

Volume 75

(21 May 2012 to 20 June 2012)

BELFAST: THE STATIONERY OFFICE LTD
£70.00

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Assembly Members

Agnew, Steven (North Down)
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McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)
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Minister for Employment and Learning	Dr Stephen Farry
Minister for Regional Development	Mr Danny Kennedy
Minister for Social Development	Mr Nelson McCausland
Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.....	Mrs Michelle O'Neill
Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure.....	Ms Carál Ní Chuilín
Minister of Education.....	Mr John O'Dowd
Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment	Mrs Arlene Foster
Minister of the Environment	Mr Alex Attwood
Minister of Finance and Personnel.....	Mr Sammy Wilson
Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.....	Mr Edwin Poots
Minister of Justice	Mr David Ford

Junior Ministers

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister Ms Martina Anderson (*Resigned 11 June 2012*)
Mr Jonathan Bell
Ms Jennifer McCann (*From 12 June 2012*)

Official Report (Hansard)

Assembly Sitings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 21 May 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership: Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Speaker: I would like to inform Members that I have been notified by the nominating officer of the SDLP, Dr Alasdair McDonnell, that Mrs Dolores Kelly has been replaced as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development with effect from 19 May 2012. Dr Alasdair McDonnell has notified me that he has nominated Mr Joe Byrne as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. Mr Byrne has accepted the appointment. I am satisfied that the correspondence meets the requirements of Standing Orders, and I therefore confirm that Mr Joe Byrne is Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development with effect from 19 May 2012.

Ministerial Statement

Criminal Justice: Human Tissue Retention

Mr Speaker: The Justice Minister wishes to make a statement to the House. Before I call the Minister and before we move to questions on the statement, I remind the House that we are dealing with very sensitive issues. I ask Members to bear that in mind in their questions. Members should also be mindful that certain matters may well end up before the courts and be careful in what they might say in the House this afternoon. I remind Members that the Committee Chair is the only Member who has some latitude in formulating his questions. No other Member has that latitude. I certainly do not expect further statements from Members.

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement concerning the publication of a report today by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), with the assistance of the National Policing Improvement Agency, on the retention of human tissues by police forces in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. At the outset, I would like to acknowledge the hurt and pain that some families have suffered as a result of the issues brought to light by this report. Echoing your comments, Mr Speaker, in this statement I will not refer to any individual cases. I ask Members to take the same approach.

Whilst the police acted within the law and there would have been important evidential and medical reasons for the retention of human tissue, it is an issue of deep regret and concern that families were not always involved in decisions affecting their loved ones. Although the retention of human tissue following a post-mortem examination without informing families was common practice prior to 2006, not just in Northern Ireland but across the UK, I share the views expressed by Assistant Chief Constable George Hamilton: there is a great difference between acting legally and doing what is morally and ethically right. I know that those views are shared by the Chief Constable, who will hold a press conference on the matter today. The families affected must be uppermost in our thinking, and it is a matter of deep concern that those who have suffered bereavement have had to endure further distress and upset.

As to the background to the report, the Human Tissue Authority issued a direction in 2010 requiring all mortuaries holding post-mortem tissue samples to undertake an audit of that material. To ensure a consistent approach, the Association of Chief Police Officers advised Chief Constables in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to conduct an audit of all human tissue held in connection

with suspicious deaths and murders. That included human tissue held by or on behalf of police following post-mortem examinations. Given the sensitivity of the issue and the impact across the justice system, I wanted to make this statement to the Assembly.

The PSNI established a dedicated team to carry out the audit in Northern Ireland. That audit identified 71 significant body parts that have been retained, originating from 64 victims. The cases go back as far as 1960. It should be borne in mind that that is not unique to Northern Ireland, as retained material has been identified in the audit returns from the majority of police forces in England and Wales. Although the audit did not strictly extend to the Office of the Police Ombudsman, that office identified seven significant body parts, belonging to four victims, that had been held as part of its investigations. That information has been included in the ACPO report.

I can confirm that 51 families resident in Northern Ireland where the next of kin could be identified by the PSNI have been contacted. The Office of the Police Ombudsman has also confirmed that three of the four families affected by its findings have been contacted. In all those cases, the family liaison process is ongoing, and specially trained family liaison officers remain available to the families in the weeks ahead. Steps are being taken to inform the next of kin in 10 cases where they are resident outside Northern Ireland and to identify the next of kin in a very small number of outstanding cases. It was intended that those visits would have taken place before the details of the audit became public. Unfortunately that was not possible, because the outcome of the audit was leaked. That made an already difficult situation worse, as it created undue worry and concern for families, including, specifically, families who were not affected by the findings but who will have feared that they might have been. The distress caused to those families is a matter of grave concern.

The samples identified as part of the audit were retained at post-mortem examinations to assist the police investigations into establishing the cause of death, as well as for evidential purposes. Further analysis or re-examination of such samples can often prove vital in identifying evidence that will bring an offender to justice. That is normal practice, and I must stress that all samples were taken under the appropriate legal powers.

Prior to the commencement of the Human Tissue Act 2004 in 2006 there was — indeed, there still is — no legal requirement to obtain consent for the taking and retention of human tissue at a coroner's post-mortem examination, if it is required to help determine the cause of death. However, the Human Tissue Act puts in place strict requirements for dealing with that tissue after the coroner's investigation has concluded. Those requirements do not extend to samples retained under the powers in the Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 on behalf of the PSNI. The PSNI is not bound by the terms of the Human Tissue Act, but in 2006 it decided to implement the spirit of the Act's intentions, which require that all families are informed if material is retained. That has made an important difference to the handling of recent cases and remains current practice. The PSNI will review the reasons for the continued retention of samples and ensure appropriate liaison with families. Although the body parts were kept for good and valid reasons, I am extremely mindful that

they relate to families who have lost loved ones and have suffered further hurt since the issue came to light.

I turn now to the points raised by the audit. The report makes a number of recommendations to ensure that best practice is followed in future. The recommendations cover police practice but also extend to both the Coroners Service and the State Pathologist's Department. A copy of the ACPO audit report is being placed in the Library. I will be considering the most appropriate mechanism for ensuring that the recommendations are fully implemented in consultation with relevant stakeholders. That is important to ensure public confidence. A range of organisations have an interest, and I want to ensure that the approach is clear, coherent and co-ordinated. My officials and I have already been in contact with the Human Tissue Authority, Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) and Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary to open discussions on the best approach.

Members of the Justice Committee have asked whether any tissue was destroyed prior to 2006 without a family's consent. I believe that it is both entirely natural and sensible to pose that question. On Friday, I met the State Pathologist and a senior representative of the Coroners Service. The State Pathologist clarified to me that there were past occasions when human tissue was taken without the family's knowledge and subsequently disposed of without family consent or knowledge. To many, that may seem a shocking statement. However, I need to put in context the substantive body of work that was done in Northern Ireland prior to 2006 to help build public confidence in post-mortem procedures and to recognise the proper place of families. That was primarily in response to events at the Alder Hey and Bristol hospitals. It included the establishment of an independent human organs inquiry, which critically reviewed post-mortem procedure and practice in Northern Ireland. The work covered all post-mortems, whether conducted by hospital pathologists or the State Pathologist.

The recommendations of the inquiry were far-reaching and led to a public information leaflet, which explained how families could enquire if organs had been removed or retained at a post-mortem carried out on a member of their family, being widely distributed across Northern Ireland. A dedicated human organs enquiry line, which was promoted via an extensive media campaign, was also available. I understand that over 300 families made enquiries through that line and had their concerns addressed as a result. In addition, a series of public meetings was held at which professionals, including the State Pathologist, explained the practices that they had followed and apologised for any distress caused. When the inquiry team's report was presented to the House on 5 June 2002, the then Minister of Health, Bairbre de Brún, apologised for the hurt caused to families as a result of organs being retained. On behalf of the criminal justice system, I add my apologies to those of the then Health Minister.

Today, there is, as indeed there has been for the past number of years, a very different approach to such sensitive issues around post-mortems. Medical practice is more centrally focused on the needs and interests of families, while meeting the requirements of the Coroners Service and Police Service, which have legal responsibility for the investigation of such deaths.

In the light of all that has been done in response to the human organs inquiry and the current audit, I believe that a further review of how post-mortems were conducted in the past would result only in further pain and distress for many families. However, I know from the PSNI and the State Pathologist that any family that has outstanding concerns in this area can raise those concerns with either organisation and have them responded to in a sensitive and open way. In the first instance, the helpline established by the police in conjunction with the victims' service and Victim Support will be an appropriate point of contact and will refer individuals to the organisation that can assist them best. I have spoken to both the Commission for Victims and Survivors and Victim Support Northern Ireland, and I will review these arrangements with them in two weeks' time. That will provide an opportunity to assess whether anything further needs to be done to support victims.

As regards my responsibilities looking forward, my focus is on ensuring that the recommendations of today's review are implemented fully in Northern Ireland. I am currently discussing with relevant organisations how best to achieve that, taking note of the approach to be adopted in England and Wales.

In conclusion, I repeat that I deeply regret the fresh pain that families have had to suffer since the issue became known. I appreciate that it will be difficult for families to deal with, both in terms of the shock of hearing that body parts were retained without their knowledge and the fact that their views were not sought on how the remains should be dealt with when the police investigation concluded. We cannot change the past, but lessons have already been learned on how we need to deal with such sensitive issues. I assure Members that I fully appreciate the gravity of the issue, and I will ensure that the audit's recommendations are implemented fully.

12.15 pm

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I thank the Minister for the speed with which he has brought the statement to the House, recognising its important nature. I express my heartfelt sympathy to the families involved in this, and I offer them my support as they go through what must be a traumatic occasion for them.

The Committee looked at this last Thursday. I think it is clear to most that there was not just systemic failure on the part of the police — the Minister rightly said that how things were carried out was morally and ethically wrong, albeit not illegal — but a failure on the part of the Office of the Police Ombudsman and the State Pathologist's Department. Right across the criminal justice system, there has been systemic failure. It surprises people that, although the Office of the Police Ombudsman was newly formed, this culture seems to have carried over to it. In 2002, when the State Pathologist's Department apologised following the inquiry into the retention of organs in the health service, one would have thought that it would then have undertaken a review of the criminal justice system. Clearly, that has not happened. Therefore, we call for an independent inquiry across the criminal justice system into how this has been handled. People will want to know the truth to give them full information and disclosure to help them to deal with this and to restore confidence in the criminal justice system and confidence that this will never happen again. When the

Minister reviews the situation in two weeks' time, will he consider calling for an independent inquiry?

Mr Ford: I thank the Committee Chair for his comments at the start of his contribution. It was indeed difficult to get the issue to the Committee last week and to the House today as speedily as possible while seeking to be as factually accurate as possible.

I have no doubt that work will need to continue. The Member correctly referred to the issues as they apply right across the criminal justice system, not just to the police. It is my understanding that the Office of the Police Ombudsman was not involved at the very beginning but that, becoming aware of the inquiry that was being carried out, it reviewed its practice and procedure. Indeed, the Independent Police Complaints Commission in England and Wales also did so. That body is also involved in this, although not directly coming under the authority of ACPO.

Mr Givan enquired specifically about an independent inquiry. My focus, as I have tried to make it today, has been on the needs of the families of those concerned. That is why moves have happened so speedily to ensure that the helpline is operational for them today, and that is why I said that I will do the review of how that is operating in two weeks' time. That will allow enough time to gather evidence of gaps in the way in which the bereaved relatives are being treated without allowing it to carry on too long before we ascertain what may need to be done. The key issue is to find ways of ensuring that the system is joined up and deals with the needs of those who are currently suffering anguish because of what happened in the past and that those who face the prospect of post-mortems on loved ones in the near future know that they will be fully involved. It may be that an inquiry is appropriate at that stage, and that is one of the issues that I will consider when I look at matters in two weeks' time. At this stage, we need the focus to remain on the needs of the families.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas sin inniu. I thank the Minister for his statement, and I echo the sentiments of the Chair of the Committee. Obviously, this is a complex and sensitive issue, and we all have to be very mindful of the families who are experiencing trauma at this time. The Minister said that he would revisit this in two weeks' time, so he should be mindful of the fact that, in the statement, there is an acceptance and, indeed, an acknowledgment that many families will be wondering whether human tissue belonging to their loved one —

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

Mr McCartney: — has been retained and disposed of without the family being made aware of that. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that those people are also informed?

Mr Ford: I thank the Deputy Chair for his comments. He raises the issue of families who will have concerns about practice in the past. When I referred to those who contacted the enquiry line previously, I said there were over 300 families. In fact, there were 340 calls that related specifically to coroners' cases as opposed to those related to the more routine hospital cases. Many of those who may have had concerns about the past had the opportunity to follow them up when that helpline was operational between

2003 and 2005. It is an issue that may arise, and concerns may reappear for some of those people.

It was also noticeable that the O'Hara report in 2002 noted that, although some relatives were distressed to learn that organs had been removed without their knowledge and then disposed of, the distress was:

"greater among those where organs of a loved one lay for years in containers for no reason which anybody can explain".

So, it is clearly a matter of significant sensitivity for a number of families who have been affected in different ways. The important thing for us today is to ensure that the work done by the helpline and by the organisations involved, including the Coroners Service and the State Pathologist's Department, deals with addressing those enquiries as sensitively as possible in the case of each family.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for making a statement at what is a very distressing time for the families. I follow on from Mr McCartney's point about the relatives. Does the Minister have any indication of where the leaks about the affair that he referred to in his statement came from? What process was immediately put in place to inform families and provide a helpline and support them?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Elliott for his comments. It is my understanding that it was always anticipated that the report would be published this morning, and arrangements were in hand for announcements to be made this morning both here and in London. Somebody chose to leak the report. The basis on which they did that I cannot guess, but it is absolutely clear that distress has been caused to a significant number of families, many of whom are not in any way involved in this but had feared they might be. That is an issue for those who chose to leak the report.

As a result of the leak, there were difficulties, but the Police Service, in conjunction with the Department of Justice (DOJ), sought to be as clear and as open as possible last week. The comments from ACC Hamilton were extremely helpful in reassuring people about what was being done. I asked officials to go to the Committee last Thursday afternoon, accompanied by the ACC and the State Pathologist, to ensure that the information could be given as accurately as possible at that stage, and I sought to make a statement to the House at the earliest possible opportunity. The key issue is to ensure that those who want to use the helpline are made aware of it and get the opportunity to have their fears addressed.

If I can take time a little more of your time, Mr Speaker, I will say for the benefit of the media that the number for the helpline, which is operational from today, is 90279100. So, if Members or their constituents have concerns, they can contact the helpline at any stage.

Mr McDevitt: I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board. The Policing Board considered this matter at meetings on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday of last week and will meet the Chief Constable again today to discuss it.

Does the Minister agree that this was a systemic failure in the PSNI, the Coroners Service, the State Pathologist's Department and the Office of the Police Ombudsman? That systemic failure extended not just to the handling and

policies around the management of the material but to communication with the families for whom this matter has such terribly hurtful consequences. Will he further confirm that that systemic failure extended to communications within what we today call "the system" and that, like the Policing Board, he was only made aware of the existence of the ACPO review in very recent times?

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to finish.

Mr McDevitt: Does he agree that such reviews, given their sensitivity, should not be kept secret from those to whom these bodies are accountable?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr McDevitt for his positive comments about the way we are dealing with matters, and I appreciate that the Policing Board, alongside the DOJ, has a significant issue to address.

I certainly agree with his general point: there was clearly a systemic failure. That failure did not just affect the agencies he named; it also affected health service bodies across the UK in the years up to 2006. The problem has been since then. Although current procedures are significantly better, there has clearly been a failure in going back to address those historical issues. I hope that, in giving the reassurance we now seek to provide to families, we will see what further work may need to be done. However, the exact management of it lay with the Police Service, and the Member and I may have views on whether issues could have been shared more widely in a way that was more constructive than in more than just the past few weeks.

Mr Dickson: Minister, thank you for your statement to the House at what must be a very distressing and difficult time for the relatives of victims. The House is to be congratulated on the very sensitive way in which it has dealt with these matters.

Minister, you said in your statement that you would take note of the approach to be adopted in England and Wales. Will you tell us a little more about how you will take note of that? In light of the report that is being published today, what actions will be taken in Northern Ireland to ensure a co-ordinated approach right across the United Kingdom?

Mr Ford: I thank my colleague, especially for his references to the way the House is treating this sensitive matter. This will, clearly, cause significant difficulties as we look to address matters properly in the future. I am concerned to see that we get the system right for the people of Northern Ireland, but there will, clearly, be lessons from the recommendations of the ACPO report. We will be able to learn from what is being applied by police services across England and Wales, as well as seeing that the justice system acts in a joined-up way, involving the State Pathologist alongside the police and the Department of Justice here.

The important thing will be to see that we keep up with best practice being implemented by other police forces while identifying the needs of local people. That is why my officials have already had discussions with a number of agencies, including the Human Tissue Authority, CJINI or others who may have a role. Indeed, the new Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) responsible for the PSNI was in my office on Friday, and I had the opportunity to discuss the matter face to face with him. Aspects of the matter clearly

relate to different regulatory authorities. The important thing will be to get a joined-up system so that nothing falls between the agencies but we do not have overlap. There will also be lessons to learn from the way matters are conducted across the water. I am determined to see that we get that system joined up. At this stage, however, I have not gone further than preliminary enquiries with the various agencies to see how we will do that.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his statement. Obviously, our thoughts are very much with the families directly affected by this, but, in his statement, the Minister also spoke of the families who were not directly affected by the findings but feared that they may have been. Will the Minister confirm that the helpline will be able to give information to families to indicate that their relative is not one of those affected and, therefore, give them some peace of mind?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Weir for that important point. I am not sure whether those directly answering the helpline will be able to give individuals information on whether they are or are not affected. That is the responsibility of the Police Service or the Police Ombudsman's office. As I said in my statement, 51 families in Northern Ireland have been identified and spoken to by the Police Service and three by the ombudsman's office.

The important thing will be that those manning the helpline see what other services may be necessary and appropriate, whether it be specific information from the State Pathologist, merely emotional support from Victim Support or a range of other options that will be available. The key thing is that the helpline will be the signposting point. We will be able to see the needs of families and how we seek to address them when we do the review in two weeks.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his statement. Along with other Members, I am pleased that it is a victim-based response that we are getting.

Safeguards were mentioned. The important question for everybody now is what the safeguards are, so that this will not happen again. Will the Minister go into some detail about that? Specifically, is he contemplating legislative change? In his statement, he said:

"However, the Human Tissue Act put in place strict requirements for dealing with that tissue after the coroner's investigation has concluded. Those requirements, however, do not extend to samples retained under the powers in the Police and Criminal Evidence (NI) Order on behalf of the PSNI."

12.30 pm

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to finish.

Mr G Kelly: I was putting the question in context, Mr Speaker.

Is there a possibility of bringing in legislation in which that can be covered? I know that the PSNI has said that it is going to do it in the spirit, but so that families will definitely be told if that —

Mr Speaker: Time.

Mr G Kelly: That is the question.

Mr Ford: I will try to take the questions amongst that. I appreciate the welcome that Mr Kelly has given to the comments. We are talking about the failings of the system more than six years ago. Since the new legislation came in in 2006, the police have been guided by the legislation as it applies to the health side of things as a manner of best practice, and there have been no concerns raised as to how that is done. At the moment, therefore, I do not see that there is any necessity to change the legislation. If it is guiding police practice and, apparently, problems are not arising from that, it seems that there is little need to move in that direction. At that stage, there were reasons why the legislation applied to the health system, rather than the justice system only. The important thing is to learn lessons and to see whether anything emerges from the operation of the helpline over the next two weeks and whether that may be necessary. However, at the moment, I doubt it.

Mr Wells: As the Minister is aware, the then Minister of Health and the state pathologist apologised for the retention of human tissue in 2002. Surely, at that point, the Department of Justice, under direct rule, as it was then, should have thought, "Hold on here, maybe we are also retaining human tissue without informing the relatives." First, it is inexcusable, surely, if that question was not asked. Secondly, does that not make it even more imperative to have a public inquiry into the issue?

Mr Ford: There is absolutely no doubt that Mr Wells makes a valid point as to what happened six years ago, but I am afraid that I have a very great difficulty in answering for what happened. In the context of what went wrong previously and whether there is appropriate information that would make an inquiry worthwhile, I have doubts about whether there is any value in having an inquiry into the failings of the system under direct rule in the period that led up to six years ago and which actually also covered a period of devolution prior to 1972. So we need to be cautious in assuming that an inquiry will do anything to meet the needs of families or to relieve their grief and distress. I am open to seeing whether that is appropriate, on the basis of what we discover over the next two weeks, but, at the moment, I am not persuaded that that is appropriate.

Mr Hussey: I too express my sympathy to the families concerned, and I express an interest as a member of the Policing Board. The Minister said that:

"Steps are being taken to inform the next of kin in 10 cases where they are resident outside Northern Ireland and to identify the next of kin in a very small number of outstanding cases."

How quickly can we expect the families of those 10 that are outside Northern Ireland to be informed?

Mr Ford: Mr Hussey's question is entirely reasonable. My understanding is that the majority of those 10 are elsewhere within the United Kingdom. One could assume, therefore, that, in co-operation with local police services, it will not be very long until they are informed. However, I believe that a minority of them are beyond the United Kingdom, and it is very difficult to give any timescale for them.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Given the sensitivity of the issue, I do not want to go into it in any great detail. The Minister mentioned the distress and devastation that

the families who are affected by this are feeling. He did not mention this in his statement, but is he prepared to put a support package around those families? I believe that they will need support in the weeks and months to come.

Mr Ford: Yes, and that is an entirely reasonable point about the support the families may need. I think I did say in the statement that the family liaison officers would remain there for the weeks ahead. Obviously, in the cases of some families, that will be a very short time; others may need support for longer. The operation of the helpline, involving victim support, will involve those who are particularly qualified and experienced in dealing with those who have suffered trauma as a result of crime. I do believe that a support package is there, being provided by different agencies, but the point of having the review in two weeks' time is to ensure that that is being adequately addressed.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus mo bhuíochas leis an Aire chomh maith as na freagraí go nuige seo. I thank the Minister for the way that he has dealt with this extremely sensitive issue. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families as they try to come to terms with this very difficult matter.

I want to pick up on Ms McCann's point: will the Minister outline what support and resources his Department has set aside for working collaboratively with other Departments on issues such as counselling, where required, or practical measures such as burial costs?

Mr Ford: We all echo Mr McGlone's comments about the families concerned being in the thoughts and prayers of us all. It is fair to say that, at this point, the Department has not seen the need to set aside any specific resources to deal with the matter. In the future, we may have to address the additional work to be done by, for example, Victim Support, but I have no doubt that any resources required will be found within the Department's existing budget line. I do not think that they will be particularly large, but that will depend on how many people need support and the depth of support required.

Mr Craig: I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board. I thank the Minister for his statement and, especially, for providing information on the helpline, because I also declare an interest as one of the families who needed reassurance.

A number of things are puzzling to say the least. The matter has been known about since 2010, which leads me to ask why you and others were not aware of it. Also, the same state pathologist who looked into the issue from a health —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member come to his question?

Mr Craig: — perspective in 2002 did not feel it appropriate to look into the policing issues as well. Will the Minister accept that an inquiry into all the relevant issues is needed?

Mr Ford: The way that Mr Craig raised the issue shows how sensitive the issue is for all in the House. His comments were similar to those that Mr McDevitt made about awareness across the criminal justice system, specifically the board and Department, at an early stage. Those are issues, but I am not sure whether they are necessarily issues for today, when our focus should be on meeting the needs of the bereaved. The way in which the state

pathologist related health and justice matters is clearly an issue of some concern. However, if I were convening an inquiry, I would want to do so on the basis of it being one that established something beneficial to those currently distressed, not one that merely raked up cases that might add to their distress without making any substantive difference to the outcomes.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas sin inniu. In response to my colleague Gerry Kelly, you said that there was no need for legislation, but the Human Tissue Act came into force in 2006, and the issue has not been dealt with until now.

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Lynch for continuing that point, but, as I see it, we have not had problems since the legislation was introduced in 2006. The way in which the inquiry into historical practice was conducted over the past three years is a different issue from that of whether the legislation is adequate. The impression that I have been given is that the police are adhering to best practice as it applies legislatively to the health side. Therefore, at this stage, there is no reason to believe that we need to change the legislation. However, the clear issue is that we ensure that we learn lessons from the inquiry and from the way in which families respond.

Mr S Anderson: I, too, thank the Minister for his statement and express my sympathy to all the affected families at what must be a very difficult and stressful time. The Minister touched on the 2006 legislation, but is he satisfied that the legal and administrative arrangements in place since then are adequate to ensure that such a dreadful situation will never happen again?

Mr Ford: I appreciate Mr Anderson's comments. It would be a foolish Minister who stood in this House and said that nothing would ever go wrong in the future. All I can say is that the evidence shows that the system now works in joined-up way and that it addresses, in a sensitive way, the concerns that individuals raised in the House today. That ensures that the police are adhering to best practice, and, as I just said, as that best practice applies legislatively on the health side. However, it would be foolish to say that nothing could ever go wrong in the future.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for his statement. I join with other Members in expressing my heartfelt sympathy to those families who have endured this news over the past week. Indeed, my prayers go out to them.

Does the Minister agree that the person or persons who are responsible for leaking this information prior to it becoming public did nothing to help the families accept what they were going to be told and that they left a lot of people uncertain about whether they would receive a call? Does he agree that that person or persons should hang their head in shame?

Mr Ford: Just to take the last phrase, I am not sure whether those who engage in leaks such as this would understand the concept of shame. I agree, and I thought that I made this fairly clear in my statement, that there is no doubt that the distress of families, including those who are not in any way involved in this, has been increased because they felt that they might be involved. It is noticeable that this leaked in Northern Ireland and not in any part of England or Wales, but, had the plan to allow the police and the ombudsman's office to make that contact gone through before there was any public announcement, individuals who heard about it

today in the way that it had been planned would not have been distressed, because they would have already had the news that they either were or were not involved. Therefore, I agree entirely with the sentiment of what Mr McCrea said, although I doubt whether some people have any shame about such matters.

Lord Morrow: The Minister said that some cases go back to 1960. Many of us were at school then. The Minister said:

"The report makes a number of recommendations to ensure that best practice is followed in future."

Is that falling short of saying that this will not happen again? If the legislation is not adequate, will the Minister assure us that he will seek additional legislation to ensure that it is fit for purpose?

Mr Ford: Certainly, as Lord Morrow highlights, we are talking about something that went on a considerable time ago. As I said to Mr Anderson, I do not think that I can ever guarantee that problems will not occur in the future. However, I believe that we have had a system in place for the past six years that has shown that things can be done right. I echo the point that I made to Mr Kelly and Mr Lynch when I said that, if there are issues of legislation, the Department will certainly consider them. To me, it appears that the police are adhering to the best practice of the legislation, and, therefore, there is no requirement to change it. However, if it appears that there is a requirement to change the legislation, I will certainly be prepared to promote that to the House.

Mr Allister: The Minister told the House that, over the years, there were a number of occasions when human tissue was not only taken without the family's consent or knowledge but was disposed of without consent or knowledge. Patently, that is in addition to the 71 cases of significant body parts that have been retained. Will the Minister tell the House how many of those cases involved the disposal of significant body parts and whether those families will now be informed of the taking and disposal of those parts?

12.45 pm

Mr Ford: Mr Allister has taken this to a slightly different point. As I said earlier, issues were addressed in the work done for the O'Hara report, and the helpline that operated between, I believe, 2003 and 2005 sought to address families' concerns after the information that the Member outlined came to light.

There were issues related to health and justice pre-devolution, after the devolution of health powers and before the devolution of justice powers, so I cannot give him any figures. However, I can say that individuals were contacted; there was an awareness campaign; meetings were held; and individuals got the opportunity to express their concerns. As I said a few moments ago, 340 families who had concerns about the retention and disposal of body tissue as part of the justice system had the opportunity to have those concerns addressed at that stage. If any of those families or others who feel that they might have been affected contact the helpline now, they will certainly be given whatever assistance can be provided.

Mr D McIlveen: I also thank the Minister for his statement. Of the 3,594 victims of the Troubles, only 64 families are affected by the announcement. What record-keeping is in

place to give the families concerned some closure on why particular pieces of tissue were taken and others were not?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr McIlveen for his point. I just want to correct his numbers slightly: between the police and the ombudsman's office, we are talking about 68 individuals — 64 plus 4. Not all were victims of the Troubles; over a lengthy period, in the region of 4,000 people were victims of a violent death. However, as he correctly highlighted, the great majority were victims of the Troubles.

The answer to his substantive point is that concerns were addressed in a number of cases when people had the opportunity to enquire previously. Individuals have the opportunity to contact the helpline now to ascertain what is happening with their particular concern. I believe that that sort of issue is better addressed by individual families, who can follow up on their concerns through the helpline and the relevant agencies, rather than seeking to do anything in a global statistical way.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, this will be treated as a business motion, and, therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Thomas Buchanan replace Mr Jimmy Spratt as a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister; and that Mr Robin Newton replace Mr Paul Givan as a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. — [Lord Morrow.]

Private Members' Business

Incapacity Benefit: Reassessments

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

Mr Brady: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern that the reassessment process for people who are moving from incapacity benefit to employment and support allowance is resulting in many people being unfairly deemed "fit for work" and losing their benefit; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to review urgently the reassessment process to avoid both the undue distress it is causing and the additional burden it is placing on the public purse by triggering so many appeals.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I think that the motion is one that Members can support because it affects and will continue to affect all constituencies. Under welfare reform, 76,000 people here will migrate from incapacity benefit to employment and support allowance (ESA). The exercise will take approximately three years to complete, having started in February 2011 and running, if on time, to March 2014.

The North has a higher proportion of claimants on incapacity benefit than England or the other devolved Administrations: 8·6% of our working-age population receive incapacity benefit compared with 5·2% in Britain. Therefore, the migration of claimants to employment and support allowance, in particular, will have a greater impact.

The work capability assessment (WCA) was introduced in October 2008 to assess entitlement to ESA, which has replaced incapacity benefit, and income support on incapacity grounds, for new claimants from 27 October 2008. The assessment is being used to determine limited capability for work and limited capability for work-related activity. In the transition from incapacity benefit to ESA, it is intended that the award of ESA will become the main route to disability-related support within universal credit, so access to employment and support allowance will be determined by the work capability assessment.

There is a high level of ill health and disability within disadvantaged communities. There is obviously an association between poverty and ill health and disability. Approximately one third of disabled people currently live in poverty. There is evidence to show that incapacity benefit and disability living allowance (DLA) have had a significant impact on reducing poverty. There is no doubt that impending changes will reverse that trend and increase poverty among the sick and disabled. Many people are currently entitled to incapacity benefit and DLA. The implementation of changes such as the work capability assessment currently deals with incapacity benefit, but a similar process will be introduced for DLA.

According to Advice NI, approximately 60% of incapacity benefit claimants are aged 50 or over. Some 9,000 live in Belfast and 4,000 in Derry, with the third largest concentration in Craigavon. Almost 50% suffer from mental and behavioural disorders such as drug and alcohol addiction. The Law Centre has also been concerned about the limited understanding of mental health problems in the assessment process and the limited weight given to supplementary evidence such as GPs' and carers' testimonies. It also states that 46.6% of individuals in receipt of incapacity benefit here have mental or behavioural disorders. It states that mental health issues need to be more specifically focused on in addressing the migration process.

Figures from the Department for Social Development (DSD) indicate that, to date, 9,000 claimants have been reassessed, of which 24% were declared fit for work and lost their entitlement, 46% were deemed fit for work with support, and 30% were assessed as unfit to work and gained unconditional ESA entitlement. Advice NI estimates that more than 20,000 will have their entitlement downgraded to the support category, and that group will be subject to a loss of benefit sanctions in line with jobseeker's allowance.

I will now deal with some of the specifics of the work capability assessment. It is carried out by Atos, which is a data processing company contracted here by the Minister's predecessor to carry out reassessments in relation to incapacity benefit. Atos is paid by results, the result being the number of people processed rather than the accuracy of the reassessment. The work capability assessment is a tick-box exercise that relies on standard interrogation techniques to identify inconsistencies in a claimant's account, which could result in no points being awarded — it is a points-based process. The claimant is not privy to the point-scoring during interview and has no opportunity to challenge any judgements by the Atos operative, which are often highly subjective judgements at the time.

I have spoken to some claimants who have had some ridiculous decisions given to them, and I will give some examples. Mental health was assessed by asking general knowledge questions, such as who is the British Prime Minister; and people have been asked to count backwards from 400 to 350. Someone not actively rocking in their chair is taken as an indication that they do not have a mental illness. That is one of the recommended criteria for Atos operatives to use as an evaluation. Declaring someone fit for work on the basis that they had been discharged from hospital, despite the fact that they had been discharged because they were too ill to undergo further treatment.

Medical evidence as well as the work capability assessment can be submitted to the decision-maker, a member of the Social Security Agency, but, currently, the work capability assessment has primacy in the decision-making process. The administrative downgrading of medical evidence in the primary process is why so many decisions are overturned on appeal. I know that an amendment has been tabled in relation to the provision of medical evidence. In my experience over many years of dealing with cases of incapacity, etc, and, indeed, appeals, good medical evidence is always a prerequisite and, if it is available, it will certainly help in the process. Indeed, in two of the examples I have given, where claimants received no points, they easily won their appeals and were awarded points well in excess of those required to win their appeal.

Recently, the chief executive of Mind, Paul Farmer, resigned from the British Government's advisory group tasked with scrutinising the work capability assessment. He resigned in frustration at the Government's refusal to listen to the growing chorus of alarm over the reliability of the test.

Disability charity Scope backed MIND's decision, saying that the huge number of successful appeals was a damning indictment of the test.

A Citizens Advice study into the accuracy of the test found that people with serious illnesses and disabilities, who could not reasonably be expected to seek work, have been found fit for work. It reported that 60% of successful appeals involved claimants who had originally been awarded no points by the work capability assessment. The work capability assessment has been fundamental, not marginal, yet despite evidence of the scale of WCA inaccuracies, the British Employment Minister, Chris Grayling, claimed the process required only tweaks.

I urge the Minister to take into account the following suggestions: the immediate review of the work capability assessment to ensure that the assessment process is fit for purpose; DSD could assume responsibility either for getting medical evidence on behalf of the claimant or for meeting the cost of medical reports to be assessed by the Social Security Agency's decision-maker in relation to the awarding of employment and support allowance; GPs, consultants and other health professionals could consider waiving fees for providing medical evidence in support of ESA claims by their patients; the current Atos Healthcare payment-by-results regime should include a penalty for any inaccuracies or errors in its assessment if a case is overturned on appeal, or, where this may not be deliverable in relation to the current contract, it could be inserted into any subsequent or renewal contract.

In Britain, Atos Healthcare has netted over £1 billion to date and is running at a cost to the Department for Work and Pensions of £100 million a year. More and more appeals are being lodged because of the flaws in the work capability assessment. In 2011, an estimated £50 million of taxpayers' money was poured into appeals against Atos Healthcare rulings. Four of every 10 appeals were successful. Professor Malcolm Harrington, who reviewed the work capability assessment, stated that he was "shocked" and "staggered" by the tremendous waste of public money tied up in the appeals process.

I ask the Minister to take on board what has been said and to hold to what he said at an information session in the Long Gallery on 19 September 2011:

"My Department will continue to review WCA and to make changes where necessary to ensure that our high standards of support continue."

He also said:

"We can however give an assurance that at the Department for Social Development we will continue to place the customer at the forefront of our priorities as we move forward."

Mr Copeland: I beg to move the following amendment: After "allowance" insert

“, with no cognisance being taken of their medical records,”.

I thank Members for tabling what I consider to be an important motion and ask that they consider accepting our amendment, which highlights the role that medical evidence should play in arriving at these decisions. This may seem rather strange to some, but I also ask the Minister to accept comments from many of my constituents who have gone through the process that, in general, his staff in the Department for Social Development display a good deal of human kindness in guiding people through it.

If there is a failing in the process, it is in the so-called test itself, which involves, in a new form, the “big doctor”. I must confess that I was totally remote from the “big doctor” for the first 40 years of my life, but I know that, depending on community background, he rates very highly after the banshee and the bogeyman on a list to be avoided at all costs. The truth is that many of our people are being put through a process that tells them that they and their doctors are wrong. After pushing a number of questions or carrying out a number of tests, they are told that they are fit for work.

Ulstermen and Ulsterwomen, regardless of their background, are not silly. They know that 62,500 people are unemployed, and according to the statistics that I have, there are 5,417 vacancies. So being moved from a classification of being unfit for work through illness to the classification of being fit for work when there is none causes certain difficulties.

The test, as I understand it, is carried out by a private company, as has been said. And this private company has, in my view, come up with a few things that are very hard even for me to accept. One of them, in several cases in my constituency, defies Einstein's theory of relativity and the space-time continuum. It lists or states an interview that, let us say, began at 9.00 am and was concluded at 9.25 am, lasting 25 minutes, but further on in that magnificent piece of paper, it indicates a number of events that took place during that 25-minute meeting. Even I, with my basic grasp of mathematics, have, on occasions, come up with 33 or 34 minutes' worth of events in a meeting that lasted 25 minutes. In any court of law — or physics — such a thing is impossible. The fact that someone is paid to come up with that nonsense to go through an appeals service is an affront to every single person in the Chamber.

1.00 pm

I have also seen documents produced wherein a man is described as a woman and a woman as a man. It is foolishness. There is something basically wrong with a test that indicates that so many people on appeal are successful on grounds of medical evidence when medical evidence has not been considered during the process. As I understand it, medical opinion is sought: a medical opinion from a GP. The GP I am told, receives no financial remuneration for filling in the form and, consequently, some forms are filled in and some are not. So we have a process where someone is referred to as a “healthcare professional”. Those Members who sit on the Social Development Committee will remember a bit of squirming on behalf of a senior departmental official when I asked him what constituted the medical qualifications of a medical healthcare professional.

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

The outworkings, in human terms, of some of those decisions are heartbreaking. I know that the Minister is, in

many ways, a victim, in that he has had legislation handed down to him. However, we may need to examine ways in which we can attune this particular piece of legislation, if possible, to suit our own particular circumstances.

We have come through 40 years of murder and mayhem. The people affected by that, in many cases, will have sustained injuries during that time. Many of them, in my constituency and perhaps elsewhere as well, are former members of the security services who have been through horrific and horrible events that, for ever and a day, have changed their lives from the point of occurrence. They find themselves being questioned about their injuries, many of which are invisible in terms of physical disfigurement but are nevertheless very real and present. Some of the cases are so distressing that it is not the first occasion on which I have been at an appeal where the chairman of the panel, or someone with medical experience on the panel, has suspended proceedings because of the effect that it is having on the constituent.

I will cite two out of many examples. A lady from the Lagan Village, whose stated condition was agoraphobia, had not been out of the house for four and a half or five years. It was not a dreamed-up condition; someone had to do her shopping. She was disallowed the benefit for not turning up at the assessment. Only intervention by me — when I learned of it, funnily enough, through Facebook — brought action. I must say that the departmental officials and those involved behaved very appropriately and rectified the situation as soon as was humanly possible. However, it would have been so much less onerous on my constituent had it not occurred in the first place.

The second example is even more distressing. It was a case assessed on the personal capability for work assessment test. Benefit was disallowed but subsequently reinstated when the mental health issues became apparent. The claimant was a female, one of four children abandoned by their mother when the claimant was less than six months old. The police gained entry to the property because neighbours had been alerted to the crying of a baby, which was her. She was entrusted into the care of a member of the family, as was common some years ago, and did not enjoy satisfactory treatment.

She was put up for adoption at seven years of age and returned as unmanageable at 13. She was entrusted to another family member and endured an existence in the attic of a house in Belfast that would test anyone's view of human relationships. She is the mother of two children, both of whom have been taken into care because of her inability to cope. She cut herself; she abused alcohol, drugs and tablets; and then she became the mother of another child. Her life changed. She has, in so far as she is capable, dedicated herself to trying, in very trying circumstances, to provide for that child as best she can. The state's answer was to tell her, after all that, that there was nothing really wrong with her and that she should be ready to return to work. It almost tipped her over the edge. The appeal part of the process was abandoned halfway through when it became evident that to continue would have constituted nothing other than mental cruelty.

There is nobody in the Chamber who does not recognise the need for reform of the welfare system, and there is nobody in the Chamber who is not aware that one person's benefits

are another person's taxes. The truth is that the system that we apply must be applied fairly and justly. I do not believe, through no fault of the Minister, that that is the current case. We must tell people to bring appropriate medical evidence where they can get it. Medical evidence should be inculcated into the system if at all possible. The truth of it all is that, if we in the Chamber cannot talk about what we believe to be unfair on behalf of our constituents, we are failing. It is our duty to rail against unfairness where we see it. It is the Minister's duty to do what he can on behalf of all of us, within what is very narrow ground, to protect the most vulnerable people in this society. I ask for the support of you all for the motion as amended.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the proposer of the motion for his very in-depth analysis. Like many other Members in the Chamber, I am inundated with calls from constituents on the subject.

In many cases, people are ill through no fault of their own. They do not ask to be ill, and the evidence often suggests that people end up claiming illness benefits as a last resort, when every other avenue is not appropriate. It is right and just that our illness benefits should evolve from a system that compartmentalises those who are not in full health as being permanently excluded from our workforce and writes them off. I am sure that everyone in the Chamber agrees that that needs to be looked at. Illness and disability does not affect everyone in the same manner. The activities that can be done can vary from person to person. The reassessment and the more flexible outcomes and support reflect that nature while still protecting those who are too ill to be in employment.

This is a new avenue for us. Following the lead from the UK, we are attempting to ensure that we have in place the most fair and robust process, and least stressful, to ensure that evaluations are done in a way that reduces stress to those who are undergoing re-evaluation. We are attempting to ensure that that is done in a way that instils confidence in everyone involved and in a timely manner.

It is right that we continue to evaluate periodically the system that we have in place to ensure that those ideals are put in place. The current system has been in operation for some time. As of the end of February this year, 9,328 people had completed reassessment. Of those, 7,126 were moved on to one of the two ESA groups, while a small proportion — 30% — had their award disallowed, with only 237 not receiving any other form of assistance. That is less than 4% of the total number of people who were reassessed. Some 246 appeals have been heard by the independent tribunal, with only 97 — 39% — being successful.

The remaining 150 decisions were upheld. That means that, according to the independent tribunal, 60% of the decisions were correct. We must strive to ensure that we continue to work to reduce the amount of decisions that are made incorrectly. Sadly, for a variety of reasons, it will not be possible to ensure that 100% of decisions are correct, but I believe that, through periodic re-examination of the system and debate in this Chamber, we can ensure that we are promoting and encouraging best practice and accountability to some of the most vulnerable in our society.

We must work to ensure that the message that is given about the changes is the correct message. The process is not about forcing the ill to work and is not simply a

number-reducing exercise; it is about empowering people to be active in our workforce and our communities to the best of their ability. It is about identifying the often multiple barriers that people face when they have health issues so that they can have the same opportunities and ambitions as people who do not have those health issues. It is also about ensuring that people with health issues are not forced to live in poverty but have the opportunity and support to be financially independent.

As mentioned in the amendment, I agree that medical evidence is paramount when decisions are being made. I know that, in many of the appeals that have been overturned, that decision has been due to the extra medical evidence. Studies show us time and again that employment has many beneficial qualities, including raising self-esteem, reducing social isolation and helping people to recover from illness.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and Mr Copeland's amendment.

There are many problems with the current work capability assessment. Indeed, those problems have, on previous occasions, been aired in the Chamber, in the Committee for Social Development and in the media. However, we do not need to listen to some of the heartbreaking accounts on 'The Nolan Show' or elsewhere to know the hardship and stress that this flawed process is causing for vulnerable people in our communities. We see it every week in our constituency offices, and Members who spoke previously gave specific, real-life examples of how it is affecting people on the ground. People with complex and serious debilitating conditions are being told that they are capable of work. Not only do those often erroneous decisions cause financial hardship but the stress and anxiety that they cause often compounds people's conditions, particularly for those with mental illness.

The fact that the process is failing here should come as no great surprise to anyone. The Harrington review of the work capability assessment in the UK was quite damning in its identification of what could and should be done to make the process fairer and more effective. Professor Harrington flagged up problems such as the impersonal nature of interactions with Atos, the difficulties in assessing some conditions, and the fragmentation and communication between the different agencies and organisations that are involved.

The impact of the process in Northern Ireland, which has a higher proportion of claimants on incapacity benefit than the other regions, was always going to be harsh. While it was flailing in the UK, it is failing here. Like many other aspects of the welfare reform agenda, we believe that a special case can and should be made for Northern Ireland. Here, 8.6% of the working-age population gets incapacity, compared with 5.2% in England. Figures suggest that up to 17,500 claimants here will join the unemployment register over the next three years simply through the migration to ESA, and others with partners in work, or those who have been prudent enough to save, may drop out of the system altogether. Even those who are rightly deemed capable of work will hardly be capable of finding it, given the dearth of jobs here. So, what chance is there for those who are incapacitated?

As Mr Brady said, the current Atos assessment displays an extremely limited understanding of mental health problems, and it does not give enough weight to supplementary evidence from GPs or carers. Almost 46.6% of individuals who are in receipt of incapacity benefit here have mental or behavioural disorders, and there is clearly a need to focus more particularly on mental health issues and to address them in the migration process.

1.15 pm

The same could be said of those who suffer from conditions with fluctuating degrees of severity, such as multiple sclerosis (MS) and Parkinson's disease, which are proving to be extremely difficult to assess. Atos Healthcare's ineptitude is plainly evident in the spiralling number of appeals and the rising success rate of appellants, which, anecdotally, according to those who work in advice services in our communities, is rising to around 50%. The high rate of appeals, and the long wait for them, comes at a significant financial and reputational cost to the Department. It also causes further anxiety and expense for claimants.

We are greatly concerned at the perceived lack of accountability of the healthcare professionals who carry out assessments. The reason why so many decisions are being overturned at appeal is often because of the presentation of medical notes at that stage. This is a ridiculous situation, especially where claimants often have to pay £50 to get those notes, sometimes from a GP who is actually sitting on the tribunal.

I have said previously in the Chamber that the SDLP supports a fairer benefits system. We are not naive enough to think that there are not people who abuse the system, but neither are we cynical enough to support a system that will abuse people. Recently, Scottish GPs voted that the Atos assessment was unsatisfactory, and GPs to whom I have spoken here share the view that it causes undue problems for vulnerable people.

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

Mr Durkan: We support the motion and the amendment, and conclude that the current reassessment process is not fit to work.

Mrs Cochrane: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion and the amendment. I have also seen first-hand the stress and uncertainty brought on by the reassessment process for ESA. I believe that the idea behind ESA is positive, in that those who can work should work, provided that appropriate jobs are available. Personal support should be given to those who are unable to carry out certain tasks or who require assistance with retraining in a different field after recovering from an illness. The benefits of getting people back to work after an illness or a disability are clear, not only for their health and well-being, but economically. However, the underlying principle of the process must be to help and not to hound people.

Other Members have referred to the work of Professor Malcolm Harrington. His initial conclusions on the work capability assessment were that the process was too mechanistic and that there was not enough of the human touch: people did not know what was happening to them, and no one was telling them. Yet, this is the same system that is determining whether a claimant is fit for work.

Prior to February 2011, 66% of claims for ESA had been disallowed, with the success rate of appeals standing at 40%. This was disturbingly high, as it appeared that significant numbers of people were being found to be fit for work when they were, in fact, not. The available information suggested that the standard of decision-making by the staff of the Social Security Agency was satisfactory and that the problems with ESA were a result of the new computerised test.

Because of this process, vulnerable people have had essential payments cut and there have been numerous cases of individuals with debilitating medical conditions, such as Parkinson's disease, MS, rheumatoid arthritis or mental health issues, being wrongly deemed fit to work. People with medical conditions such as those have good days and bad days, and assessing them over the phone on a good day creates a wholly inaccurate picture of their illness or disability. With such a generic and impersonal test, it is unsurprising how many claims have been successful at appeal. Realistically, it is the first opportunity that a claimant has to have their individual circumstances and medical history looked at and discussed in detail on a face-to-face basis.

Although some adjustments have been made to the work capability assessment, considerable criticism continues from those in the advice and voluntary sector, as 27% of those who have migrated from incapacity benefit to ESA have been disallowed altogether. There is a widespread view that access to the support group is also extremely limited. With no input from a claimant's GP or health worker, and limited knowledge of the claimant's medical history, we cannot realistically expect a tick-box exercise carried out over the phone to adequately assess whether an individual is or is not fit to work.

A one-size-fits-all approach does not work, and we must focus our efforts on fixing a flawed assessment process. The benefits system should be reformed to make work pay and to encourage those who are, in fact, fit for work into paid work. However, with so many decisions in the current assessment process being challenged, significant finances are being directed into the appeals process.

As Mark Durkan said, Scottish GPs called for an end to work capability assessments at their annual British Medical Association conference in March. They commented that the computer-based assessments are inadequate and give little regard to the nature or complexity of the needs of long-term sick and disabled persons. We, too, need to consider a better assessment process to ensure that the most vulnerable are given the support that they need. I support the motion and call on the Minister to review the process urgently.

Mr Easton: The welfare system that we have today was born of our society's concern about how it treats its poorest and most vulnerable. It was seen that the state should protect the most vulnerable when they need it the most. One of the things that makes people most vulnerable is poor health that leaves them unable to work.

Welfare reform, which requires people to move from incapacity, DLA or income support on the grounds of incapacity, is a reform that we have to ensure that we get right. The current process, which is the work capability assessment, has three main outcomes for those on long-term illness benefits. It is another reform that has been imposed on us

through the issue of parity with the rest of the UK. However, we must be sensitive to the fact that, as a region in the UK, Northern Ireland is unique as regards these types of benefits. A higher percentage of the population in Northern Ireland is on incapacity benefits than in any other region in the UK. A great number of recipients suffer from severe mental health issues, having come through the conflict that we experienced over 30 years. The capability assessment process seems to be failing some of them. The process has left those with mental health issues, particularly the most vulnerable, many of whom are long-term claimants with multiple barriers to employment, feeling let down.

Some 75% of 300 respondents to a survey on the Mind website stated that the WCA had made their mental health worse, and 51% admitted that they had had suicidal thoughts as a result of worry about the WCA. Suicide is still much stigmatised in our community, and it is an issue that is often hidden. That statistic and honesty gives me real concern that many more people are feeling similarly and that some might act on these thoughts purely as a result of their reassessment and the possibility of an appeal process. A staggering 95% of respondents indicated that they were fearful that they would not be believed in this process. That is a worrying statistic, and the evidence appears to suggest that we are placing this very vulnerable group under more pressure than necessary. The process also appears to have a lack of empathy with and understanding of illness in the mental health arena.

Northern Ireland is also unique compared to the rest of the UK when it comes to employing people with disabilities, regardless of hidden or covert disabilities. That needs to be addressed. People who are forced off incapacity benefit must have a reasonable expectation that a job exists that they can be reasonably be expected to do.

We must address the prejudices that exist in our employment arena and that stop people who want to be productive members of our community from fulfilling their potential. In my experience, people do not want to be ill long term or to be written off. The premise of this reform is that no one will be written off. However, we must ensure that we empower individuals to come off this benefit when their health allows them. The rate of successful appeals suggests that we have not got the equation quite right. Feedback from those suffering from mental health issues and other disabilities suggests that we have not got the equation right, and it is with that in mind that I support the motion.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As this is first debate in which the Assembly will hear from Mr Chris Hazzard, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I rise to speak on the motion brought before the Chamber by my party colleagues. It is no coincidence that I have chosen this topic for my maiden speech. The reassessment of those in receipt of incapacity benefit, while well under way in Britain, has only begun here in the North, but it is already having a serious detrimental impact on many of my constituents. To date, around 9,000 people here have had their claims reassessed. Within the next two years, 57,000 more people are scheduled to undertake a test, the design and implementation of which has already provoked a great deal of criticism. Citizens Advice is just

one amongst a number of groups and experts that have described the current fit-for-work test as not fit for purpose. They have good reason.

Let me just take a moment to describe the test to Members. Many people understandably expect that a person deemed eligible for benefit on the basis of a medical assessment in the past would be reassessed on the basis of a medical re-examination, but that is not the case. The test, designed by a British occupational therapist and conducted by a private company, is not a medical reassessment but a capability test. The work capability assessment is not designed to determine how chronically ill a person is. It is not designed to determine whether their condition has worsened or improved. It only decides, regardless of your health and physical condition, whether you could carry out some sort of work. It applies to any kind of imagined work, not a specified job or a real job in the real labour market, but the projected possibility of a job. It does not assess your employability or match your capability with jobs that are available. It does not take account of the likelihood of any employer being prepared to accommodate your illness. The only decision that the test is designed to make is whether you can be ill and work at the same time.

At its most ridiculous, British Ministers argue that those with fluctuating conditions such as MS and bipolar disorder will be able to move in and out of work — three months at their desks, six months away on sick leave, six months back at their desks, three months on sick leave, and so on. Can you imagine any business knowingly employing many people on that basis and still being successful? The current British Government see themselves as pro-business and as market realists, but have you ever heard anything so absurd? Who will suffer the consequences of that absurdity? It certainly will not be the British Minister or the British Treasury, who are driving a cuts agenda that targets the poorest and most vulnerable in our society rather than facing up to the difficulties of taxing the rich and powerful.

I have no doubt that most Members are already dealing with the outworkings of this in their constituency offices. I am dealing with them in mine. Like other Members, I have heard the media talk of scroungers and accusations of people swinging the lead, but that is not the reality that we are being faced with in our constituencies. We are being met with the plight of seriously ill people who, on the basis of a poorly thought out test that was carried out by an outside international company with no interest in the impact on our communities, could lose benefits, sometimes all their benefits.

According to recent figures released by DSD, only 30% of those reassessed in the Six Counties retained their original entitlement. Just under half, or 46%, had their entitlement downgraded to fit for work with support, which carries obligations to prepare for work and undertake rehabilitation. Almost one quarter, or 24%, were declared fit for work and lost their entitlement. All those in receipt of employment and support allowance, with a few exceptions, are obliged to undertake a reassessment test every year. That means that the 46% who fall into the fit for work with support category are particularly vulnerable to losing their entitlement at a subsequent assessment.

The process is fundamentally flawed, and that is clearly evident if we consider the high numbers of successful appeals and the profile of those appeals. Of those who

were refused benefit, 40% were successfully reinstated on appeal. When the claimant was accompanied by CAB, the success rate increased to around 60%. A high proportion of those who were successful on appeal had been allocated no points during the work capability test. That in itself signals serious problems with the reassessment process.

Let me remind the House that although Atos is funded by the British Government, appeals are paid out of the block grant. Measures to increase the accuracy of the reassessments and to reduce the number of appeals are particularly significant to the Executive here. I also want to point out that many of those who have successfully appealed still face an annual Atos test.

In Britain, where the process is well under way, many have found that, a few months after a successful appeal, they are again declared fit for work by Atos, and that the whole appeal process has to start over again. That has resulted in a revolving system, where benefits are removed, reinstated, removed again, and so on. That is no way to treat sick and vulnerable members of our community.

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

Mr Hazzard: All welfare systems are a balance between ensuring incentives to work and preventing the defenceless falling into abject penury. We must not allow the balance to tip the wrong way. I call on Members to support the motion.

Lord Morrow: There is a task here for the Minister to examine the criteria that are used to determine whether a person who was formerly in receipt of incapacity benefit and who is being reassessed for employment and support allowance is fit for work. We are aware that social security benefit is a non-devolved matter and that what we are discussing involves a directive from Westminster, and we should keep that in mind during the debate. However, I want to stress that some people should be deemed fit for work, or at least some form of work. Some people are grateful for that.

1.30 pm

There is also a role for the Department for Employment and Learning, as the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 must be robustly enforced for a number of disabled people who are being moved to jobseeker's allowance. Likewise, employers must understand that they cannot simply make use of disabled persons for free in work placements. I have heard several examples of disabled persons working for free for some considerable time, but they were invariably overlooked when paid posts became available. That is totally wrong. I am pursuing that matter with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister; I have submitted a number of questions for written answer on that matter, and I look forward to receiving replies.

Numerous constituents who had been in receipt of incapacity benefit have come to my office in a distressed state after being reassessed as being fit for work. Fortunately, we have been able to assist with appeals, and, so far, all but one has been successful. Therefore, there is clearly something fundamentally wrong with the assessment process, whereby a person is examined by an assessor and deemed fit for work.

I want to detail a number of reports that have come through my office and were subsequently overturned. One report

suggested that a claimant was not distressed, as they were not rocking back and forth in their chair. I find that to be an intolerable remark. Another report concluded that a claimant had no sight defect, despite being blind in one eye and awaiting a corneal transplant for the other eye and receiving treatment twice weekly in Belfast, for which he had to be driven all the way from County Tyrone. In another report, a claimant with significant learning difficulties was deemed to be fit for work, as they could operate complex devices like a dishwasher. To put it mildly, I find those remarks to be insulting.

Following the successful appeals achieved by my constituents, I submitted a question for written answer to the Minister to query the number of allowed appeals over the past three years. The reason why I chose the past three years was to cross over the period of the change in Government at Westminster and the sweeping reforms that followed. The Minister's response showed that between April 2009 and March 2010 there were 354 successful appeals, between April 2010 and March 2010 the figure had jumped to 1,410, but, startlingly, after the renaming of benefits and welfare reform, the figure between April 2011 and March 2012 was 2,065. When we break that down, that shows that the vast percentage of appeals was allowed in the past year.

It costs a serious amount of money to pay appeal panels, which, at a minimum, are made up of a legally qualified member and a medically qualified member. The emotional cost to appellants is also significant and cannot be overlooked. I have real concerns about the benchmark that has been set to deem people as being fit for work and about those who are carrying out the examinations. To put it mildly, a lack of common sense is being applied.

Mr Swann: It was Benjamin Franklin who said:

"Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are."

The issue we are debating, especially in the context of our amendment, is social justice. The purpose of our amendment is to strengthen the motion, and I thank the Members who tabled it.

In the past, the Minister has said that the fact that 40% of cases are appealed successfully is a sign that the system works. Minister, I must say that my interpretation of those figures is somewhat different, and I feel that you are wrong. How can a system that heaps mental anguish on the weakest in society, and in which at least 40% of cases are unnecessary in the first place, be considered successful? I think that it was the Member for North Down who said that it shows that 60% of the decisions were correct. However, it also shows that 40% of the decisions were wrong in the first place.

From my constituency work, I know the impact that the process has had on people's health, especially on those with significant mental health issues. For the purposes of social justice, I want to focus on the outcome of the current tribunal appeals process. As I said, 40% of appeals are successful. However, behind that figure the outcome is significantly different for those who have independent representation — such as that from Citizens Advice, Advice NI or, indeed, from Members here and their staff — and those who try to represent themselves. Where someone is represented, they have a 70% to 80% chance of winning their appeal; where they are not represented, that figure

drops to 20%. Even allowing for advice services taking forward the most winnable cases, the differential is still massive. The Minister, who is also responsible for advice provision, should also know that the advice agencies do not have the resources to meet the current demand. In a situation where the decision-maker relies on the examining medical practitioner's word — based on only a 30-minute or 40-minute interview — being sacrosanct, the individual is left at a serious disadvantage.

Our amendment would ensure that the decision-maker has access to the individual's extensive medical history and is able to take a balanced view, based on the comments of the professional about the 30-minute assessment, knowledge of the client and detailed, established notes taken over many years by another professional. Our purpose is clear: to reduce the number of wrong decisions being taken in the Atos assessment and, in doing so, reduce the mental anguish that is being caused unnecessarily to so many individuals.

When will we know the system works? We will know when every decision taken by the Minister's staff is the right decision, first time. Social justice demands it, and the Ulster Unionist Party asks for it.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank those who tabled the motion. At the outset, let me state that the SDLP does not oppose the idea of simplifying the social security system. We do not oppose the principle of getting people back to work when or if they are able to. We do not oppose welfare reform. However, we do oppose unfair reform. The concern that is expressed in the motion is that many people are being unfairly deemed to be fit for work and are losing their benefit as a result. Colleagues have shared their constituency experiences, as we see the transition — smooth is the last thing that it could be called — from incapacity benefit to ESA. We see the outworkings of that change as people are being cut off.

That is happening as a result of the deliberate narrowing of the criteria under which claims are assessed. In other words, the definition of "fit for work" has been changed. The ongoing reassessment of an estimated 76,000 incapacity benefit recipients began on 28 February 2011. By 29 February this year, 9,328 individuals had completed reassessments. Of those, 2,202 had their incapacity benefit award disallowed following a work capability assessment. That represents 24% of those who were reassessed. To put this in perspective, let us look at the figures in Britain — in England, Scotland and Wales. According to a summary from the Department for Work and Pensions in March 2012, in the reassessment of incapacity benefit claimants for employment and support allowance, 37% of claims were disallowed. I grant that more people have been reassessed there over a slightly longer period. Whether the figures here will rise as the process nears completion remains to be seen. There are then those who are awarded ESA but placed in the work-related category. Such claimants may receive the benefit for up to 12 months, after which their household income becomes a determining factor. That will have severe repercussions for a lot of people.

Beneath these figures lie harrowing examples of people who have been regularly assessed as unfit over a long time — I have dealt, as have colleagues, with cases going back five, 10 or even 15 years — but, suddenly, the individuals concerned are told otherwise. They are being told that they

are, after all, fit for work and that they had better find some quick. In Britain, a quarter of those who have been told for more than 15 years that they were not fit for work have, on reassessment of their claims, been told that they are fully fit for work. A further 40% of the same group are being told that they will be able to work at some point with help. If numbers here break down in similar percentages, there will be a huge impact on the welfare system. Long-term claimants tend to get sicker and may lose their sense of purpose. These people will need a great deal of help and support to rejoin the labour market, and that is if suitable jobs are available for them. That problem is magnified when they have been unfit for work for a considerable period of time and are nearing retirement age, as, in some cases, they are. The Minister will need to ensure that resources are made available to provide the necessary help and support to all of these people.

Inevitably, there are concerns about the training and qualifications of the assessors. I know that complaints have been made about the treatment of some people with disabilities during the reassessment of their claims. Assessors have, at times, shown little or no understanding of the disability being assessed. That the assessors are contracted to a private company and are unaccountable to the Department is another area of concern.

To date, more than half of the claimants who have been disallowed have appealed and are currently going through that process, which can be costly. As the motion indicates, this is a sign of the undue distress being caused to claimants and will take up more and more resources as the process continues. Regardless of the high-minded rhetoric used to justify the reassessment process, the perception is one of a process designed to cut the costs of the welfare system, where Tories have paid to bail out the banks by targeting the most vulnerable. The people who are paying are those who most need our help. I support the motion and I call on the Minister for Social Development to urgently review the reassessment process.

Mr Agnew: I will not repeat much of what has been said already. In the debate, many of the main points have been raised on the figures of appeals and the concern that we should all have about the substantial number of people who are being deemed fit to work having been originally deemed unfit to work. I question what the agenda is. Perhaps it is to prevent unfair remuneration, through an incapacity benefit system and employment and support allowance, to people who are fit to work in order to protect those who cannot work and need support. It may be to save the public purse from money that is being spent on people who could potentially be earning themselves. However, one of the unintended consequences has clearly been an unfair system whereby people who are clearly unfit to work are having the genuineness of their claims questioned. In some cases, they have been denied benefits in the first instance, and, later, having shown their cases to have been right, that decision has been overturned. They go through significant and considerable stress and hardship. Indeed, the cost to the public purse of dealing with appeals cases is significant and considerable. We have to judge the quality of the system based on the original agenda. If it is to tackle unfairness and waste of public money, it is failing in a significant number of cases.

I welcome the amendment, and I speak in favour of the motion and the amendment. Not only is the reliability of claimant submissions being questioned, but, by excluding GPs from the initial process, we are, to some extent, questioning the ability and honesty of GPs in assessing the patients they have worked with, in many cases, over a number of years. This information is key. As has been pointed out, a short assessment cannot assess many of the disabilities and illnesses that it is required to judge. Not exclusively, but particularly with mental health, how can any kind of judgement in a very short space of time be made by someone who has never met the claimant, does not know the claimant and is not fully au fait with the claimant's condition, or, indeed, is an expert in how that condition may affect the person?

1.45 pm

In my previous role in the Simon Community, I worked with a number of individuals who had mental ill health. I saw those people on good days when they were able to use their skills to cope with daily living, but I also saw them on the days when they could not cope and needed support. A number of those people could be deemed to be fit for work under this assessment, but anybody who knows them intimately and has known them over a period of time would know that they could not be fit for work on a sustained basis.

We have to question the system, given the failure rate and that 40% of rejections are successfully appealed. However, it was mentioned that the statistic for that is actually 60% for those who have Citizens Advice accompaniment to their appeals. That suggests that we have to query a number of the assessments and try to get things right at the front end rather than waiting until the appeals process.

We have to be honest: no system will ever be perfect, and there will always be some margin for error. However, I contend that the system is fundamentally flawed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Agnew: In deeming genuinely incapacitated people to be fit for work, the system has shown itself not to be fit for purpose.

Mr McClarty: Like others, I am very concerned at the process for reassessing people who claim incapacity benefit.

Given previous contributions, it is clear that I am not alone when I say that I have been inundated by calls from anxious constituents who are fearful that their limited income will suddenly stop. The Minister will, of course, argue that the reassessment will not stop welfare support but that it will facilitate a more appropriate entitlement that will help people back into work. The sentiment is there, but the reality is not. Reassessment is stopping benefit for some people, namely those whose partners work, however limited that working income.

Furthermore, many of my constituents have been hit with a letter that rejects their claim for incapacity benefit and deems them to be fit for work. Yet, those same people genuinely struggle with their ailments to the extent that getting through the day is a challenge. That leads me to question the process and the training of the professionals who are carrying out the assessments.

There are many issues here, many of which other Members raised. However, I will reiterate some of them to highlight to the Minister how serious the matter is and how deeply flawed the process is.

The process is too ambitious. In Northern Ireland, 76,000 claimants will be subject to the reassessment process over a three-year period. Approximately 500 claimants a week will be assessed. I repeat: 500 people a week. I can only begin to imagine the severe pressure that assessors are under to make quick decisions. That pressure will undoubtedly lead to mistakes. It has led to mistakes. The escalating number of successful appeals proves that. It is essential that we note that those mistakes are not minor: they are negatively life changing and contribute stress and anxiety to those who are already suffering from illness and certainly do not need that extra burden.

The ambitious figures are also resulting in delays, particularly as appeals are emerging thick and fast. That is just not acceptable. We should not expect people to sit and wait, wondering whether they can afford to feed themselves while the Department gets its act together. Again, we must consider that those most affected by all this are, foremost, struggling to deal with the cost of illness, financial and otherwise. I believe that, since the process began last year, the enormous challenge has proven to be severely underestimated.

The working capability assessments here are based on the UK standard and are not Northern Ireland specific. Northern Ireland needs to write its own rule book on illness and capability to work. We are a post-conflict society. A huge proportion of our population is suffering from the effects of that conflict. Of course, we have come a long way, but scars are still being borne. The prevalence of mental illness here, for example, is one of the highest in the UK. We need to understand mental health and other illnesses better before assuming that people are simply fit for work.

There is a much bigger picture. There will always be people who take advantage, and I agree that we have a responsibility to address that. We must remember that we are living in very difficult times and people are, quite simply, desperate. It is not simply a case of benefit-scrounging; in a lot of cases, it is survival. Getting a job is not simple, particularly in Northern Ireland, where unemployment is at its highest. My constituency of East Londonderry is potentially facing over 400 further job losses if the Justice Minister gets his way. I am far from saying that incapacity benefit should address that shortfall, but I do not agree that this migration of benefits is to help people get back into work. There is no work for them.

Many serious issues were raised concerning work capability assessments. I am therefore led to believe that the reassessment process is deeply flawed, and I appeal to the Minister to immediately review it to avoid further fear and anxiety among the public and to limit the ridiculous cost to the public purse from appeals. Therefore, I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I thank all who contributed to the debate, and I welcome the opportunity to respond to the motion, which calls on me to review urgently the reassessment process owing to the

distress that it is causing people on incapacity benefit and the cost to the public purse of the volume of appeals.

It may be useful if I provide some background on reassessment. Employment and support allowance was introduced in October 2008 to replace incapacity benefit as part of the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2007. The legislation was passed by the Northern Ireland Assembly on 25 June 2007, almost five years ago. That was in the term of the previous Assembly, and a previous SDLP Minister put the Bill through the Assembly.

The 2007 Act made provision to allow for the migration of existing incapacity benefit customers to employment and support allowance. In Northern Ireland, approximately 76,000 incapacity benefit customers will go through reassessment, which commenced in February 2011 and is due to be completed by April 2014. I am pleased to be able to advise that the Social Security Agency is on target to meet the deadline.

The work capability assessment is a key component of reassessment, as the medical opinion and factual reports are used, along with the information provided by the customer and any independent medical evidence, by the Social Security Agency's decision-makers to establish entitlement to employment and support allowance. Customers undergoing reassessment are required to take part in a work capability assessment, which focuses on the functional effects of an individual's condition rather than the condition itself. It is used to determine a person's ability to engage in work or work-related activity. That ensures that all who are able to work are given assistance to help them back into employment.

The outcome of the work capability assessment does not mean that everyone is ready to take up work immediately. It is recognised that the incapacity benefit caseload will include customers with very different needs, given the broad range of medical conditions. Those customers who are considered to have no limited capability for work and who move on to jobseeker's allowance receive support from an employment services adviser from the Department for Employment and Learning. The advisers also provide support and assistance to those entitled to employment and support allowance who are placed in the work-related activity group. Customers with the most severe conditions move into the support group in employment and support allowance and are not required to participate in work-focused activity.

The debate has focused on the work capability assessment and the medical aspects of the customer journey. Members have related the experiences of individual constituents. I recognise that the work capability assessment can and, indeed, has been improved.

No doubt, Members are aware that there already exists a requirement under section 10 of the Welfare Reform (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 for yearly independent reviews of the work capability assessment. Professor Malcolm Harrington, an occupational health specialist, was appointed to undertake those reviews in Northern Ireland and Great Britain. In his first review, Professor Harrington found that the system was not broken, but he set out recommendations to improve the process and the way in which we treat customers. In his second review, Professor Harrington found that significant strides to change and improve the process had been taken since his first review.

Members will recall that his first report was laid before the Assembly in September 2011, followed by a second report in November 2011. His third review is already under way, and the report is expected in November or December.

The Social Security Agency is working with Professor Harrington and has made very good progress in taking forward the recommendations from his reviews. Professor Harrington has recognised the excellent standard of decision-making that he found in Northern Ireland. In his first two reports, Professor Harrington did not recommend a radical redesign of the customer journey or the work capability assessment. Of the 22 recommendations contained in his first report, 14 were specific to the Department and, of those, 13 have been implemented. Those included improvements to the customer journey and the provision of mental health champions to provide advice and support to healthcare professionals and decision-makers when dealing with customers with mental health issues. Work is ongoing to implement the remaining recommendation. Note the emphasis that has been placed on mental health issues. I think that all of us are aware of the particular challenges that are faced by people with mental health problems not only as they go through the customer journey, but any of the challenges that many of them face in life. Those can be particularly traumatic.

Work has also begun to implement his year 2 report and includes the recent informal consultation on proposals for making the work capability assessment process better for cancer patients. The two areas that have been picked up on particularly are mental health and cancer.

The motion suggests that there is a disproportionately high level of appeals generated by the reassessment process and that the outcomes indicate that there is a serious problem with the decisions being made. As of 31 March, 2,828 customers had been notified that their benefit was being disallowed. Of those, 1,662 customers had exercised their right to appeal the decision that they had a limited capability for work. The overall appeal rate for reassessed cases is 63% against an original planning assumption of 66%. It is worth noting that the appeal rate for incapacity benefit customers against the personal capability assessment was 49% in 2007, which was the last full year of the benefit.

Members have voiced concerns about the number of appeals that customers win and stated that that indicates that staff are getting too many decisions wrong. The main reason why decisions are being overturned by a tribunal remains that additional evidence was provided to the panel that was not available to the decision-maker. The most recent report from the president of appeals tribunals indicates that the level of incorrectness for employment and support allowance was 0.7%. That represented two incorrect decisions from the 281 cases monitored.

The outcome of appeals for reassessed customers at 31 March was that 35.8% had their appeal allowed. That compares favourably with the allowed rate for incapacity benefit appeals in 2007, when 36.6% of appeals were allowed. So the figure is very much the same as it was with incapacity benefit.

It is important to restate that the reassessment of incapacity benefit customers is not about disallowing benefit. It is

about ensuring that customers are receiving the right benefit and the right level of support to meet their individual circumstances.

The importance of continuing to support customers who have their incapacity benefit disallowed was paramount in the planning for reassessment. The introduction of the specially trained customer advice and support team ensures that customers receive immediate support and financial advice on their entitlement to other benefits. Assistance is provided to customers who decide to claim another benefit or want to appeal.

2.00 pm

Prior to the start of the reassessment, a major concern was that too many people would not understand the process, would be lost to the benefit system and would end up with no support. The customer advice and support team ensures that every disallowed case where there has been no contact with the customer is tracked as an additional safeguard measure, and there are currently only eight customers being tracked to ensure that they receive some assistance.

I should add that the customer advice and support team intervention that we have in Northern Ireland is not in operation elsewhere. There is a different arrangement elsewhere. It was introduced in Northern Ireland to cater for our customers and to ensure that we make their journey as suitable as possible. It is something that the Department thereby provides.

The reassessment customer journey recognises that this is a difficult time for those going through it and ensures that ongoing support and advice is readily available at each key point in the process. Customer reaction to the way in which Social Security Agency staff have helped them through the assessment journey has been very positive. I note that at least one Member commented on that point, and I thank Mr Copeland for that.

The decision by the Social Security Agency, following extensive consultation with the voluntary and community sector, to make regular telephone contact a key feature of the reassessment process has proved to be very successful. Customer feedback has been extremely positive, and the effectiveness of the current approach can be quantified by the low number of incapacity benefit customers who have had their benefit disallowed because they have not returned their medical questionnaire. As of 31 March, that figure stands at 35.

There have been excellent results from customer satisfaction surveys. By the end of March, over 23,000 customers had undergone reassessment, yet the Social Security Agency has received only 34 complaints. I should add that there are seven points along the customer journey where there is telephone contact with the customer. That regular intervention and contact with the customer is a key element in how the process operates.

The principle behind employment and support allowance is that appropriate work helps to improve a person's self-esteem and is good for most people's physical and mental health and well-being, as well as their finances. Any significant changes to the reassessment process would be constrained by the long-standing policy of parity in social security matters. Any changes to the existing regulations

could result in a disjoint with the regulations in Great Britain. A breaking of parity could have serious financial implications.

The Social Security Agency uses the Department for Work and Pensions IT systems to process and pay benefits. That ensures that the taxpayer is not asked to pay twice for the implementation of systems in Northern Ireland that are common across the rest of the United Kingdom. The arrangement means that the Social Security Agency does not pay for IT development costs but pays for IT running costs based on a pro rata usage basis.

One final consideration is the potential impact that a different approach to reassessment could have on the systems that are being developed nationally to administer universal credit from October 2013. The debate has explored fully the concerns of Members, and I share many of the concerns that have been expressed about the impact on individuals. However, I assure the Assembly that arrangements are in place to ensure that the work capability assessment continues to be reviewed and improved.

My time is limited, but I want to pick up on a few points. It is often said that Atos is paid by results. That is incorrect. There are 10 physical indicators and seven mental health indicators. The point should be made that rocking in a chair is only one of a number of indicators. It is not a yes or no thing, and you are not in or out depending on that; it is simply one of the factors to be considered and taken into account during the work capability assessment.

The Harrington review is ongoing. It is over a five-year period. As I said already, he did not recommend a radical redesign of the customer journey. I intend to supply MLAs with a diagram setting out the customer journey very clearly. I have found it helpful in keeping an oversight of the programme, and others would benefit from that because it makes the details of the process clear. A few MLAs' comments were inaccurate, and it is clear that there is some misunderstanding. For example, the input from a medical adviser, a psychiatrist or whoever should be in at the start of the process. It has to be in early, as it is considered at a very early stage. If it is there, it may well be that you do not have to go for a work capability assessment.

Special arrangements are in place in Northern Ireland to support customers with mental health issues. Mental health champions are in place, people have support from the customer and advice support (CAS) team, and healthcare professionals receive comprehensive training in relation to mental health. Their work is audited by Atos —

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

Mr McCausland: — and by the Social Security Agency's health assessment adviser. It would be helpful if we could spend some time looking at this more fully, as it is a complex system and there may be some misunderstandings.

Mr McGimpsey: I support the motion as amended. I am grateful to Members who have taken part in the debate. I am particularly grateful to the Members who tabled the motion. Clearly, there is consensus in the House, and I will not exhaust us by going through all the points made.

It is important to reflect that this is not a devolved matter per se; it is firmly within the remit of Westminster. However, as we are a firm part of the kingdom, our citizens are

perfectly entitled to the benefits of the process as it comes through, not least because Northern Ireland could not afford this type of resource on its own. It is important to reflect the fact that the process, as administered in Northern Ireland, is a matter for the Department and the House to consider. When you look at the numbers who are being reassessed, as people are moved from incapacity benefit to employment and support allowance, it is clear that very large numbers are involved. It is generally recognised that there is a problem in the system, and that is best encapsulated by the point made by many Members, which is that around 40% of appeals were allowed. Forty per cent of those who appealed against a decision were successful. It is a staggering indictment of any process to have, in effect, a 40% failure rate. It would not be accepted in any other area, and I am glad that the sentiments here are that it is not acceptable for us.

Of course, the surreal side to this is the logic of declaring people who are unfit for work to be fit for work and moving them from incapacity benefit to employment and support allowance, bearing in mind that the number of people who are unemployed is 62,000 and rising. The opportunities for those folks to find employment are very limited. Nevertheless, it is important that we do the job and do it properly. As Members have said and as I am well aware, we have health issues in Northern Ireland that are particular and different to those in the rest of the United Kingdom. For example, our mental health need is 25% greater than that in the rest of the UK, and our spend is around 25% less. There are issues around intellectual and cognitive capacity that are not being picked up in the system. The recommendations in the Harrington review are coming through, and we are looking at the recommendations made in the review of the rest of Great Britain. It seems that those that are being acted on and carried forward will do a great deal to help. It is clear that the Minister and the Department recognise that there is a problem and steps need to be taken. They are in the process of taking those steps. I wish them well in doing so to ensure that we make the system fair, so that everyone in the process is treated fairly and properly and given the benefits that all citizens are entitled to by right.

Clearly, there is a problem with Atos and the assessment process. I am not familiar with the organisation, but I am aware that it is not part of government. I think that there is a question mark over private organisations playing such an important role in dealing with mental and physical incapacity issues. I think that there is clearly a serious problem with Atos, not least because it is hitting a 40% failure rate in the appeal process.

I support the motion as amended. It has been a very useful debate. There is clear consensus in the House on something that we all, including the Minister, see as unfair and unjust. We are moving forward together to deal with it.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I thank Mickey Brady, who is the main person responsible for bringing the issue to the House this afternoon. I thank all the Members who spoke and extend my gratitude to those who supported the motion. Of course, I want to indicate our support for the amendment tabled by Ulster Unionist Party Members. We think that the amendment is helpful, because it reminds people that it is preferable that the medical evidence is available when assessments are carried out. So I want, again, to thank all the Members who spoke and indicated their support for the

motion and, indeed, the amendment. Many Members gave personal anecdotes from their experience as MLAs dealing with the issue over the past number of months.

I remind the House that the motion is in two parts. One part deals with the reassessment process itself, and the other deals with the fact that this is a matter for the public purse. The appeals that are dealt with come out of the public purse — in other words, through the block grant. It costs people here. If the system is flawed, people here pick up the tab.

All Members who contributed to the debate indicated their dissatisfaction with the reassessment system. The motion has nothing to do with parity. It does not deal with the Act or the principle of shifting from DLA to personal independence payments (PIPs). It simply deals with the process of reassessment. I am reminded of the time, several months ago, when we were advised by a range of stakeholder organisations that the system was likely to be flawed. Our attention was drawn to the experience of the process being rolled out in Britain, and we were referred to the Harrington report. When Harrington reported here, he carried out a desktop exercise; in Britain, he carried out site visits, virtually unannounced, to a range of social security offices. To my knowledge, that has not happened here. However, I would be very concerned if it had, because Professor Harrington was due to meet members of the Social Development Committee but could not carry out that engagement because he was sick. So I would be concerned if he had been here doing other work and none of us had been made aware of that. I presume that he is continuing his desktop-type analysis here, although I stand to be corrected on that. We look forward to the positive sides of Professor's Harrington's report and to the experience being garnered from his and similar reports.

When we raised that issue with the head of the Social Security Agency during a meeting with the Minister, we were told that the contract negotiated here with Atos had additional clauses to correct some of the difficulties experienced in Britain. We were told that the process here was an improved contract of reassessment. Therefore, it strikes me as important that such a motion is brought to the House, because, clearly, notwithstanding the fact that the contract was supposed to be improved, there are still difficulties.

2.15 pm

Some Members believe that 40% of the appeals that are made are successful, and others may think that it is a higher figure. Really, when you start to hit the figure of 40%, it does not matter whether it is 40%, 50% or 60% — clearly, there is a problem. What the motion says and what all Members are saying unanimously — it is a very important message — is that the system is flawed. You can argue about the extent of the flaw and about the difficulties that are contained within, but all the Members who have spoken have acknowledged that there are flaws in the system.

It is important to remind ourselves of the particular anecdote from Mr Morrow. He referred, as did the Minister, to the anecdote that we have heard on a number of occasions, about a person who had not been displaying rocking in the chair. When we raised that with the Social Security Agency — it was a surprise to me — we were told that that was, in fact, true but it was only one of 27 descriptors. The system is supposed to be getting more

simplified, but we were told not only that that was only one of 27 descriptors but, in fact, the descriptors will increase in number. We were advised of that by the Social Security Agency, so it was proved to us, as Members who raised it, to have been a case in point, where people had been reassessed and declared fit for work despite the fact that they had a serious condition.

The motion, supported by all the Members who have given their own testimony, is that the system is, to some extent at least — the extent depends on your take on it — flawed. That has caused, in some cases, fairly serious trauma to people who have been claimants and have had their claim rejected. Not all those who have had their claim rejected have even put in an appeal. Again, anecdotally, we can say that some people thought that there was no point so they did not bother. That is something that I cannot quantify, so I will not give any facts or figures on it.

From our party's point of view, we are very pleased that Members across all parties are agreed that there is a problem with the reassessment process and that it is important, as the system rolls out, that we get to the bottom of that problem. The motion calls on the Minister to ensure that a proper review is carried out on those flaws, which, all of us are able to testify, have had serious impacts on quite a number of people who have had their claims rejected. That is obviously very unfair and wrong. The fact of the matter is that, if we have to go to appeal and to tribunals, it takes a lengthy time, which adds to the adverse impact and, perhaps in some cases, to the trauma. It certainly adds to the cost to the public purse here, which, I think that we would all agree, should not be acceptable.

Without rehearsing all or any of the rest of the arguments, I am satisfied that all the Members who have spoken have done so very eloquently from their experience. That may not make the motion unique, but it is informative that all the Members who have addressed it this morning have spoken from their own direct experience as local representatives dealing with cases and claimants or even attending appeals.

I urge the Minister to ensure that such a review is carried out. Professor Harrington's work has been an important part of that, but it is critical that we get that work in a particular framework, so that we can report back. The Minister himself suggests that we may need a wider debate on the issue. I think that everybody would welcome that wider debate. There is no question or doubt about that, because it is a learning process. The experience that we have all gained so far leads us to believe clearly and to know, as the testament of all the Members who spoke indicates, that there is a problem. What the motion is addressing is that we must get the problem fixed.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern that the reassessment process for people who are moving from incapacity benefit to employment and support allowance, with no cognisance being taken of their medical records, is resulting in many people being unfairly deemed "fit for work" and losing their benefit; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to review urgently the

reassessment process to avoid both the undue distress it is causing and the additional burden it is placing on the public purse by triggering so many appeals.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. As Question Time begins at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until then.

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

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Environment

Derelict Property: North Coast

1. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he will seek additional funding to extend the intervention for derelict sites on the north coast to Ballycastle.

(AQO 1987/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): I thank the Member for his question in a packed House. I support the principle of additional funding being extended. The purpose behind the intervention in Portrush and Portstewart was to deploy government resources to mitigate the appearance of the built environment, in this case because of the state of Portrush and Portstewart for people who live there and the many tourists who go there, not least the increased number of tourists who will go there at the end of June and early July. I support the principle, which is why I look forward to hearing from colleagues in Derry, the council and my built heritage people with a similar bid, I hope, in June monitoring for the sort of intervention in Derry in advance of 2013 that we have seen in Portrush and Portstewart. If the argument can be escalated to other parts of the North, including the Causeway Coast, which is, arguably, our single biggest natural asset, you will find no argument from me against that. I trust that there will be no argument at the Executive against that.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Unfortunately, it has been a trend in the past that many government organisations, including NITB, have simply forgotten about Ballycastle, to the detriment of the town and to the benefit of other places like Portrush and Portstewart. It is unfortunate that that seems to be continuing. Does the Minister accept that funding should have been made available to Ballycastle and the rest of the north coast when it was first put in place? Will he give us an assurance that, in the interests of the community there, he will seek to address that inequality before the summer?

Mr Attwood: The initial claim by the Member cannot be visited on me or my predecessor in the Department for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie. A master plan was developed for Ballycastle, and I initiated some events in Ballycastle to build up its profile. My mother, who is in the Gallery today, will remember that, as kids, we spent summer after summer in Ballycastle on the beach having great holidays. Many continue to do so.

I do not agree with the argument that the time to help out the north coast generally was when we deployed the money for Portrush and Portstewart. Why? Because that was a short-term intervention with end-of-year moneys that my officials said should be returned to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). I said that we should deploy that money for good projects. Given the recent announcement about the Irish Open, that was the time

and place to deploy that end-of-year unspent money in that area. A precedent has been set, and it is a good precedent. Money should now flow to Derry in advance of 2013 for the same reasons as Portrush and Portstewart. Arising from that, including the context of the review of public administration (RPA) and the rundown of planning transfer function, I would like to see other parts of the North, including the north coast, benefiting from that sort of project.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister. Given that there are an increasing number of derelict buildings in villages due to deterioration, do you agree that the planning criteria for townscape character need to be reviewed to allow for a more practical opportunity for demolition and rebuild? That would go some way towards the re-enhancement of Ballycastle, Bushmills and other towns and villages.

Mr Attwood: Many planning applications have been granted where work has not progressed. Therefore, we are in a bind: there is planning permission for sites that have been abandoned, are in decay, are half-finished or are derelict. There is an immediate problem — be it Ballycastle, Bangor, the Lisburn Road, Portrush, Portstewart or many places in between — about what we do to improve the appearance of those sites, given the sense of decay and dereliction and the negative impact that that has on local trading conditions, on one hand, while using planning powers to enforce against developers and others who have money — I have spoken about this in the Chamber before — and planning permission and have the opportunity to improve the appearance of sites but singularly fail to do so. That is the immediate crisis that we face, and I think that there should be immediate intervention from government in the way that I pointed out.

Mr Swann raised fundamental issues that also need to be addressed, including whether we will be more flexible in allowing those with planning permission to extend it, given that economic circumstances have meant they have not been able to develop sites. In all that, I will take on board what Mr Swann just said.

Mr Campbell: The Minister outlined the good work that will be done in Portrush and Portstewart this summer. He also outlined other projects that could flow from that work. Will he agree that, if we had more notification and an advanced time, with 12 months' rather than 12 weeks' notice, we could plan things better, whether it is the celebrations of Londonderry as the UK's first City of Culture, the World Police and Fire Games or other events? Twelve months' notice is much preferable to 12 weeks' notice.

Mr Attwood: As the Member will know, because he was a Minister, if a bit of money comes out of the blue from left field and you have eight or 10 weeks to spend it before the end of the year, it is government's responsibility to demonstrate good authority and spend the money. I compliment the people of Coleraine, Portrush and Portstewart and the councillors and the council leadership, who, having been granted £405 million, have spent in and around —

Mr Campbell: £405 million?

Mr Attwood: It is £405,000. Christmas has not come that early, I assure you. For the record, the sum is £405,000. The current estimate is that £385,000 was spent. That shows good authority by my Department and DFP in

approving that project and by the council in spending the money. I agree with the principle that there should be more advance notice. I expect the Derry bid to be accepted, because I have raised it already at the Executive table and did not find much resistance. In the event that something comes forward from the council and from my built heritage people, I want this to become a feature of monitoring rounds on a rolling basis so that people across the North know that there may be an allocation on that basis that they could bid for. That would deal with the issue that Mr Campbell mentioned.

Bovine Tuberculosis: Badger Cull

2. Mrs Overend asked the Minister of the Environment whether he has had any discussions with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development on the implementation of a pilot badger cull scheme to tackle bovine tuberculosis.
(AQO 1988/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank Ms Overend for that question. If it is deemed appropriate, I will have a conversation with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development on the matter. Badgers are a protected species under the 1985 order, and, to have a cull, my Department would have to grant a licence. As yet, nobody has approached me about an application for a licence, which will explain why there has not been any conversation with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). If an application is forthcoming, I will look at it, but I want to make it very clear that I will do so using two standards: one one hand, whether a cull will have a direct impact on reducing bovine TB; and, on the other, whether it will enable the build-up of scientific information to make a further assessment of the best way to go forward with tackling the threat, which continues to infect a small but significant percentage of our cattle herds.

Mrs Overend: Does the Minister accept that there is a reservoir of TB in wildlife? Could he outline whether he or his Department has held discussions with any of the authorities that are engaged with or are planning the pilot scheme on the cull of badgers in other parts of the UK? Has he tried to establish whether there are any similarities to the Northern Ireland situation?

Mr Attwood: Yes, there is a reservoir of threat in the badger population, but that also extends to feral ferrets and deer. I do not know whether my Department has consulted on the assessment schemes carried out in England and the Republic of Ireland, but it may have. I will come back to her on that.

The real issue is how we will manage the threat to the North. The experience of culling in England and in the Republic of Ireland suggests that, although you may cull in a certain area, badgers from outside that area that carry a threat will then repopulate that area. Therefore, that is a short-term intervention that does not work in the long term. On the other hand, the problem is that the success or otherwise of the cull is determined by local geography; namely, whether badgers inhabit an area where they might or might not easily migrate to other neighbourhoods because of the hills, woodlands and the like. Therefore, if we were to have a cull in the North — I am not prejudging that; no application has been made — we need to have a model that works, given our rural landscape, not necessarily the model

that has worked or not worked, depending on the science, in the Republic or in England.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. Does he have any plans to meet the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development in an effort to explore ways in which his Department can help to increase biosecurity in our countryside?

Mr Attwood: If an invitation is forthcoming, I will certainly be keen to meet. The issues of biosecurity, the protection of our rural landscape and the protection of our farmers, given that agriculture is still our largest industry, are the business of government. I will certainly meet other Ministers, but I demonstrated that when it came to trying to protect the modiolus modiolus in Strangford lough. I met and worked with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in order to create a position of strength, which may now prevail in avoiding European Community infraction proceedings.

I will work with other Ministers on other rural issues, including the potential of fracking in Fermanagh, being guided always by my responsibility, which is to ensure that, when it comes to planning and environment, all appropriate standards are robustly honoured and enforced.

Mr Rogers: To what extent is the Minister's Department receiving the co-operation of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in delivering the restoration plan that followed the modiolus restoration research project, which reported in February 2011?

Mr Attwood: These are changed times, and there is a new order of things in the management of modiolus modiolus, as people know. Earlier this year, the European Commission, following a package meeting, advised the Northern Ireland Executive, me in particular and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, that it was commencing the infraction process. As I said before, infraction, if proven, commences with fines of £8 million and upwards. That would have happened in the case of modiolus. However, following that, the two Departments worked hard together to interrogate the options and went to Europe. As a result, it appears that a better situation has arisen, whereby a proposal, inter alia, to have a no-catch zone for the mid-zone — a substantial part — of Strangford lough, together with a range of other interventions, including the restoration of modiolus, may be sufficient to mitigate the risk of infraction, if not avoid it, and, at the same time, protect the lough and the modiolus and allow us to look at opportunities for the fishing community in that part of the North.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for his answers on modiolus, but I want to go back to badgers and to something that he mentioned in his original answer. Does he agree that the current scientific evidence does not support a badger cull as a way of tackling bovine TB and that such a cull should be taken forward only in circumstances where scientific evidence supported it?

Mr Attwood: As I indicated in my opening answer, I would make any assessment of an application for a licence against two criteria, one of which is that referred to by Mr Agnew. I have to assess whether a cull would result in a direct reduction in bovine TB. In that regard, I concur with the intention of the question. I might differ, however, where the science produces different conclusions and suggests — I say this with some vigilance — that, where the geography

ensures or restricts the movement of badgers from one area to another, a cull, if it is done on a sustained basis, may have a sustained impact on bovine TB in that area.

2.45 pm

The science suggests that geography and the character of the countryside impeding the movement of badgers from an area where there has been a cull into an area where there has not, and vice versa, has a bearing on whether a cull is appropriate. However, I want to make it clear that the science leads to different conclusions. I will make a judgement based on all the science, evidence and information, as well as my own assessment of what I think is the right legal standard to be achieved. In those circumstances and only in those circumstances might I come to a conclusion about licences.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that supplementary questions have to be brief. There should be one question only, and Members should bob up and down until they are called.

Listed Buildings

3. **Mr McDevitt** asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he can take to protect more listed buildings, especially those that are currently at risk of dereliction. (AQO 1989/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank Mr McDevitt for his question. At present, there are 8,500 listed properties in the North. Save for 5% of them, owners do what they have to do in protecting that built heritage. As I keep saying, built heritage is part of the quality of our lives. Derry and Belfast are the industrial cities of this island. The more we can promote and protect these buildings, the better our own lives and our tourist product and tourist spend will be. I know that there were people — I met them last night — experiencing the Titanic signature project and the other appeals of this city over the weekend.

What do we do? We ensure that we spend as much as we can on grant aid. Last year, we spent 62% more than the previous year, and we increased the limit for listed grant aid up to £150,000. We have served more urgent works notices in the past six months than were served in the previous 40 years. That is still far short of what we need to do, but it sends a message to those who have listed buildings and are not maintaining them that we will come after them to ensure that they live up to their responsibilities. I have convened heritage crime summits to bring the weight of experience outside the Department into the life of the Department and to ensure that we have an action plan to ensure that heritage crime does not become a growing problem as we go forward.

Mr McDevitt: The House will welcome the news that the Minister is determined to ensure that those who have the great privilege of being custodians of a listed building live up to their responsibility. Can he assure the House that urgent works notices will continue to be issued in great numbers to continue to send out the signal that, when you have a listed building, you are a custodian of a very special thing?

Mr Attwood: I agree that urgent works notices will be issued. In the past two weeks, I have instructed my officials to produce a further calendar to escalate the scale of what we are doing. I would like to think that great numbers will be reached, but time will judge me on that. In the meantime

and in parallel, government itself has a responsibility. Some 5% of listed buildings that are in government ownership and for which my Department and other Departments have responsibility are currently at risk. In speaking to the wider community, government needs to speak to itself. In speaking to itself, it has to ask each Minister, including me, this question: what are we doing in respect of the 5% of listed buildings in the government estate that are at risk? The responsibility to tackle the issue is immediate and urgent for me and other Ministers. I will write to other Ministers to ask what leadership we will show to improve on that 5% figure.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister consider listing the remaining buildings associated with the former RAF Limavady site due to the historical and tourist potential, as demonstrated in the recent BBC documentary, 'Dig WW2 with Dan Snow'?

Mr Attwood: I am pleased that the Member mentioned that site and location. I will refer it to my director of built heritage. If an assessment process has not been undertaken, it will be, and a decision will be made. It may be that it merits listing, or it may be that it does not. However, I think that I have demonstrated that, if there is merit in the argument, it will prevail. I demonstrated that even in recent days when I made sure that a church in Dundonald was available for listing. At the same time, that does not mean that all buildings of heritage value that may not be listed will necessarily be preserved. There will be times and places when our built heritage that has seen better days may be subject to planning approval that will see that it no longer exists.

Mr Copeland: Can the Minister confirm the differences, if any, between buildings of architectural significance and other buildings, perhaps such as those at the Maze, that have a historic or a political significance? Is there a process in the way in which assessments are carried out in both cases?

Mr Attwood: The high standard is "listed", which is the premium or gold standard for buildings of historic heritage or value. As I said, 8,500 buildings may qualify for that. At the moment, having put more resources into it, we are rolling out what is known as the second survey to make assessments about those that should be listed, those that should be delisted or those that should continue to be listed. Unfortunately, that could well take up to 2020. There is a Public Accounts Committee (PAC) hearing about the matter this week.

There are other categories of buildings. For example, in conservation areas such as that in Derry, the buildings themselves may not be listed, but the area has conservation value. So, that is a lesser standard, but it is still of a high enough standard to mean that, on the one hand, policy requires that we do what we can to protect the area, while on the other, when it comes to planning permission, nothing that will have an undue impact is allowed. So, there are various interventions that ensure that the wonder, beauty and scale of our built heritage are protected as well as they can be going forward.

Local Government Reform

4. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he has presented a financial package to the Executive to support local government reorganisation and rates convergence. (AQO 1990/11-15)

5. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of the Environment how ratepayers will be protected from increases in their domestic rates bills as a result of local government boundary changes.

(AQO 1991/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank Mr McCallister for his question.

I acknowledge that funding of the review of public administration (RPA) is a huge issue. In my view and as I have made clear to the Assembly, it is an even bigger issue, because the Executive decided to go down the way of having 11 councils rather than 15. If we had gone for 15, six councils would not have been merged and the upfront costs and burden would not have been as high.

I believe that the Executive should assist in the RPA. That is why, in my June monitoring submission, which has to be submitted within the next 10 days, I will make bids for Executive moneys to help with the RPA. They would be used to help in dedicated ways, such as in resources for the improvement, collaboration and efficiency (ICE) programme or in resources and staff for change managers. So, the principle of help is something that I accept. However, the councils also have to accept the principle of helping themselves. If there are opportunities, for example, through a new loan policy, which I am looking at, through more sharing and collaboration to produce more savings or through the disposal of surplus assets, they should be part of the narrative of the funding of the RPA. Government may help, but everybody else has to help everybody else.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I was told earlier that questions 4 and 5 were to be grouped. Will the Minister clarify whether that was a grouped answer?

Mr Attwood: That is the case.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister for his reply. If only the Executive would listen more to the Minister and to this party, perhaps we would be in a much better place. Does the Minister accept that the cost to be borne — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I thought that I gave Members good advice just a few minutes ago, but they did not listen to a word of it. Continue.

Mr McCallister: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. As the Minister tries to create convergence, does he agree that that is likely to put great pressure on ratepayers and businesses throughout the new council areas? Does he also agree that it could damage business in our regional towns and communities?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. I do not want to create the misimpression that the Executive never listen to my view. However, Executive minutes are littered with the quite numerous times when I have had to record my dissent. Last week, I recorded my dissent about what I think remains an ill-judged and ill-worked-out proposal in respect of £80 million of social investment fund moneys not spent in the past 14 months.

A Member: Hear, hear.

Mr Attwood: Thank you very much.

I want to reassure Members, councillors and ratepayers that the transfer of functions under RPA is meant to be rates-neutral. If we are serious about transferring planning

functions to councils, we cannot do that on the cheap. The transfer of planning functions is the significant change under RPA, and resources must follow that. I want to give the reassurance that I will not, at any time, be minded to do that or to see the transfer of other functions on the cheap.

I also believe that councils have to show good authority to their ratepayers by interrogating even more vigorously and accelerating the process of sharing and collaboration. Last August, the councils came forward with a rigorous programme of sharing and collaboration that would realise close to £600 million savings over 25 years. This year, next year and in the run-up to RPA and thereafter, there are real opportunities for more sharing and collaboration. That will allow councils to show good authority and demonstrate to ratepayers that we will do this at the lowest cost possible, consistent with good practice and best evidence, and in such a way that the burden does not fall on ratepayers.

Mr Givan: I should probably declare an interest as a local government representative on Lisburn City Council, which has the lowest rates of any city council and the third lowest rates of any council in Northern Ireland. I am proud to declare that interest.

The Minister will be aware that, although some councils are merging, others, including Lisburn, are losing areas. Dunmurry, for example, is being haemorrhaged off and moved to Belfast City Council. Dunmurry belonged to a council whose rates were considerably lower than those in Belfast, so what assurances can the Minister give to those ratepayers that any impact on their rates — they will see a double-figure percentage increase — will be ameliorated?

Mr Attwood: All of that is work in progress. There will be tensions when ratepayers in old council areas merge with ratepayers in councils with rates differentials. Over time — I stress that it will, in all likelihood, be over time — rates will converge. The notion that there can be a Big Bang approach to rates convergence seems an unlikely one, especially when there are differentials between merging councils and those differentials are significant. The Member's point would, quite rightly, give rise to anxiety that people will see a huge increase in their rates burden — commercial or private residential. Since the decision to implement RPA was taken just before Christmas, work streams have been established to interrogate all those issues in order to employ best practice. Included in those is the creation of a new business case — it will be available just after the summer — in which the full costings of RPA will become more fully known. Given the changed circumstances and the economic circumstances that we face, that will allow us to get the best models going forward, including one for rates convergence.

3.00 pm

Finance and Personnel

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 9 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

Unrated Properties: Belfast

1. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action has been taken to identify unrated commercial and residential properties in Belfast.

(AQO 2001/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I thank the Member for the question. Land and Property Services (LPS) works in partnership with Belfast City Council building control officers to ensure that the valuation list is maintained in an accurate and timely fashion. Building control officers will, in carrying out their normal duties in connection with new properties or alterations to existing properties, gather that information and supply the data to LPS, which is required to carry out a valuation assessment. No system is 100% foolproof, and new buildings can sometimes be missed out. However, the district valuer also has the power to value any unrated property that is brought to its attention by bodies other than the council, for example by the public.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his answer. How much in rates does he estimate is being lost in the system? The question is fairly speculative; nonetheless, the Minister may have some estimate.

Mr Wilson: It is not possible to estimate because, of course, if we knew that properties were vacant, we would take the steps that I outlined to make sure that they were being valued. However, there are cases in the system at present. In the Belfast City Council area, 142 cases are in progress in respect of non-domestic properties and 279 cases in respect of new domestic properties. Currently, 150,000 properties are rated in Belfast. Obviously, we are not collecting rates from those properties that are in the valuation process at present. If we knew of ones that are not currently being rated, we would be able to get an assessment, but if we know of them, they will be in the list that I have just mentioned.

Mr Humphrey: I declare an interest as a member of Belfast City Council. Where does the statutory responsibility for maintaining valuation lists in Northern Ireland rest?

Mr Wilson: It rests with the Commissioner of Valuation for Northern Ireland and the district valuers in LPS. Of course, public bodies have a duty — as do the public — to inform LPS when they become aware of any properties. Do not forget the way that rates work: we decide that we want to raise a certain amount of money and spread that across the rateable valuation of all the known properties in Northern Ireland. So if a property has not been identified, rates are not levied on it and the amount that we want to gather is rated on the properties that are known. Therefore, it is in the interests of the public to notify LPS of a property that they believe has not been valued, so that it is brought into the system.

Mr Gardiner: The Minister may have covered part of my supplementary question. What action are he and his Department taking to ensure that development that has not been the subject of planning permission is identified and added to the rating list?

Mr Wilson: If the property in question has not been subject to planning permission, it may be that building control officers will be aware of work that has been done that, for example, required building control. As I said, building control officers not only notify LPS when completion certificates have been issued on new properties or on improvements to existing properties, but if in their duties as they look at properties that they have got to do work on, they come across a property that they believe is not on the

valuation list — councils have been good at working with the Department on this — they will inform LPS. That is one way in which councils ensure that that property goes onto the valuation list. As I pointed out, it is in the interest of councils to do that because it means that their rates base goes up as a result of more properties being identified.

Empty Premises Relief Scheme: North Antrim

2. **Mr D McIlveen** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what advice and support his Department is giving to businesses in the north Antrim area to ensure that maximum benefit is derived from the empty premises rate relief scheme. (AQO 2002/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The empty premises relief scheme arose from lengthy consultation on the rating of commercial premises. As a result of the responses that were received, the Department decided at the end of the consultation to include in the legislation the relief on empty properties. The rule is that if a property has been empty for 12 months prior to the beginning of this rateable year, and providing that it has been used for retail purposes, it will be subject to 50% rate relief for one year. The idea is to entice businesses into properties.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his answer. On a point of clarity, can he advise the House as to what the main reasons might be for applications for empty premises relief not being awarded?

Mr Wilson: The main reasons are that the properties have not been vacant for 12 months prior to the beginning of this rateable year or have not been used for retail purposes.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fheagra go dtí seo. Agus ba mhaith liom an méid seo a fhiafraí de. In the media of late, there has been a lot of discussion about the non-domestic revaluation. How does the Minister see businesses benefiting from the non-domestic revaluation, and is it possible to bring the revaluation forward, as some business organisations have requested?

Mr Wilson: I will make this very clear because certain expectations have been built up around the revaluation exercise: just because there has been, let us say, a halving of property prices since the previous revaluation does not mean that rates will be halved. We will still be gathering the same amount of rates. Equally, of course, when property prices went up, we did not increase the rate from each property either. However, some people will benefit, because their rateable valuation or their rent on their property will have risen less than the average during the period, while other properties will pay more because their valuation or rent has gone up by more than the average, or not fallen by as much as the average fall has been. There will be a change in the relative payments of properties. Some will be losers and some will gain. We will still be lifting the same amount of rates.

As far as bringing the revaluation forward is concerned, a considerable amount of work is to be done to get the information. All Members will want to ensure that, when we do it, the revaluation is robust. That means that we have to gather the information. Once the information is gathered, there is a lead-in time, because councils have

to be informed about whether there has been a change in the rate base for their council area so that they can make adjustments. Hence, there is a length of time involved that means that any revaluation exercise starting now will not be operative until 2015.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Can the Minister assure the House that a similar and uniform approach to the scheme will be employed right across the board?

Mr Wilson: It will. One of the reasons why we delayed the valuation in 2010 was because such an amount of churn was going on in the market that we could not have ensured that we would have a comprehensive and robust revaluation. International guidelines are laid down for any valuation exercise, and given that we want the valuation exercise to be able to withstand the test of appeals, and so on, it of course has to have the same standards applied right across Northern Ireland. Hopefully, once we have got the valuations done in 2015, it will give us an opportunity to do regular updates from then on.

Fair Payment Charter

3. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether the fair payment charter is restricted to the construction industry or whether it also covers supply and services contracts. (AQO 2003/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Supplies and services contracts, which are undertaken by the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) on behalf of Northern Ireland Departments, are not subject to the fair payment charter. That is because supply chains can be very complex and global, and, therefore, it can be difficult to implement and police any form of fair payment charter. However, the terms and conditions of contracts for supplies and services specify that the suppliers should normally be paid within 30 days of receipt of a satisfactory invoice and that subcontractors should be paid on the same terms and conditions. The Member will be aware that the Government are paying most of their suppliers — I think that the figure is 95% — within 10 days.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for his answer. What sort of monitoring is in place to check that primary suppliers are passing back to the subcontractors the benefits of receiving early payment?

Mr Wilson: Well, first of all, in the construction sector, the project manager — in the supply of services, the contract manager — is obliged to look at the invoices that are submitted to see that they are being paid on time. In the construction sector, because it is easier to police, the project manager has the additional responsibility to look at invoices that have come in and, if they are not paid, to ask why they have not been paid. If they have not been paid on time, the main contractor can be asked to explain himself. Whether it is in the supply of services or the supply of construction contracts, if there is not a satisfactory performance, a certificate of unsatisfactory service can be issued. Since January of this year, a sanction can be imposed on such contractors, which will stop them being able to apply for public sector contracts for the next 12 months.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Are all Departments co-operating fully with the fair payment charter? If not, what is his Department doing about that?

Mr Wilson: The fair payment charter is a voluntary code. When they award construction contracts, centres of procurement expertise (COPEs) are required to ensure that the conditions of the fair payment charter are followed. It is up to the project manager on each of the major contracts to ensure that, on a monthly basis, as I have explained, invoices that have been submitted have been paid. If they have not been paid, it is up to the project manager to find the reason for that. Has the work not been satisfactory? If the work has been deemed to be satisfactory, an explanation has to be given. As I pointed out, if a contractor continues not to perform to the conditions that have been laid down, a certificate of unsatisfactory performance can be issued, and there are real sanctions attached to that.

In the construction sector especially, we are moving back into the bad old days, where main contractors are putting more and more of a burden on the subcontractors, either through late payments or by cutting payments. That is bad for the supply chain, and it is bad for the health of the industry. Within our powers, we will seek to ensure that that supply chain is protected.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister said that a certificate of unsatisfactory performance can be issued in circumstances where a contractor has not complied and come up to standard. How many of those have been issued by the Department in the past year or two?

Mr Wilson: The fair payment charter was only recently introduced. I made a statement on it in the Assembly in January this year, so it is in its infancy. I will not judge the success of this by the number of certificates that we issue. I will judge the success by how few certificates we issue because if we are not put in a position where we have to issue certificates, it means that the measures are working.

3.15 pm

I would far rather see subcontractors being paid on time than being put under pressure by payments not being made or, in some cases, denied to them. However, once we have had an opportunity to see a year of this scheme in place, I will give the House an update, and the Member can, of course, always ask a question to get an update. It is in its infancy and it is too early to say, but I hope that I will not have to issue any certificates.

Peace III

4. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the progress, including the spend, on the Special EU Programmes Body Peace III programme. (AQO 2004/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Peace III programme is progressing well and is almost fully committed, with 158 projects worth £284.2 million approved. That represents 98% of the total programme budget. Peace III has achieved all its annual expenditure targets to date. As of 1 May 2012, expenditure of £109.8 million had been achieved.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive response. I am sure that he will agree that the Peace

funding programmes have made a significant contribution to peace-building in Northern Ireland and the border counties. How would a potential Peace IV programme be developed?

Mr Wilson: Like all the other Peace programmes, it will be developed as a result of public consultation, written submissions and research. The principal concerns in that consultation will be, first, to identify the current peace-building needs. Secondly, there will be a critical look at Peace III and earlier Peace programmes to see where the deficiencies were. Then, of course, there will be the development stage of future programmes based on the evidence obtained. That will be undertaken by the steering groups associated to and led by Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).

Mr Allister: Will the Minister tell us something of the cost of running the SEUPB, given its lavish offices and bloated staff complement? In respect of a Peace IV programme, would the Minister agree that it would be far better to spend the match funding that would be demanded for such an unnecessary project on direct spending, and that if we did not have a Peace IV programme, he would have more funds to spend, which would otherwise be going on match funding?

Mr Wilson: On the exact costs of the SEUPB, I cannot give him the figure off the top of my head, although I can say two things to him. First, we have insisted, and the Minister in the Irish Republic has agreed with me on this, that — *[Interruption.]* In fact, he is just ringing me here, I think, Mr Deputy Speaker to confirm that — *[Laughter.]* I will try to pass that off quickly.

We have agreed that there should be 3% efficiency savings year on year in the SEUPB. This year, there will also be a staff review within the SEUPB. It is my view that the current level of 65 staff should be reduced substantially to the original level of, I think, 45. That staff review will be ongoing.

As far as any future Peace money is concerned, I do not think that there is the connect that the Member suggested because it would, of course, depend upon what money Westminster then made available to us for direct spend in Northern Ireland. There is no guarantee, of course, given the current climate, that the money that would have gone to Europe — because that is what happens: the UK Government put money into Europe and Europe then gives it back to us — would have come to Northern Ireland.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for the answers to date. The Minister will be aware that it is no secret that I support the Narrow Water bridge project. Will the Minister confirm that he is aware that Louth County Council has initiated an appeal of a recent decision in relation to that? We are awaiting the outcome of the appeal and I would welcome an update.

Mr Wilson: I am aware that 13 projects were accepted under the most recent INTERREG call, that the Narrow Water bridge was not successful in that and that an appeal has been made. A number of factors were considered when making a decision on the successful projects, which have now been shortlisted down to the 13. One of the factors would have been the deliverability and the ability to spend the money within the time. Regardless of all the other merits or demerits of the project that the Member mentioned, I think that one of the factors concerned whether the money could

be spent within the time. That is critical, because the one thing we do not want to do is allocate money to a project and find that it cannot be spent.

Corporation Tax

5. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on discussions with Treasury on the devolution of corporation tax powers. (AQO 2005/11-15)

12. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the devolution of corporation tax powers. (AQO 2012/11-15)

Mr Wilson: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 5 and 12 together.

The Executive continue to work with the Government in devolving responsibility for corporation tax. There have been two meetings of the joint ministerial working group on rebalancing the Northern Ireland economy. Our final meeting has been arranged for 25 June.

Considerable progress has been made on the work programme that was agreed, and which I have outlined at previous Question Times. There are a number of issues to be resolved over the next months, particularly around the potential costs and practical implications of transferring corporation tax and the timing of the measure. That said, I anticipate that the ministerial working group will produce a report in the summer and that a decision will be taken by the Government on whether to agree the devolution of powers following that report.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister, for your reply. Minister, you have said on a number of occasions that corporation tax, on its own, cannot be described as a silver bullet for our economy. What plans do the Executive and you as Minister have to invest in some of the other key economic drivers, which will offer a whole package to potential economic investors in Northern Ireland?

Mr Wilson: Much of that will be up to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. However, given some of the changes in EU rules, especially around selective financial assistance, that is going to become more difficult. The Executive have looked at a range of things that we can do to stimulate the economy, even within the levers that we have currently. The Member will be aware that there is a working group under the chairmanship of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Through that, a wide range of recommendations have come from stakeholders, industry and a range of people. Those things will be followed through.

The main recommendation has been to look for high quality investment projects that can be brought into Northern Ireland. We want investment projects that bring wages that are higher than the average because we want to lift the wages in the private sector, not bring down the wages in the public sector. My Department has sought to encourage the manufacturing industry through the rate concessions that have been made to manufacturing businesses.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for his response. Will a reduction in the corporation tax bring jobs to the private sector? Given the success of this morning's event, can the Minister outline to the House whether the devolution of corporation tax powers is being encouraged and promoted

by most businesses across Northern Ireland as a measure that will have a huge economic benefit to the region?

Mr Wilson: I heard what the Member said about the promotion of jobs. There is no doubt about it: if you reduce the amount of tax that a company has to pay, you may well attract more businesses into Northern Ireland and leave them with more income for new investment in Northern Ireland, which, in turn, should generate more employment. However, there are wide and varied predictions as to what the impact would be. Even the Secretary of State and those who support the devolution of corporation tax powers and a reduction in corporation tax in Northern Ireland say that the benefits will only be experienced over, maybe, a 10- or 20-year period.

It is very difficult to model any economic outcome over that period because so many variables can change. For example, we do not know what impact the break-up of the euro area might have in the next six months not only on the European economy, but on the UK economy and banking within that. To try to build any of those variables into any model and talk about job creation in that light makes it very difficult.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Following on from the Minister's previous answer, does he agree that the one essential part of measuring the potential outcome is to have the correct information from the Treasury and the Revenue Commissioners in relation to the total tax take from here? In doing so, we can measure any potential benefit from that. Is the Minister satisfied that the Executive will have that information properly to hand in order to take decisions around the implementation of corporation tax powers when they are devolved?

Mr Wilson: In any conversation with the Treasury, you always wonder whether the correct figures have been given. The Treasury simply seems to take the view that it has given us a figure and we should just believe it, but I am not always sure whether that is the best way of conducting business.

The figures on the cost of devolving corporation tax can vary as a result of a number of factors. There is the actual corporation tax that is paid currently — surprisingly, even that information is difficult to get at, especially as businesses that have a footprint in Northern Ireland and a footprint in other parts of the United Kingdom may pay to different tax offices. There is also the secondary impact of any reductions in corporation tax and whether those should be counted. Even if you decide to count them, how do you measure them? There is the tertiary impact, as well. Should you include the fact that if you get more people in employment, you pay out less in benefits, and should we get some share of the value of that? There are so many variables in all that, as well as displacement, etc, that the figure is not as easy to obtain as some people would expect.

Mr Campbell: Given the unspecified extent of the price tag, which we do not know yet, that will be attached to the devolution of corporation tax, and the protracted timeline that we could be faced with, which the Minister has outlined, are there any other measures that could be implemented in the next two or three years, while we are working at that, which would make Northern Ireland a much more attractive place to invest in?

Mr Wilson: There are. One of the big debates at present has been around whether we should set up enterprise zones in

Northern Ireland. The Executive have not taken a view on that because many of the benefits of enterprise zones that exist in England, Scotland and Wales are already available right across Northern Ireland: for example, access to broadband, rate reductions for the manufacturing industry, certain planning restrictions being lifted, etc. However, one benefit that we have been pursuing with the Treasury is the capital allowance aspect of enterprise zones, and I know that Arlene Foster has done quite a lot of work on that. Indeed, many businesses tell me that because they will not make huge profits anyway for the first few years, allowances based on the amount of capital that they have to invest initially could be very attractive to them. That is one of the fiscal issues that we need to discuss more fully with the Treasury.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment while there is a change in the Chair.

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

3.30 pm

Private Members' Business

Prison Service: Archive

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

Miss M McIlveen: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the importance of the role played by the Prison Service in the history of Northern Ireland and pre-partition Ireland; recognises the wealth of material of historical significance owned and held by the Prison Service and the educational importance of this material; and calls on the Minister of Justice to take all the necessary steps to ensure that this collection is fully archived, that its totality is maintained and that it is as accessible as possible to the general public.

I thank the Justice Minister for attending today. Despite falling under the remit of the Justice Department, this is an issue of cultural and educational significance. There have been discussions and expectations for some time that there would be a Prison Service museum. However, today's debate is concerned with the collection itself.

I, along with my colleague Peter Weir, have taken the opportunity to visit the Prison Service collection, the vast majority of which is held at Woburn House just outside Millisle. A small portion of it is on show at Woburn House, and it provides a fascinating insight into almost 200 years of prison history on this island. It is not simply confined to the modern-day Northern Ireland Prison Service. It represents an important part of the history of this island, and it should not be buried.

The items in the collection stretch back to the 1840s when all the prisons on the island were under the control of Dublin Castle. There are artefacts relating to prisons from all over pre-partition Ireland and prisons in Northern Ireland, including the Maze, Crumlin Road jail, Londonderry and Armagh. Included in the collection are original cell doors from Armagh prison, early 20th century prison uniforms, prisoner photographs, pictures and contraband seized by the authorities. The Prison Service is also holding original artwork and crafts by prisoners, including murals from the Maze prison. The fact that there are so many prison records, documentation and artefacts in Prison Service ownership means that a treasure trove is waiting to be discovered. At present, that wealth is denied to the wider public for a variety of reasons, including security concerns and the fact that we simply do not know everything that is there.

Parts of the collection are displayed at the Prison Service college at Woburn House, which allows some limited access, and has been open to the public on world heritage day on a couple of occasions. Such access was facilitated by the former curator and archivist whose contract was terminated a number of months ago, which means that public access is

even more limited, and there are no plans to open for this year's world heritage day.

The bulk of the collection is held at Woburn House, although a small portion is on loan to Crumlin Road jail. Answers to questions for written answer have indicated that the total collection contains an estimated 66,000 items, 6,000 of which have been catalogued. The job of cataloguing the material has fallen to the former curator who now attends Woburn House on a voluntary basis to carry out the work. If he did not do that, the collection would simply lie there collecting dust with no one to catalogue it and with no one having any idea of what is held at the site. Given that his role is purely voluntary, the cataloguing aspect has almost ground to a halt. The fact that there is such a huge amount left to do means that, in any event, it would be insurmountable for one man to complete. Museums with much fewer artefacts have teams of archivists working on them.

I previously asked the Minister what plans there were for a Prison Service museum and was advised that plans had not yet been formulated and that they would be considered after consultation with key stakeholders. In his response, I would be grateful if the Minister would update the Chamber on the progress of the stakeholder consultation, who the key stakeholders are and what the Prison Service's plans are for a museum.

Despite the Minister's assurances in response to other questions I submitted on the future of the collection, there is a worry that it will be broken up before it has even been catalogued. Approaches have been made to go through the documents and artefacts and to lift items for other projects. Although the Minister has sought to assure me in response to questions that there are currently no plans to remove or dispose of the artefacts from Woburn House, the phrasing of that response and the manner of the approaches for items causes a great deal of concern.

It has been said on several occasions in the Prison Service that the intention is to allow those in charge of the Maze project to select what they want from the collection and for the remainder to be dispersed, with artefacts going to the Ulster Museum and documentation going to the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI). From a historical and educational perspective, it is extremely important that the collection remains intact. I seek the Minister's assurance today that that will be the case. Given the limited space already available to the Ulster Museum, sending artefacts there could simply mean consigning them to storage when there is a fascinating story to be told.

Those who have visited Woburn House have said how differently they view the Prison Service as a result. The collection contains a story not only of prison life in pre-partition Ireland and Northern Ireland but of the prisoners and prison employees, which would be lost if the collection were broken up. Of course, those items could be loaned to other exhibitions, but for that to happen, the collection needs to be properly catalogued. To tell the story, you need to know what you have.

The Minister advised me that the Prison Service has been asked to consider the loan of artefacts to the Maze/Long Kesh programme delivery unit, which is considering a future display to include Prison Service artefacts at the new peace and reconciliation centre at the Maze. He also said that

if such a request were accepted, an agreement would be drawn up and an inventory completed. I think that that would be quite appropriate, but I am concerned that the collection might be dispersed without the Minister's knowledge. I seek his assurance today that he will seek to keep the collection intact.

The threat to the integrity of the collection persists and is compounded by the uncertain future of Woburn House. The new multipurpose training college at Desertcreat is due to become operational in 2015, with Prison Service personnel being trained there. What does that mean for the Prison Service collection? Where will it then be housed? The ideal scenario would be to have a central holding centre where the items could be on permanent display. That would mean that the public could have greater access to the displayed items and that there could be a proper facility from which other items could be loaned. It is, of course, vital that the process of cataloguing items not only continues but is stepped up. For that to happen, finance would obviously need to be made available to employ staff. I ask the Minister to look at that possibility, even on a cross-departmental basis.

A process had already begun for the collection to obtain museum status, which would have meant that it was eligible for grants, but the termination of the curator's employment halted that process. It needs to be restarted. As has already been indicated, the Maze/Long Kesh programme delivery unit has expressed an interest in some items. However, it is difficult to comprehend how the unit can know what it is looking for and how it can possibly find it without a more comprehensive catalogue being completed. As I said, there are over 66,000 items, and only 6,000 of those have been catalogued. It has taken one man, who has knowledge of the Prison Service and archiving, over six years to do that.

The Minister may well have no current plans to dissipate the collection, but I would hate to see this valuable resource being lost to us and future generations through neglect, negligence or recklessness. I certainly want the public to be able to see as much prison history as possible, as it represents a fascinating view of life here. However, such a view should not be limited to snapshots such as the Maze. The history of the Prison Service did not begin in 1971 and end in 2000. What is available can tell the tale from the establishment of state-run prisons to the present day, including the development of prison records and the treatment of offenders through the centuries, as well as the human stories of prisoners and staff. Similarly, the collection should not simply be gathering dust on the shelves of Woburn House or the Ulster Museum.

It is right that items should be loaned out and put on public display in museums and exhibitions to inform and educate, but, equally, it is important that they remain part of a whole collection so that historians are able to use the unique information that is available. For that to be done, it is necessary to complete the process of cataloguing. Naturally, the removal of funds for that to be done creates concerns about the future of the collection. Therefore, I ask that the Assembly acknowledges the importance of the collection to our understanding of our history, and I seek support for the motion.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus ba mhaith liom a rá go mbeidh Sinn Féin ag tabhairt tacaíochta don rún. I will first of all state that Sinn Féin will be supporting the motion. We find ourselves in support of the concept that has been outlined by the proposer, Michelle

McIlveen. The history of many nations is often mirrored by the history of imprisonment. You can look at places like South Africa and others. When you go to Scotland, particularly Stirling prison, you get a good sense of the history of Scotland through the history of the prison and the documents that are recorded, and that complements the fine history that is found in other museums and places of learning.

Sometimes, particularly when people talk about imprisonment as it pertains to the North, there are, obviously, competing histories and stories. In many ways, that is a good thing, and I think it should be encouraged. I do not think we should feel that there is a single version of history. Each person will tell the story of imprisonment from their own perspective. In recent times, particularly with the work on the development of the Crumlin Road prison, Armagh prison and now the Long Kesh site, that is one of the things that have enriched that engagement for me. Many people now accept that it is valid and only right that there are different people's perspectives. Imprisonment impacted on many people, including the staff who worked there, the visitors, people who were imprisoned there and the Quakers. All the different people add together.

The one great strength of the motion is that it refers to a particular collection that stretches back 100 years at least — maybe 150 years or more. That is good, because from all those artefacts, people will get a sense not only of the history of imprisonment in the North — or, indeed, across the island, as alluded to by Michelle McIlveen — but of the many different chapters in our history. People might claim that some are more controversial than others, and I think we should be trying to avoid that. There is a history, which is there to be seen and embraced, and I do not think that we should have any fear of it.

I am finding out today just how many single artefacts there are in the collection. What I would like to see developed is for that set of artefacts to tell a story, and the Department has a role in this. In recent times, the Department has, on individual request, released documents that pertain to an individual prisoner's imprisonment. On a personal level, I declare an interest as a former political prisoner, and I have availed myself of that service for documents that pertain to me. Not all of them were released, and perhaps that is a story for another day. However, it is important that, when you read those documents, you get a sense of the impact that imprisonment had as it unfolded. Those types of documents will have a role to play in the future as we extend the story of imprisonment.

I think we have done it, and have been seen to have done it, across this island. If you visit Kilmainham prison, you get a good sense of the history of that prison. It is done in such a way that, as the curator of the prison told us, you are not there to tell a particular story, but you create a scenario and then allow people to join the dots themselves. I think that is the way that that type of history should be told. We have shown, with the development of Crumlin Road prison and with the recent announcement last week that not only are people developing the history of the Crumlin Road prison, they are now turning it into a place where commerce can take place. You can have a visitor attraction that is also a place of commerce.

Armagh Prison is the same. It has successfully been turned into a place for people to go and reflect. I have talked to people across the community from different perspectives

who have gone there and have come away enriched by the experience. I see no reason why we cannot do that with the other prison sites, particularly the one at Long Kesh. So the collection, the need —

3.45 pm

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

Mr McCartney: This party recognises the need for the collection to be conserved and indeed enhanced. We support the motion.

Mr Elliott: I welcome the debate today, a lot of which is around the history of the prisons and of the Prison Service in particular. Quite often, when we look at prisons in modern-day Northern Ireland, we think of the past 40 years, whereas I appreciate that this is about much more than that. I also appreciate the wording of the motion. It actually is about much more, even predating the partition of Ireland. We need to preserve and look after those archives.

I recall being in Lithuania a few years ago and visiting a couple of defunct prisons there. It was amazing; they had artefacts from generations, almost, preserved in those prisons. They were using them as a tourist attraction to some degree, although they highlighted that it was not particularly appealing for tourists to go there; it was more for locals to visit at that time. However, they had done a really good job in preserving the history of the prisons and of the prison officers and how they felt. They gave almost a live tour of what prison life was like in those times and down the generations. Like this, it did not just relate to one period in time, but went back a number of years.

It is important that we all recognise the hurt and suffering that was endured in those times, particularly by prison officers. I know that many prison officers and staff, and indeed their families, underwent serious intimidation and threats at times. That was clearly very distressing for them then and is still very distressing for the families, because they have had to endure that for a long time. We had casualties; a number of prison officers and staff were murdered, and that was a very unfortunate situation. These people were put into employment as prison officers because that is a job that needs to be done. It is a job that needs to be carried out effectively and efficiently. It is unfortunate that we had some in Northern Ireland who lost their lives because of that.

I believe we have an opportunity to ensure that preservation. I note that Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for assurances around the preservation of those artefacts, and I reiterate that. I hope that the Minister can give us some assurance that those artefacts that are currently preserved will continue to be preserved and not broken up. I referred to Lithuania earlier, and it appeared that they kept the artefacts on a prison-by-prison basis as opposed to bringing them all together. I am not so sure that that would be possible here because some of the older prisons are now not in place. Unless you put them into a museum nearby, it would be much better to bring them into a collective situation.

I know that there was significant dedication and service from prison officers and staff throughout the years, and I pay tribute to them. They used to be called prison warders as opposed to prison officers, but, irrespective of the name,

I think there needs to be an absolute recognition of the work carried out by prison officers and staff, and the threats and intimidation that they underwent. I had to visit prisons to see inmates on occasion, and I can tell you that some of the prison officers I talked to felt like prisoners themselves while they were in there. Times were so bad that prison officers often felt that they, not the prisoners, were the people being apprehended and imprisoned. They felt under that much pressure.

The Ulster Unionist Party supports the motion and welcomes it.

Mr A Maginness: I thank Miss McIlveen for bringing the very worthwhile and timely motion, which, of course, the SDLP supports. Clearly, Miss McIlveen has done a lot of research. Everyone in the House should welcome the idea of archiving artefacts from the Prison Service, post and pre-partition in Ireland, in a systematic and professional way. It is important that we preserve our history, and this is one way of doing that. Of course, once the archiving has been done and the material is sorted out, it will add considerably to our tourism offer, certainly in Crumlin Road prison and perhaps in other parts of Northern Ireland.

I was in Crumlin Road prison last week at the launch of Danny Boy whiskey by the Belfast Distillery Company. It is a very impressive project, combining industry and tourism. It is not simply the manufacture of whiskey. It is the sale of whiskey — Irish whiskey, I hasten to add — and there is a tremendous thirst for Irish whiskey throughout the world, in particular, in the United States, China and Japan. It is a great product to sell. However, combined with the tourism product in Crumlin Road prison, it is a unique blend, if I may put it that way, and I think that it will be particularly successful.

I know that some of the artefacts are already in Crumlin Road prison. If we can use some of them to add to the prison's appeal to tourists, we will create something of great worth for the curious tourists and travellers who visit Belfast.

This is very important. My first academic love was history, and it continues to be a great love of mine. If we lose our history, we lose something precious to our culture. It is of great value. Clearly, this would preserve our history in a very meaningful sense, not just for the purpose of business or tourism, but for education and giving future generations an understanding of how this part of Ireland was governed and how we conducted ourselves. I think it important, therefore, that the motion is supported. I look forward to the Minister's considered response to a very sensible and, as I said, timely, motion.

Mr Dickson: I support the motion and thank the Member for bringing the issue before the House.

I agree that the Prison Service played a very important role in the history of Northern Ireland. Prison officers faced many challenging situations, particularly in the past 40 years. Many have made sacrifices for society over all the years, pre-partition and post-partition. We are moving through a period of reform and modernisation to equip the Prison Service to face the challenges of the 21st century in Northern Ireland, and, as we do, we must make sure that the services and sacrifices of the past are not forgotten.

As we know, the history of the service is encapsulated, as other Members have told us, in some 66,000 items

currently held in the Prison Service college in Millisle. More than 6,000 of those items have been catalogued by a now-retired member of staff, who has offered to continue that work on a voluntary basis. I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in thanking him for all that work. I understand that many of the 66,000 items are photographs, but some of them will be material of important historical significance. It is important that the items in that category are preserved and archived.

I imagine that there are organisations that have an interest in the future of many of the items and artefacts. There could be options as to where some of the items could be located; Mr Maginness made reference to the former prison on the Crumlin Road. As those options are considered, we must also acknowledge that some items may still to this day be subject to data protection rules due to their place of origin. It is important that before any long-term preservation or transfer is agreed, compliance with the Data Protection Act 1998 is assured. We also need to understand the obligations that the Prison Service has to the Public Record Office and that there are appropriate protocols in place.

With all those things considered, we must ensure that items of historical significance are preserved and are as accessible as possible so that future generations will be able to understand the work of the Prison Service pre- and post-partition, as the motion states, and acknowledge and appreciate the service and sacrifices that were made for our society.

Mr Givan: I commend my colleague Michelle McIlveen for tabling the motion. It is very timely. To date, the contributions from all sections have been made in an appropriate manner, given the sensitivity around the issue.

As many will know, and you will have seen in the motion, I declared an interest in the subject: family members of mine, including some very close direct relatives, served in the Prison Service. They have all now retired from the service and are glad to have done so. My comments come from the perspective of someone who has belonged to a Prison Service family and was part of the wider Prison Service family. It is important that we never forget the sacrifice made by those who served in that very difficult job, which resulted in a lot of heartache, pain and anxiety for those families.

Prison has motivated a lot of people from all sides to get into politics. I was motivated to get into politics because of the inappropriate release of prisoners as a result of the Good Friday Agreement. I stood in the car park at the Maze prison when the final prisoners were released as a result of that agreement. It was then that I felt that that was wrong and that it was time to get active. Others will tell a story about their experience of prison life and why they decided to get active in politics, but I decided to get into politics to try to do something about an issue that was wrong rather than shouting from the sidelines.

My experience is from a Prison Service family's perspective. One of my distinct memories is of when the family member returned from work, and the smell of smoke on the uniform was so pungent that it stayed with me. Every time they came through the door, you knew straight away that they had come from a smoky environment — the individual does not smoke. I recall an occasion on which a snooker ball was brought home because it had been thrown during a disturbance in

the prison. I remember asking what that was about, and it was just dealt with; the person said that they had brought it from work. It was never really discussed or referred to in my home. That experience was kept out of our home, but I always knew that there was something particularly strange because the vehicle was always checked underneath and we were always conscious of where the car was being driven. We were never allowed to tell anybody about the employment of individuals in my home.

Therefore, I knew that there was something different about the job. So many families had the same concerns. Some had to move home, while some had security installed in their houses. That story has not been told, but it needs to be told, and we should never forget about it. Indeed, hundreds were injured during that time, some severely and some fatally.

4.00 pm

Mr Weir: Does the Member agree that the experience of individual prison officers is yet another reason why there needs to be a dedicated prison museum in Northern Ireland?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Givan: Yes, I agree, and I thank the Member for his intervention. Those officers were injured implementing government policy, and they held the line for decisions that were taken in London. Some made the ultimate sacrifice for that, and then when the policy was reversed, they had to implement it. They were the pawns in the game, but some suffered horrendously.

Thirty officers were killed as a result of their employment in the Prison Service. A Mr Walker was killed in 1942, but 29 were killed during the terrorist campaign. In my remaining time, I want to read their names into the record: William McCully; PC Dillon; John D Cummings; Robert John Hamilton; John Wesley Milliken; Thomas Graham Fenton; Desmond Ernest Irvine; Michael Christopher Cassidy; Agnes Jean Wallace; George Foster; Edward Donald Jones; Thomas Gilhooley; David Teeney; Gerald Francis Melville; William Wright; Elizabeth Matilda Chambers; James Andrew Ferris; William McConnell; Patrick Thomas Kerr; Leslie Jarvis; Brian Samuel Armour; John Griffiths; James Alexander Peacock; Albert Miles; John Murdie McTier; Patrick Mackin and his wife, Violet Mackin; William Wilson; Graham Cox; and William Cecil Burns. Their sacrifice and memory must never be forgotten.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like my colleague, I declare an interest as a republican ex-prisoner who spent many years in a number of prisons. I am very encouraged by the maturity of the debate today. The Member who spoke previously said that, one time, a snooker ball went missing. I think that I remember us searching for that snooker ball in Long Kesh.

Nobody denies that the Prison Service played a major role over the past 40 years — indeed, the past 200 years — in the prisons. However, its role, like that of all other stakeholders, should be told and, as the motion states, fully archived. I believe that that can be best done within the framework of the proposed conflict resolution centre on the Long Kesh/Maze site.

As the motion states and Michelle McIlveen said, there is a wealth of information. I heard that there are 66,000 pieces. Indeed, I have many in the attic myself from a different perspective. Most of the material held is of historical significance and from all perspectives. It is not only from a republican perspective that I say that all records should be maintained because, as my colleague said, material relating to the British Army, the Quakers and the various prisoner organisations that passed through and were associated with the prisons should be archived. There needs to be equality of all stakeholders' material, and perspectives should be collected, fully archived, totally maintained and made accessible to the public. That can be best done on the sites that we have. We have a number of sites that are only beginning to come to fruition.

I also believe that they can be of educational importance, so that present and future generations can learn the lessons about the need to avoid conflict.

The site and the archive material can also provide a tourist perspective. I have visited Kilmainham jail in Dublin on a number of occasions, and, as was mentioned earlier, it brings huge numbers of people to that city. I have also visited Robben Island, the famous prison in South Africa. It has become one of the major tourist attractions in that country, bringing thousands of people there each year.

We have had a very mature debate, and I support the motion, but it should be inclusive of all.

Mr Kinahan: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion and the fact that we have had such a mature debate. I particularly welcome the history lesson on the collection from Miss McIlveen, and I congratulate the one curator whom she talked about, who has managed to curate 6,000 items out of 66,000. It is a huge job. I would love to see a museum being set up; we all need to see a museum somewhere. If that does not happen, Minister, we need to look at the other options, whether in the form of private investment, for making sure that the collection is kept together. I am against — I think that most would be against — the best of the collection being picked out to go to one location, unless it can be cleverly copied and maintained so that the whole story stays in one place. There are means of doing that today, and we should seek assurance on that point.

I very much welcome Sinn Féin's support and that of everyone else for the motion. I acknowledge that there are many different stories to be told in different ways, but it is most important that these stories are told and that there is no whitewashing, no invention and no lies.

I will put my old fine art hat on and point out that not only does the collection need to be curated, it needs to be preserved. The early BBC films and footage are rotting away because they were kept in a room at the wrong temperature. Clothes and hats can be eaten by moths or can rot away when they get damp. Plastics and other materials have come in. There is a great deal that needs to be done, and it is not an easy task. You have to plan how you keep such a collection.

When I started at Christie's, we did not sell any memorabilia from Ireland. In that time, Adams and other auction houses in Ireland have sold memorabilia from the conflict. In the early days, there was no memorabilia from the conflict in the North, and a Royal Irish Constabulary helmet would not have been sold. Today, those same sales mix the history, North

and South. It is not just about preserving the collection. We have to think about its value, and that value will change. That means that every item has to be looked at and assessed. It is not just the item itself; it is the story, and the other items that go with it, that will give you its value. With that value, you have to think about insurance, which adds to the need to keep the collection together.

I would also like to make sure that we do not forget the families who supported their loved ones who worked in the Prison Service; not just all those whose names were read out earlier, but every single person linked to them. We must not forget them because they will have gone through the same angst and pain. I look forward to seeing a history of the prisons in a proper collection, and I am glad that this debate has been carried out in such a mature way. We must never forget them. The Ulster Unionists support the motion.

Mr Allister: Certainly, it would be very remiss of those of us in this generation if we did not take steps to preserve that which tells us about previous generations, no more so than in relation to the gallant contribution of the Prison Service to the well-being of us all. In recent times, as has been said today, 29 people paid supremely with their life for doing their job on behalf of the law-abiding community. Others suffered grievously. One prison officer suffered being shot in the head by a Member of this House, Mr Kelly. Another died as a consequence of the prison escape in which Mr Kelly and others took part. We have much for which to be grateful to those who were lawfully doing their duty.

It is right that the House should contemplate the preservation of artefacts, historical items and all that makes up a history. However, this same House has really very little room to talk, because this House, under its own Assembly Commission, has taken steps to hide away the artefacts of this House and of our history as a Parliament and Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member come back to the motion, please?

Mr Allister: Yes. The context of this House holding forth upon what others should do, but not what it does, will not be lost on many people. Here we are debating this issue quite properly, but every effort is made to ensure that we never debate, for example, the re-hanging during jubilee year of a portrait of Her Majesty that the Commission controls and owns. I say to the House that it should examine itself in the context of examining this motion and —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to stick to the motion, please, or we will have to move on.

Mr Allister: — lead by example in that regard.

I have heard some people say that we could take parts of the collection. It is shameful that only 10% of it has been catalogued. That is a shameful neglect of duty and indicative that the necessary funding has not been afforded to those who could do the job. However, some seem to think that we could take part of the collection. Indeed, we have heard in today's debate that those who are overseeing the Maze project are interested in selecting certain items and cherry-picking — or is it terror-picking — from the selection. One could well imagine what some people might be interested in amongst the archives: some of the handmade weapons that were found in the prison, the murals that go with it, and all of that. I want to say very clearly that those whom

I represent would have no time for the cherry-picking, or terror-picking, of items for inclusion in the Maze project.

It is interesting that Mr McCartney talked about modelling things on Kilmainham jail. Anyone who has been there can only come away recognising that it is very deliberately a shrine to the 1916 events. It was the National Graves Association peddling all of that. If that is what is being held up as an example of what we could and should do with the artefacts from our rich Prison Service history, it betrays what some really want to do. In my book, there is no place for the glorification of terrorism, be it outside the prison or inside the prison. I, for one, want no part in a project that would aid that in any shape or form. Let us celebrate the tremendous contribution made by our Prison Service to the freedom that we enjoy, but let us not tarnish or sully it —

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

Mr Allister: — by equally seeking to promote the ill fame of those who were occupants of the prisons.

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): I congratulate Miss McIlveen and her colleagues for securing the debate and bringing the issue to the Assembly. As she said, she has highlighted the issue in a number of questions to me. It has been interesting to hear the breadth of debate around the Chamber and, indeed, by and large, the unanimity. I share Miss McIlveen's assessment that the Northern Ireland Prison Service has played an important role in the history of Northern Ireland, and reference has also been made to the pre-partition arrangements. I have paid tribute to the officers in the Prison Service on a number of occasions for the difficult job that they do, and have done, in challenging times and for the sacrifice that has been made.

4.15 pm

The work that is now ongoing to reform the Prison Service is meant to build on that proud history as we transform the service to one that is fitted for the challenges for today and tomorrow. However, I certainly agree with the sentiment expressed in the Chamber this afternoon that, as we seek to move forward, we should not forget the past. Most Members referred to different aspects of that past, most poignantly when Paul Givan read a list of names. That aspect is something that I think we should all be entirely conscious of as we seek to discuss what otherwise could be a very divisive issue.

As Michelle McIlveen pointed out, the Prison Service holds a significant collection of artefacts. It may be helpful if I take a bit of time to outline the nature of the material, which amounts, as was said by many, to some 66,000 items that are stored at the Prison Service college in Millisle. They have been accumulated over many years from a number of prison establishments, including some that have long since closed; for example, Armagh, Belfast and the Maze prisons. Around 6,500 of the artefacts have been catalogued, again, as was said, by a retired member of staff who was retained by the Prison Service to catalogue those items. He was supported by serving and retired members of staff as he carried out that function.

I acknowledge the scope and the scale of that collection. I visited the Prison Service college at Millisle and viewed some of the artefacts. I recognise that much of that

collection is likely to be of considerable historical or educational significance. However, I should also add the caveat that, equally, many of the 66,000 items are of no historical significance at all. We need to be realistic as we look to the future of the collection and ensure that we maintain the important items and have the educational opportunities without suggesting that every single item is worth preserving. Most of the items are, in fact, photographs of individuals who have served time in custody. Many of the photographs originate from the Maze compounds and cells from 1970 onwards. Although many of the photographs are of limited interest, there are, as is generally known, a number that quite clearly capture the history of the Maze compound in particular, because many existing photographs were taken illegally by prisoners and give some indication of life within the compounds. Other items include contraband that was confiscated from prisoners or that was found during searches, including stills for brewing poteen, so I can perhaps assure Alban Maginness that the new Belfast distillery is not actually that modern — that practice was being carried out some years ago within the prisons. However, hopefully, the licensing laws are now being fully complied with.

We have also seen a variety of other makeshift tools, including ones used for digging, carving and as weapons, some of which, no doubt, were used for training, particularly in the Maze compounds, by paramilitary factions.

The motion calls on me to take all necessary steps to ensure that the collection is fully archived. As I said, the archiving process has begun and, to date, around 6,500 items have been fully catalogued. However, the process is neither easy nor straightforward, and it is likely to take considerable time to complete. Members need to be realistic about the other demands being placed on staff in the Prison Service college at this time.

In the meantime, the Prison Service is giving consideration to the future arrangements for storing and managing the artefacts, particularly given the intention to relocate training from the current college site at Millisle to Desertcreat.

I suppose that I should add for Danny Kinahan's benefit that it is not just about storing and maintaining the artefacts, but adequately preserving them. However, I must say that some of the artefacts that I examined are of such crude construction that the skills of the fine art dealers whom he is so knowledgeable about are unlikely ever to be required.

Although I recognise that the collection includes artefacts of significant historical and cultural value, we need to acknowledge that much of it is of no historical significance whatsoever, so I do not believe that it is either practical or desirable to retain the collection in its entirety, as some Members suggested. The real issue is about ensuring that we get the items of value and ensure that they are properly looked after.

There is clearly a wide interest in the future of some of the artefacts. A number of organisations, including the Prison Service Trust and the Retired Prison Officers' Fellowship, have already expressed a direct interest. Other interested parties include, for example, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which, as was said, is responsible for bringing forward the refurbishment of Belfast prison, and which clearly would wish to have a number of artefacts

that originated in Belfast available to put on display in the refurbished prison for viewing by tourists.

Given that the Maze/Long Kesh regeneration group has secured some £18 million worth of funding to construct the new peace and reconciliation centre, the programme delivery unit has also requested that the Prison Service provides artefacts previously associated with that site for display in the new building. Further funding has been approved by the Heritage Lottery Fund to furnish the building, including the provision of display facilities for artefacts previously associated with the site. The Royal Air Force and the army have indicated their willingness to co-operate in providing suitable material, and given the Prison Service's long association with the site, particularly throughout the Troubles, I believe that it is appropriate that it should also be represented.

Senior representatives from Belfast prison and the Maze/Long Kesh regeneration group have visited Millisle and are in discussions about suitable artefacts that could be loaned for display — I emphasise the word “loan”. A number of artefacts are on display at Belfast prison under a service level agreement, which clarifies that the artefacts are on loan and remain the property of the Prison Service. A small number of artefacts are also available for display at the Ulster Museum. I hope that that assures Members that we do not propose to break up the collection. However, clearly, as other Members said, there are benefits in putting some of the artefacts on display at different locations to tie in with the history of those locations. That seems to be a sensible way to maximise their educational value. However, I repeat that that must be done in the context of a service level agreement, which makes the ownership of the items and the lending arrangements clear.

I certainly agree that it is important, where our legal obligations allow, that photographs of particular historical interest to the Prison Service are preserved and stored, and, where possible, displayed in appropriate locations. However, it is critical that we first obtain a clear understanding of the Prison Service's legal obligations in relation to that collection of artefacts to ensure that it remains compliant with its obligations under the Data Protection Act 1998. Clarification is also needed on whether NIPS will be obliged to provide any of the items and documentation to the Public Record Office, given that body's responsibilities.

The Prison Service has held a number of meetings with the Departmental Solicitor's Office and been in communication with the Public Record Office on the future of the artefacts. However, no decisions have been taken at this stage. Discussions are ongoing, and a meeting has been planned for early next month at Millisle, at which the Public Record Office and the Departmental Solicitor's Office will be present. That will allow the role of the Public Record Office and the potential for sharing the collection in other places to be thoroughly explored. I hope that that will represent a significant step forward in the direction that Members have called for today.

I assure Members that I recognise the importance of many of the artefacts that we talked about as part of the historical heritage of the Prison Service and wider society in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Prison Service has no long-term interest in retaining the artefacts, but it must ensure that it meets its legal obligations in disposing of or

suitably transferring them. As such, it is important, in the first instance, to clarify the legal issues, particularly those surrounding data protection obligations and to identify what interest, if any, the Public Record Office holds before any decision can be taken. I assure Members that any decisions on the future of the artefacts will be taken by the Prison Service in the best interests of preserving a critical collection that captures the history and heritage of all our pasts.

Mr Weir: First, I thank all those who took part in the debate. I welcome the broad support for the motion from all sides of the Chamber. That support was a bit more disguised from some Members than from others, but there seems to have been broad acceptance of the motion.

I want to deal with some points raised during the debate. As was indicated by the Member who proposed the motion, we visited the museum site together and saw the wide range of artefacts there. It was very much an eye-opener. As is often the case, the museum is something that is on my own doorstep, but which I had never had the opportunity to see. One of the purposes of the motion is to express regret that although the museum is there and has been open to various groups at different stages, the opportunity for the wider public to visit the museum and view those artefacts has been extremely limited. A number of Members raised the potential opportunities the museum presents, and I think that it is important that the public have that knowledge of the past and where we have come from.

As was indicated by, I think, the proposer of the motion and echoed by others, including Mr Elliott, this is not just about the past 40 years, important as they are. This collection dates back to the middle of the 19th century. I note that some of the research on the history of prisons on the island of Ireland refers to the first prison reform package, produced in 1777, which shows that very little is new under the sun. Indeed, some may say that we are still waiting for its full implementation. This great historic process should interest many people. As was said by a number of Members, particularly Mr Kinahan, it is about a history and education that the wider public has so far been denied.

As the proposer highlighted, at the heart of this issue is ensuring that we have an intact collection that is not broken up. I have some reservations about what the Minister said at a later stage, when he talked about progress and almost left the impression that stuff may be hived off to the Public Record Office. That is not the purpose of this motion; it is about keeping the archive intact. The proposer and the Minister indicated that we are at the stage at which around 6,000 of 66,000 items have been catalogued. There is no doubt that many of those 66,000 items may not be of outstanding historic interest. However, until all items are properly catalogued, dismissing a lot of them would be ill-judged. I suspect that there may be a lot of hidden treasures in there that we should seek to preserve for the future.

Turning to some of the other Members who spoke in the debate; although he has departed the Chamber, Mr McCartney, along with Mr Lynch, supported the motion fairly fulsomely. One might say that they gave a degree of blanket support to the proposal. Indeed, indications have been given that the full history needs to be shown. Mr McCartney and Mr Maginness gave the example of the opportunity provided by the development of Crumlin Road jail. Mr Maginness seemed to get sidetracked and had almost a glint in his eye

when whiskey was mentioned. I do not know whether his mind has taken him so far in that direction that he has now departed the Chamber. However, as he said, this proposal is timely.

Mr Elliott and, later, Mr Lynch mentioned the international perspective, and there are many examples throughout the world of previous prisons and jails being used for archives. Undoubtedly, some will serve as a fine example while others, perhaps, may provide an example of things that we should avoid. Therefore, it is important that we get it right. We should never be so introspective in this country that we do not learn from outside.

Mr Elliott, Mr Givan and Mr Kinahan mentioned the sacrifices of prison officers, which I think is an important aspect to this. Particularly in light of the events of the past 40 years, we need to give that recognition, and doing so is of particular significance to prison families. Mr Elliott sought, with others, an assurance that the archive would be maintained as a proper collection. Mr Dickson also talked about the need to recognise the service, sacrifice and role of the Prison Service.

Mr Givan spoke very personally of his background. His was an example of a prison family and showed the impact of that perspective. Again, as he said, this is a story that has not yet been fully told.

Mr Lynch expressed a particular preference for the archive to be located on the Maze site and highlighted its tourism potential. Mr Kinahan brought a unique and expert perspective by saying that this was not just a matter of cataloguing; with his background in fine art, he talked about the creation and preservation of the archive, and he realised the value of it. Indeed, he welcomed the fact that we were looking at this in a fairly mature way.

Mr Allister referred to the need to ensure that the archive allows future generations to see some of the history of previous generations. He also highlighted the sacrifices made. He raised the concern that there cannot be cherry-picking in this and that it cannot reflect a terrorist perspective. We need to be cognisant of that.

4.30 pm

Finally, when talking about building on what is a proud history, the Minister highlighted the nature of some of the material. It is clear that a certain amount of progress has been made. As we move forward, the concern is that the progress in reaching this point has been quite slow. Although he mentioned that there will be a point early next month at which there will be further discussions and, hopefully, decisions taken, they will have to be on something that preserves the integrity of the archive.

In conclusion, I welcome what has been a mature debate. I pay particular tribute to the curator, who, over the past six years, has single-handedly, and now on a voluntary basis, sacrificed many hours to catalogue these items. There is a history and a tradition that can be of value from an educational and a tourism point of view, and there is a need to preserve the best of the past. We should unite on pushing for a Prison Service museum and the retention of the artefacts. I appreciate that, in a recent Adjournment debate, the Minister gave indications that the site at Millisle was being considered at a broader level and that decisions

had yet to be taken. One of the indications that was given in the review of prisons in Northern Ireland was that the training college would cease to exist at its current site and would, effectively, move to Desertcreat. Perhaps there is an opportunity to look at the current site in Millisle and, indeed, at the former borstal as a permanent home for an archive and a museum and at making it much more open to the public. I throw that out as one suggestion, and at the heart of this is, first, the creation of a proper Prison Service museum that is accessible to the public and, secondly, the retention of the archive in a coherent and integral form. I thank various Members for their support for this matter, and I urge the House to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the importance of the role played by the Prison Service in the history of Northern Ireland and pre-partition Ireland; recognises the wealth of material of historical significance owned and held by the Prison Service and the educational importance of this material; and calls on the Minister of Justice to take all the necessary steps to ensure that this collection is fully archived, that its totality is maintained and that it is as accessible as possible to the general public.

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I did not want to raise this point of order during the debate because I think that, in the main, the debate was very mature. Can the Speaker's Office read the Hansard report and make a ruling on when a Member made a claim against another Member that could not be substantiated in a court, even a Diplock court?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Yes, of course, the Speaker can look at the Hansard report of the debate. I am sure that, the issue having been raised, he will take a close look at it. However, it will be up to the Member who may have been offended by any comment to raise it, preferably on the Floor of the House directly or with the Speaker.

Mr McCartney: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, but given that the Member was not here at the end of the debate, I felt that it would be appropriate to raise it so that it could be brought to the Speaker's attention immediately.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you for that further point of order. You are entitled to raise it as a point of order, but there are separate and specific arrangements for when accusations have been made against a Member. I ask any Member who may have been offended to follow those arrangements. If they need any guidance, they can contact the Speaker's Office. Where someone feels that accusations have been falsely made against them, I would appreciate it if the Member concerned raised it.

Mr McCartney: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, far be it from me to question the position of the Chair, but, in recent times, a Member raised an issue on behalf of another Member and the Speaker dealt with it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is up to the Member concerned to disprove the allegations that may have been made against them. I have given advice that the Clerks gave me that is

based on precedents. Following that guidance from the Clerks, I propose to move on.

Adjourned at 4.35 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 22 May 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Speaker's Business

Public Petition: Causeway Hospital, Coleraine

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Adrian McQuillan has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. He will have up to three minutes to speak about the petition.

Mr McQuillan: Thank you for allowing me to hand over this petition to save acute services at the Causeway Hospital. I also thank the members of the Causeway branch of Unison for collecting all the signatures: some 26,182 in total. I know that they were out and about on their days off and on their bank holidays and at the North West 200. I take the opportunity to welcome them to Parliament Buildings. Many of them are in the Public Gallery.

What we all want is a sustainable future for the Causeway Hospital. It would be in no one's interest to persist with a model that could collapse in a year or two. We all realise that there is some level of change happening on every acute site, and it would be much better for any change to be planned rather than unplanned.

Regionally, the Northern Trust has one of the largest catchment areas, with boundaries that extend from the glens of Antrim to Cloughmills, Ballycastle and Castlerock, taking in such areas as Portrush, Portstewart, Garvagh, Kilrea and all outlying areas. A total of 43,500 people receive care in the Causeway A&E annually, and the downsizing of other hospitals in the Northern Trust area has put remaining facilities under a significant amount of pressure. Clearly, those existing facilities would be unable to effectively care for the people who no longer have the option of treatment at the Causeway Hospital.

The golden hour was clearly flagged up as being the key point in identifying the need for the Causeway Hospital. Paediatricians made it very clear that, if a sick child had to travel to outlying facilities from the Causeway area, he or she would not survive the journey due to the travel time involved. Many of the initiatives in the Compton report are based on a model where the road infrastructure is much better than it is in Northern Ireland. It does not take into account the rural nature of this area.

I will read you a letter that appeared in the 'News Letter' last Tuesday from a Mrs F Anderson of Coleraine:

"I felt I must write and publicly say thank you to the doctors and nurses at the Causeway Hospital, Coleraine. Recently my husband developed a sudden stroke, and

I remembered the advertisement on TV – ring 999 immediately. I did so, and thanks to the swift action of the ambulance staff, and the super staff of the A&E, my husband was getting treatment within an hour. I dread to think what might have happened if this A&E was closed at the Causeway Hospital. To the doctors and staff, in the A&E especially, I couldn't thank you enough for your excellent care and treatment. To the powers-that-be – please think again before closing this A&E department."

That letter tells us a lot about the Northern Trust.

We encourage the local community to engage fully over the next number of weeks with the local commissioning groups and the trust, which are preparing a population plan that must also include the population shift for the summer months and the large events that take place in the area, such as the North West 200 and the international air show, so that we can secure a solution that provides a long-term, sustainable future for the Causeway Hospital.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank you once again for receiving the petition. I also thank the members of the Causeway branch of UNISON.

Mr McQuillan moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank you for the petition. I will forward it to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and ensure that a copy is forwarded to the Health Committee.

Assembly Business

Mr G Kelly: On a point of order, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I understand that yesterday, while I was at a meeting in the Senate, Raymond McCartney raised a point of order, and the Deputy Speaker — I think it was you — said that, since it involved me, I should raise it this morning. I ask the Speaker to check Hansard. I understand that remarks were made by another Member, Jim Allister. On checking the Hansard report, will you come back to me on the basis that I think that it was unacceptable for a Member to make such remarks in the House?

Mr Deputy Speaker: You have put your views on the record, and the Speaker will deal with the matter on his return.

Ministerial Statement

Credit Unions

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the reform of the Northern Ireland credit union movement. Members will recall that I have addressed the House on a number of occasions on this important subject. I am now pleased to be able to report on the progress made to date and the plans for the future development of the movement.

I have at each stage of the reform programme sought to ensure that the Assembly, the credit union representative bodies and the Northern Ireland credit union movement generally were fully consulted on and engaged with the reform process. To a large extent, the process was begun by the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee's 2008 inquiry into the role and potential of credit unions in Northern Ireland. The inquiry resulted in a number of recommendations, most of which my Department endorsed, while being mindful of the fact that the timescale for implementation of those that required legislative change would depend on the demands of the legislative programme in the Assembly and at Westminster.

The Committee's report confirmed the wish of many credit unions to expand the range of services that they can offer, in particular those that help to address financial exclusion. For many low-income and vulnerable groups, a credit union is their only contact with a financial institution and only source of credit. It is also increasingly their preferred access route to a wider range of financial services. Where it has been within its remit, my Department has facilitated many of the enhanced services now available, such as the transfer of state benefits and wages, bill payments and bank direct debits and standing orders.

The Committee's inquiry was followed by a HM Treasury review of the legislative framework for Northern Ireland credit unions that involved a consultation of all major stakeholders. The Treasury report broadly endorsed the recommendations of the Committee report and shared with it the recommendation that responsibility for the regulation of Northern Ireland credit unions should be transferred to the Financial Services Authority (FSA).

Both reviews recognised that move as being essential for the development of the movement and the protection of its membership. In 2010, I joined the then Economic Secretary to the Treasury in setting out proposals for the future regulation of Northern Ireland credit unions. Overall, the responses to the consultation by the representative bodies and several individual credit unions were supportive and welcomed the opportunities and benefits that FSA regulation would bring.

The preparations for the transfer of regulation on 31 March were thorough and were undertaken jointly by Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and FSA officials, who worked closely on identifying and addressing the needs of the Northern Ireland movement. A series of familiarisation roadshows was run over a two-week period, taking in the four main population centres: Belfast, Londonderry, Newry and Belfast — that is obviously wrong. The roadshows were

timed to coincide with the FSA consultation on the detail of the proposed regulatory framework.

Some Members will know that, as part of the feedback on the proposed regulatory framework, I received representations from the ETI Committee and the credit union trade bodies. I subsequently conveyed my concerns and those of the movement to Mark Hoban, Financial secretary to the Treasury. More recently, I met Andrew Bailey, interim successor at the FSA to Hector Sants. As a result of those representations, a number of concessions were secured, the most significant of which relates to the share/savings limit and the investment period for surplus funds. The FSA had originally proposed a reduction in the amount that an individual member could save from £15,000 to £10,000 and a reduction in the maximum period for which a version 1 designated credit union could invest surplus funds from five years to one year. The case for retaining the Northern Ireland higher savings limit of £15,000 has now been conceded. The FSA has agreed to waive the normal £250 fee for applications received before April 2013 from version 1 credit unions that wish to apply for version 2 status. In addition, version 1 credit unions reinvesting surplus funds during that period will be allowed to do so for up to three years. Investments made prior to the transfer of regulation to the FSA will be allowed to mature in accordance with the original terms and conditions of the investment.

With any major regime change, be it regulatory or otherwise, it is inevitable that there will be a period of adjustment and bedding in. For the majority of Northern Ireland credit unions there will be no greater administrative costs as a result of the transfer of regulation to the FSA. However, I am aware that a number of credit unions may require some assistance to document their policies and procedures in compliance with FSA requirements. In recognition of this, I am pleased to announce details of support to be made available to credit unions that need and would benefit from advice on this area of their business operation. I plan to offer a one-off grant payment to each of the two credit union trade bodies to contribute towards the cost of providing support and advice to their members to ensure their compliance with the regulatory requirements of the FSA. The offer of financial support is conditional on that support and advice being made available to independent credit unions that are not members of either trade body.

Regulation of Northern Ireland credit unions by the UK financial services regulator brings with it the wider benefits of the financial services compensation scheme and the Financial Ombudsman scheme. Prior to 31 March this year, members of Northern Ireland credit unions were the only savers in the whole of the United Kingdom who did not enjoy the protection of the financial services compensation scheme. However, I acknowledge and pay tribute to the Ulster Federation and the Irish League of Credit Unions for the prudential role played in the operation of their respective self-funded share protection schemes. The burden that those bodies carried will now, quite rightly, be carried by the much better resourced UK financial services industry. Credit union members can save with the confidence and assurance that they have the same status as all other savers. I feel sure that the extension of the UK compensation scheme to Northern Ireland credit unions will help attract new members and contribute to the growth of the movement.

One recommendation of the 2009 ETI Committee report was that registration of Northern Ireland credit unions should remain within DETI. However, as discussions with HM Treasury and the FSA on credit union reform progressed, it became increasingly evident that no tangible benefits would result from registration remaining with DETI. In March 2010, the joint consultation by HM Treasury and DETI considered the transfer of regulation and registration from Northern Ireland. In a letter dated 27 September 2010, I notified colleagues on the ETI Committee of the decision to transfer credit union registration to the FSA or its successor. The Government response to the March 2010 consultation was published in October 2011 and stated that the credit union registration function would transfer to the appropriate Great Britain authority following the introduction of the necessary legislation, the transfer of regulation and registration being a positive and practical step.

10.45 am

Following agreement with the Financial Secretary to the Treasury on the inclusion of provision in a suitable legislative vehicle, the Financial Services Bill, with the necessary Northern Ireland clauses, was presented to Parliament earlier this year. I have sought agreement from the First Minister and deputy First Minister to bring before the Assembly a legislative consent motion permitting the inclusion of the relevant Northern Ireland clauses in the Financial Services Bill. The proposed NI clauses would permit Her Majesty's Treasury, by order, to enable the transfer of the registrar of credit unions for Northern Ireland to one or more of the successor bodies to the Financial Services Authority.

I recognise the importance of a thriving and growing credit union sector. Recent reforms have placed credit unions in Northern Ireland on a more secure footing. I intend to build on the good work already done and continue the reform process by introducing a Northern Ireland Bill that will remove restrictions on Northern Ireland credit unions and permit them to expand the range of their activities and reach out to new groups.

In recent years, there have been significant developments in the legislative framework governing credit unions in Great Britain. In line with previous practice and as part of the credit union reform process, my Department is considering how best to update Northern Ireland credit union legislation in a similar way. A key development for credit unions in Great Britain was the introduction of the Legislative Reform (Industrial and Provident Societies and Credit Unions) Order 2011 or LRO. The LRO made changes to existing Great Britain credit union law. It was considered that the existing GB legislation was inflexible and that the restrictions on the operations of credit unions inhibited their operational effectiveness, the provision of services to members and their ability to deal with other corporate bodies. Credit unions in Great Britain, for example, faced problems related to the scope and eligibility criteria of their membership qualifications and, like Northern Ireland credit unions, were restricted to providing services to individuals. In addition to clarifying the position for all GB credit unions with regard to the attachment of shares, the LRO gave Great Britain credit unions greater flexibility in two key areas: the services they can offer and the people to whom those services are available.

Prior to the LRO, credit unions were prevented from offering interest on the deposits of members and were permitted to offer only a discretionary dividend. It was considered that that disadvantaged credit unions when compared with banks and building societies, which had no similar restriction. The LRO, therefore, withdrew that restriction, and that allowed credit unions to offer interest-bearing shares, subject to certain conditions, and gave credit unions more scope to compete in the marketplace.

In addition to permitting GB credit unions to extend the products offered, the LRO made significant changes to the groups that credit unions can serve. The LRO gives GB credit unions the freedom to grant membership to corporate entities such as companies, partnerships, local community groups and social enterprises. The LRO also allows GB credit unions to choose to offer services to more than one group of people. GB credit unions no longer must restrict membership to those sharing a single common bond. Instead, single credit unions can now provide services to different groups, thereby giving more people access to credit unions and facilitating the expansion of credit unions.

The Bill that my Department will take forward is intended to grant similar freedoms to Northern Ireland credit unions, allowing them not only to continue to fulfil their valuable role within the community but to extend it even more widely. If allowed to offer more mainstream savings products, credit unions will be in a more competitive position in the financial marketplace and so be able to reach a wider audience. When credit unions have the freedom to choose a broader membership base, more people will have access to credit unions, which will then have a greater opportunity to grow.

I am keen to ensure that Northern Ireland credit unions benefit from the most appropriate legislative framework at the soonest available opportunity. My officials are in the process of scoping out legislative provisions for a new credit union Northern Ireland Bill. Following that exercise, policy proposals will be developed and put to public consultation during 2013. The aim is to introduce the Bill in the Assembly in late 2013. The new Bill is scheduled for passage through the Assembly in the 2013-14 legislative session. Officials in my Department will, of course, continue to keep my colleagues in the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee informed of progress. I commend the statement to the Assembly.

Mr A Maginness (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I thank the Minister for her very detailed statement. I think that everybody in the House will welcome it, as supporters of the credit union movement. I also thank the Minister for her continued support on the reform of credit unions. That is very important.

There are a couple of issues that I would like the Minister to respond to. The Minister said that she had:

“sought agreement from the First and deputy First Ministers to bring before the Assembly a legislative consent motion permitting the inclusion of the relevant NI clauses in the Financial Services Bill.”

My understanding is that the deadline for that is 11 June, so the schedule is very tight. Will the Assembly be able to meet that deadline, as it is important to get that transfer undertaken?

With your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a final point. The Minister proposes to introduce the credit union Bill to the Assembly in the 2013-14 session. For many people looking at this from the outside, particularly the credit union movement, there is a degree of eagerness to get on with the job of expanding services. Will the Minister consider bringing that programme forward to an earlier date to satisfy the growing enthusiasm and interest of the credit union movement?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Chair for his points. I am obviously very keen to get the legislative consent motion before the House at the earliest opportunity, and I hope that that can be arranged very soon. Obviously, I await clearance from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and I hope that that is forthcoming.

That leads me to the Member's second point. This has all been about having all our ducks in a row, as it were, so the Northern Ireland legislation could not happen until the Westminster legislation had happened. We cannot take the next step forward until we are included in the Financial Services Bill where registration and regulation are concerned.

I think that I have shared with the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment the timetable for all these things; if I have not done that, I will. So, if we miss one of those dates, inevitably, the reform programme will not only slow down but will be at risk of being in jeopardy entirely. It is hugely important that we continue the close working together between the Department and the Committee so that we can ensure that the reform takes place. We should always keep it to the forefront of our mind that the pressure for reform came from the credit union movement. It was taken up in an investigation and inquiry by the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and that gave it the impetus to move on. We then had reform proposals from Her Majesty's Treasury, which we dovetailed with our proposals. The process has been an intricate web of trying to move forward on this reform programme, but I assure the Member that there has been no delay by the Department. We are very keen to ensure that the credit union movement, which has been of great assistance to many people right across Northern Ireland, continues to offer its services and grows those services with all the safeguards that are now in place. So, I assure the Chair and the rest of the House that we will push ahead on the issue. However, he is right to say that time is short for the legislative consent motion and we really need to get it to the Floor of the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that some latitude is shown to the Chairpersons of Committees. I ask other Members to be focused in their questions.

Mr Moutray: In her very welcome statement to the House, the Minister referred to a one-off grant payment to the two credit union trade bodies. Can the Minister outline what form the package of financial assistance will take?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. That has been a continuing theme, and, although I indicated that the burden should not be much greater on the credit unions, any change brings with it challenge, as everyone in the House will know. We have decided that the Department will provide financial support by way of a one-off grant of £20,000 to the Irish League of Credit Unions and the Ulster Federation of Credit Unions as a contribution towards the

cost incurred by the two bodies in providing the necessary support and advice required by the individual credit unions. That is important, because there are many independent credit unions out there as well. It is a condition that they make that advice and assistance available to independent credit unions. If you are an independent credit union, you can apply to the Irish League or the Ulster Federation for that assistance, and it is a condition of the funding from DETI that that assistance will be given. We hope that that will enable credit unions to put in place the policies and procedures that they need to be regulated by the Financial Services Authority, and we hope that it will be of great assistance to them.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. She has gone into the matter in great detail. She said that the Bill that her Department will take forward will grant similar freedoms to credit unions here, particularly the way in which groups are allowed to participate in credit unions. The credit union movement was concerned about football and GAA organisations. Will the Minister clarify that she intends to bring that forward?

Mrs Foster: It is intended — absolutely. To date, only individuals have been able to avail themselves of credit union services. The LRO — the Bill in Great Britain — has allowed joint accounts and allows incorporate bodies to join their credit unions, so that will include sporting groups, and it may include social enterprises that want to take out an account in a credit union. We are scoping out the Bill at present. However, it is certainly my view that those groups will be able to avail themselves of credit union services going forward, and most people want to see that happening. With the increased bureaucracy in many of our banks and building societies, a lot of those groups may feel more comfortable with credit unions, and, therefore, that will be broadly welcomed.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for her statement. The reform of the Northern Ireland credit union movement has caused concern to many, and I thank the Minister for her work on this, her correspondence and her continued statements to the House. She mentioned the one-off payment: I commend that idea, as my colleague did. Will the Minister tell the House what research her Department has carried out to assess the cost to those bodies of support and advice to their members in complying with the new regulations?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. We believe that the FSA regulation should not — I use the words “should not” — increase the cost to the credit unions. However, we recognise that there is a change involved and that more policies need to be developed and put in place. I know that the two trade organisations have been very much involved in the development of policies and procedures, and, therefore, we wanted to assist them in that. I think that the House is already aware of the fact that my officials have a very close working relationship with the credit union movements. They have been very much alongside them in all of this reform process, and they have assessed that that support, by way of a one-off grant of £20,000 to each of those bodies, should increase the capacity of both those movements to comply with the FSA arrangements. As I said, it is not just for those two bodies and the members of those two bodies; it is for independent credit unions as well.

Mr Lunn: I welcome the Minister's statement. There is a lot to welcome. As somebody who laboured under the yoke of the FSA for 10 years, I can say that the credit unions are about to discover what heavy-handed bureaucracy and overkill means. I fear that some of the smaller credit unions may have difficulty in coping with that. Where possible, could the Minister ensure that the FSA will regulate with a light touch, bearing in mind that that organisation regulates some of the biggest financial institutions in the world, as well as very small credit unions?

11.00 am

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. I have heard those concerns expressed, and that is part of the reason why we have decided to put this finance package in place. My DETI officials have been working with credit unions to try to ensure that they are aware of what is needed from them. They have also been working with FSA officials, and I went over to meet those FSA officials two or three weeks ago. I met Andrew Bailey and a young chap — whose name I cannot recall — whose sole task is to regulate credit unions here in Northern Ireland. After the meeting, I was very encouraged by the way in which they have been approaching the matter.

Initially, they came forward with a package. Concerns were raised with me by the ETI Committee and from credit unions directly, particularly in relation to the size of investment. We took those issues to the FSA, and it relented given the maturity of the credit union movement here in Northern Ireland. The credit union movement in Northern Ireland is much better developed than in the rest of Great Britain, and the FSA recognised that in the concessions made in relation to the Bill.

I am optimistic that the FSA will regulate credit unions. Yes, it will be more bureaucratic than what has happened heretofore, but, as a result, credit unions will get a protection that they did not have. Given all of that, the balance is certainly in favour of FSA regulation.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her statement. Will Northern Ireland credit unions have access to the growth fund modernisation programme?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. The growth fund modernisation plan was a fund announced in Parliament for Great Britain credit unions. It comes back to the point that I made to Mr Lunn about the maturity of Northern Ireland credit unions compared with the maturity of GB credit unions. GB credit unions have a reach of only around 4% of the GB population, whereas there is a really deep penetration of credit unions right across Northern Ireland. There are very few towns in the Province that do not have a credit union of one sort or another. Therefore, the modernisation fund was announced to try to encourage the growth of credit unions in Great Britain. That money was not made available to Northern Ireland because we have such a deep penetration of credit unions in the Province. I have had correspondence with Members about that on a number of occasions. Hopefully it is understood that that fund was just for Great Britain credit unions.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask that Members be as quiet as possible in the Chamber. I have heard a few conversations on all sides. We are here to put questions to the Minister and listen to the answers.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement and her ongoing work to try to provide the credit union movement with some stability. The Enterprise Committee report that the Minister referred to recommended that registration of credit unions remains within DETI. Will the Minister outline why she feels that the credit union movement, its members and the wider economy would benefit from that element transferring to London? The Minister has said that there are no tangible benefits to that element remaining within DETI, so perhaps she will clarify what the tangible benefits of it transferring to London will be.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. I know that this issue has been raised. The reason why we felt registration should go along with regulation is because registration is essentially an administrative function and does not involve any oversight. All that credit unions would be doing is registering their accounts in the Department, and they would then have to be regulated by the FSA. Therefore, there would be a sense of confusion and duplication. It was thought that it would be much better, cleaner and easier to understand if registration and regulation were carried out by the one body, and that is the Financial Services Authority.

I know that the Financial Services Authority does not have an office in Northern Ireland, but it has given me an undertaking that it will be over in Northern Ireland often. As we have heard, it ran four familiarisation meetings right across the Province. I know from speaking to officials and FSA members that they hope that the warm relationship between DETI and the FSA will continue. I have no doubt that credit unions will continue to call on my officials for advice and assistance; that is fine, and I have no difficulty with that at all. Indeed, I encourage that, because there is a wealth of knowledge in the Department. However, for the benefit of credit unions, for simplification and to stop duplication, we felt that registration and regulation should be together.

Mr Dallat: Mr Deputy Speaker, I also welcome the Minister's statement and, indeed, beg your indulgence to pay tribute to officials in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, who have a marvellous relationship with credit unions. The Minister will be aware that credit unions were founded in times of great poverty — now called austerity — among working-class people. Will the Minister assure the House that, in future, credit unions will be encouraged to reach out to the victims of payday loans, loan sharks and all kinds of gombeen men? Will she ensure that the principles of the credit union movement stay alive and flourish in the future?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question and, indeed, his warm tribute to officials. I know that that view is held across the credit union sector. These austere days have reminded us of the value of the credit union movement, which has been very much to the fore in helping such people and playing a role in financial inclusion. The provision of financial services to lower-income households really is a key service of the credit union movement. It plays a vital role in this area and has been a key player in affordable credit pilots, which have been led by the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland in Ballymena and Londonderry, together with the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland and the Ulster Bank. As the Member rightly says, credit unions have that background, but I can see them taking an even more active role in financial inclusion and, indeed, social enterprise.

Mr Allister: Can I press the Minister a little further on the anticipated delay in bringing forward local legislation? The ambition seems to be to let another 18 months pass before local legislation is even introduced, and the time it will take for the legislation's passage means that we are probably at least two years away from it being implemented. Surely responsive devolution can do better than to have a three-year time lag between the LRO and local legislation in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for this question. It is certainly not my ambition to slow down credit union reform. I think that my record on credit union reform speaks for itself. As I indicated, we have to wait until other matters have been sorted out at Westminster. We cannot carry this through on our own; the Westminster legislation has to be in place before we can take matters forward. I want to assure the Member that if it is at all possible to shorten that time frame, the legislation will be pushed through sooner, because I want to make sure that credit unions have all the services available to them as soon as is practicably possible.

Private Members' Business

Irish Language: Funding

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

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the effects that the new funding model proposed by Foras na Gaeilge will have on Irish language organisations; expresses concern about the nature of the consultation process; and calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to review these proposals in view of her Department's emerging Irish language strategy.

Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím leis an rún a mholadh: rún atá iontach tábhachtach, dar liomsa; rún faoin tionchar a bheas ag an tSamhail Nua Mhainithe, atá molta ag Foras na Gaeilge, ar na heagraíochtaí Gaeilge, thuaidh agus theas. Ba mhaith liom díriú ach go háirithe ins an díospóireacht seo ar na heagraíochtaí Gaeilge anseo sa Tuaisceart. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss the impact of the new funding model proposed by Foras na Gaeilge on Irish language organisations and to ask the Minister to review the proposals in the light of her emerging Irish language strategy.

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

The support infrastructure for the Irish language in Northern Ireland is relatively young. Most of it has been developed only within the last 12 years. A critical part of that infrastructure is a small voluntary sector with around 20 people employed in it, which is core funded by Foras na Gaeilge. The sector's work includes educational resources for Irish-medium schools; support for preschool education; cross-community initiatives; community development; a radio service; and advocacy for the Irish language community.

Under Foras na Gaeilge's current proposals — the new funding model — most of those organisations will cease to exist as they will be disqualified from applying for core funding. They, and the voluntary sector in the Republic, will be replaced by a small number of all-island organisations, which will be chosen on the basis of competitive tender. The new funding model is, in part, a response to the straitéis fiche bliain — the 20-year strategy for the Irish language in the South. It is also a response to the economic situation. Foras na Gaeilge's funding has been severely cut, and most of the organisations have lost up to 25% of their funding since 2008. We are told that the cuts are likely to continue. Foras na Gaeilge has argued that its process reflects the need to rationalise the sector.

Tá an earnáil deonach Gaeilge iontach soiléir faoi thionchar na samhala nua seo – déanfaidh sé damáiste don earnáil. The Irish language voluntary sector in Northern Ireland is very clear that the new funding proposals, if implemented, will have a devastating effect on the small and fragile support infrastructure that has been developed to date. It is important to state that the sector is not opposed to change

— nor, indeed, is it blind to the need for cuts — but it does not support the new funding model.

De réir mar a chuaigh an próiseas comhairlúcháin chun tosaigh is amhlaidh go raibh go leor gearán fá dtaobh de. As the consultation process has progressed — and there have been many complaints about that process — it has become abundantly apparent that the new funding model is opposed, not only by the Irish language voluntary sector but by eminent linguistic scholars, Dáil Committees and the Irish language media, as well as by almost everyone who attended public meetings organised by Foras na Gaeilge across the island.

I do not have the time to go into each matter in great detail, but I will highlight some of the critical issues during the course of the debate. They relate to the funding model itself, the proposed all-island structures, our own Executive policy and due process, and, indeed, good practice.

Níl an t-am agamsa inniu dul isteach in achan mhionsonra ach déanfaidh mé iarracht na hábhair a phlé ins an díospóireacht seo. The Irish language voluntary sector argues that a competitive funding model will commercialise the sector, narrowing its range of activities. It will stifle innovation, undermine voluntary input and undermine the independence of the sector, thereby severely curtailing its advocacy role. When the representatives of the sector attended the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, they argued that it could lead to a loss of skilled and experienced personnel as well as the wealth of contacts and reputations they have built up over the years. It will also mean that proposed job contracts will be for three years, and employees will have to reapply at the bottom of the scale for each competitive cycle. They pointed to numerous research papers on competitive funding from Britain, Australia and America.

All of those consistently highlighted the defects of this model and argued strongly in favour of core funding for voluntary organisations.

11.15 am

Is fearr ar ndóigh an cur chuige uile-oileánda i gcuid mhór cásanna ach tá eisceachtaí tábhachtacha ann. The Irish language voluntary sector —

Mr Campbell: Will the Member give way?

Mr D Bradley: Yes.

Mr Campbell: If the Member could set aside just for a second the merits or demerits of the case that he is making; does he think that he advances the cause of the Irish language by interspersing Irish throughout his contribution while moving the motion, when most of us in the Chamber and outside do not understand the language and do not know what he is talking about other than when he speaks Irish in addition to the contributory opening line that he would normally use? Does he think that interspersing his comments constantly with Irish when most of us do not understand what he is saying advances his case?

Mr D Bradley: Gabhaim buíochas leis an chomhalta as an phointe a rinne sé ansin. I thank the Member for his intervention, and I will take the time to explain to him that, in all cases, I have translated what I have said, so it is open to you to understand it if you choose to. That is in

accordance with the Standing Orders of the House, and, as you know from past experience, I would not dare breach them. We will move on, Mr Deputy Speaker.

As I said, the Irish language voluntary sector North and South agrees that certain functions are best carried out on an all-island basis. It also agrees that, due to different constitutional, legal, administrative, social, political and socio-linguistic circumstances of the two jurisdictions, other functions are best carried out on a jurisdictional basis. The sector argues that the original decision to reorganise it on an all-island basis was beneficial but not in every case. Although Foras na Gaeilge has now allowed for two schemes to operate on a jurisdictional basis, it has not followed through on the implications of these precedents.

The Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government, which has been agreed by all five parties, has made a commitment to strategies for Irish and Ulster Scots. It seems inconceivable and contrary to good practice that any attempts should be made to restructure the Irish language sector in Northern Ireland in a policy vacuum before the Executive's strategy has been developed and agreed.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr D Bradley: I am sorry; I cannot on this occasion, as I have still material to cover.

Foras na Gaeilge acknowledges that its restructuring programme is directly linked to the 20-year strategy for Irish in the South. Indeed, the restructuring was announced only days after that policy was introduced. The strategy applies to the South but does not apply to the North. It appears that Northern Ireland is marginal to Foras na Gaeilge's consideration, and this perception is reinforced by the fact that all versions of the new funding model, including the most recent one, have entirely ignored the cross-community priority clearly identified in the Programme for Government.

That priority refers to language strategies:

"building relationships between communities...unlocking the potential of the culture, arts and leisure sectors as instruments for positive change. Additionally, it seeks...to advance social cohesion and integration."

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr D Bradley: It also ignores the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration, which envisages that language strategies will contribute to the Executive's goal of a shared and better future for all.

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

Mr D Bradley: Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil an t-am istigh. I support the motion, and I ask Members to lend their support also.

Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): I welcome the opportunity to speak on today's private Members' motion on the new funding model proposed by Foras na Gaeilge. I would like to outline briefly the Committee's consideration of the issue.

On 9 June 2011, the Committee received a briefing from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) and Foras na Gaeilge on the proposed funding model and details

of the second consultation that ran from March to June 2011. Members considered concerns raised by the previous Committee about the limited nature of the first consultation and the fact that the guidelines for conducting an equality impact assessment (EQIA) and a regulatory impact assessment (RIA) had not been followed.

The Committee shared those concerns and raised them with DCAL officials and Foras na Gaeilge on 9 June 2011. Members expressed concern that a full EQIA has not been undertaken and asked for an explanation for that decision and details of the screening process. Members also questioned why a regulatory impact assessment had still not been undertaken.

The Department later confirmed that an RIA would be undertaken by Foras na Gaeilge as the proposals would have a direct impact on the voluntary sector, and that was welcomed by the Committee. The Committee agreed to a further briefing on the outcome of the consultation on 15 September 2011 and also invited the Irish language core-funded group to brief the Committee on 22 September 2011, on its concerns about the proposed funding scheme and the consultation process. Officials briefed the Committee on the outcome of the consultation on 15 September 2011, and the consultation had asked the public to report on four key recommendations. Members learned that all four recommendations had been rejected by Irish language groups in Northern Ireland. That was confirmed on 22 September by the Irish language core-funded group, which highlighted deficiencies in the process and said that the guidelines for conducting an EQIA and RIA and the consultation were not followed.

The Committee wrote to the Minister, on 26 September 2011, about the concerns of the Irish language core-funded groups, the consultation process, the RIA and the EQIA. The Committee asked the Minister to refrain from making any decisions on the proposals put forward by Foras na Gaeilge until proper consultation with the sector had been taken. The Committee has followed closely the developments in relation to the consultations on the new funding model proposed by Foras na Gaeilge and, following the decision by the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) last October to undertake a further consultation to address the concerns raised about the consultation process, the Committee invited officials to provide an update on 26 April 2012.

The Committee continues to take an interest in the issue and has requested that DCAL and Foras na Gaeilge report to it on the outcome of this consultation in due course.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom ar dtús a rá gurb é mo bharúil gur tháinig an rún seo roimh an Tionól níos mó ná giota beag ró-luath. Tá gá le díospóireacht a dhéanamh go deimhin ach caithfidh muid fanacht leis an phróiseas comhairliúcháin ag an am chéanna.

I am very pleased to speak on this matter today and, indeed, very proud that issues relating to the Irish language are being discussed in the Chamber. I have some concerns about the motion. I consider it pre-emptive and slightly premature. We see that reflected in the wording of the motion, in that the new funding model is described as "proposed" and the Department's strategy as "emerging". It is my contention that we are discussing this much too early,

and I thank the Chair of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure —

Mr D Bradley: Gabhaim buíochas leis an chomhalta as mé a ligint isteach anseo. I thank the Member for giving way. Does he not agree with me that it is much better to be pre-emptive than to wait until it is too late? If we want to influence these decisions, we must enter the debate early and effectively. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Ó hOisín: The Member knows that there have been a number of previous consultations. When the current Minister took office, those were in a state of chaos. I praise the current Minister for her efforts to rectify that.

A process of consultation is exactly that: we should take on board what all the stakeholders and interested parties say and have said. That has been reflected very much in a number of the consultation meetings and workshops that we in Sinn Féin, members of the Committee and others have carried out with many of the groupings. It is certainly no reflection on any of the groupings.

I declare an interest as someone who has worked with most of the groupings over my working life, including Altram, which deals with the preschool sector; Comhaltas Uladh, of which I am a former member; Iontaobhas Ultach, which is delivered through the Ciste Craolacháin, which, of course, I was part of; and other groupings such as Forbairt Feirste, Pobal and Raidió Fáilte, on which I once had a slot, but that was a few years ago.

As I said earlier, the Minister has brought some sort of form and shape to the consultation, and I praise her for that. We listened to and took on board all the worries and concerns that many of the groupings have. That is reflected in the extension of the funding to June 2013 and the putting in place of an RIA and an EQIA. The matter will come back to the North/South Ministerial Council — the Comhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas — by July. For us to —

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Earlier in his contribution, he mentioned the SDLP motion, which talks about proposed funding for Foras na Gaeilge. Like Mr Bradley, the Member is much more eminently involved in and has more knowledge of the subject than me. It is my understanding that 75% of the funding for Foras na Gaeilge comes from the Irish Government and 25% from the Northern Ireland Government, and the reverse is the case for Ulster Scots. Perhaps the Minister, in her response, can say whether the problem is the funding from the Irish Government, who are so economically strapped at the moment as a member of the euro zone.

Mr Ó hOisín: The Minister might address that later in the debate. You will appreciate that the funding is also reflective of the number of groupings and the people involved.

I look forward to the consultation's publication. I can probably expect and predict some of the answers. There is concern among the Irish language sector, but it has perhaps never been stronger than it is now. Look at the development of the number of náiscoilleana, bunscoilleana and meánscoilleana right across the North. The support services have to be in place in the education sector and the community sector. A lot of the voluntary organisations in the community sector are delivering those services on the ground. We look at places such as Carn Tóchair, which was

fully an Irish-speaking area until the census of 1911. A large percentage of the people there spoke Irish. We are now looking at a small rural community in which there are over 250 Irish speakers who work, live and carry out their daily lives through the medium of Irish. I commend them on that, and I commend Foras na Gaeilge's funding for the project.

I return to my central position, which is that the motion is probably premature. It is pre-emptive. If I were to be sceptical about it —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr Ó hOisín: — I would say that it might even be a little cynical. I do not want it to be that and I do not want to say that, but that is the way that I feel.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr McGimpsey: As has been indicated, Foras na Gaeilge is not an independent fiefdom but part of the North/South Language Body and, as such, is answerable to the North/South Ministerial Council in language format. There will always be a unionist Minister at those meetings, so a veto exists as far as unionism is concerned. It is more than simply an academic exercise when it comes to funding for Gaelic.

I was surprised to hear Mr Ó hOisín say that the current Minister was sorting out the chaos that she inherited. I was not aware that you had been provided with chaos when the portfolio was handed over from the previous Minister. I am sure that he would take a contrary view to the Member's. We are all aware that core funding is key for organisations that bid for funding, whether it be for Ulster Scots, Gaelic or any other form of funding. If organisations get core funding, they then have continuity and confidence to plan. They do not spend most of their time, as many groups do, wondering what the next funding round will provide for them and lobbying and working for that funding.

So, I am not sure about the notion that we had chaos and that this will sort out that chaos.

11.30 am

Core funding is always the way for voluntary and community groups to go forward, if at all possible, to give them that confidence and continuity. Therefore, I am not clear about the argument as to why we will go on to a new funding model. That has to be developed, but, clearly, as has been indicated, the Committee has concerns and the Irish language groups have concerns. I sat in the Minister's chair at one stage, and I am reminded that we are empowered, where appropriate and where people so desire, to take resolute action to promote the language and to facilitate and encourage its use, and it appears that, in this constituency, the people do not desire that type of change of arrangement. The Irish language is 75% funded by the Dublin Government, and that Government will have a major say in this. Similarly, Ulster Scots is 75% funded by the Northern Ireland Executive. So, it is not simply a matter for this House but a matter that requires consensus and working by agreement.

I listened to Mr Bradley, and I have always considered him to be something of an expert in the area. He certainly appears

to have a vocabulary and a grasp of the language that most people in this House do not have. I heard Mr Campbell ask him whether he was really making his case by speaking in Gaelic first before speaking in English. That is not a problem that most of us provide Mr Campbell with. I have listened to the discussion, and we have to tread carefully and with caution if we are to change this after a number of years. The promotion of Gaelic has been successful, and that is one of the successes of the cross-border body. We need to be very careful that we do not lose the support of the constituency by introducing a funding model that may well be driven by budget problems in Dublin. If Dublin has those budget problems, it has to be honest with us and make that case.

The issue still has to be fully explored. I am not fully across all the issues, and it is a developing argument. Someone said that the motion is premature and pre-emptive; I am not sure that it is either of those, but it is a discussion that we can usefully continue.

Mr Lunn: I have listened with interest to the contributions so far, particularly from the Irish-speaking side of the House. As a non-Irish speaker and a non-member of the Committee, I feel a bit like Mr McGimpsey in that I am not totally across the issues. So, most of what I will say will be by way of observation and impression rather than facts, and I am sure that if I say something completely wrong, somebody will jump up and correct me.

Frankly, I am always impressed by the interest and commitment of those who are involved in the Irish language movement and the ongoing project to widen its use in everyday speech and conversation. Mr Ó hOisín mentioned the education perspective, and it has been well proven that learning an additional language at an early age is stimulating and beneficial to our children. That is accepted at home and across Europe. My grandson started to learn Spanish in primary 2, and he knows more Spanish than I do now. So, I support the promotion of Irish-medium schools as one of Foras na Gaeilge's activities, if there is a strong parental demand for it.

I will turn to Foras na Gaeilge and today's motion. What little I know about the organisation indicates that the review of the funding model is to be welcomed — it is long overdue — provided that it is done properly. My impression is that the organisation has been allowed to do its own thing with funding from both Governments with, perhaps, precious little supervision or accountability. They appear to have funded certain bodies by block grants without due regard to how effectively the money has been used, while, at grass-roots level, it seems to be generally accepted that local projects doing really good work on language promotion and development and showing real creativity and energy receive only about one sixth of the total funding that is channelled to the core-funded groups under the present system. My impression is that, under the new model, it will be easier and quicker for projects to access funds, and that the money will, in theory at least, follow the action and will result in enthusiasm and good practice being rewarded.

I also hear from Irish speakers that there is a need to regenerate and revitalise the geographical areas of language activity so that they fit into the context of a national language planning model, ensuring that where Irish-speaking communities exist, they are active and vibrant and not just nominal Gaeltacht areas where there is little or no real

attention paid to the subject. I understand that there are two Gaeltacht areas in Belfast, which exist in name only. I spend quite a bit of time in Donegal, in the Fanad peninsula, which, apparently, is also a Gaeltacht area, but I have yet to hear anyone speak in Irish when I am up there, sometimes for weeks at a time. That is not meant to be a criticism, but we need to direct the funds to where the action is or where the potential is. There is not much point in having a Gaeltacht area if nobody speaks Gaelic.

We will have to listen with interest to the rest of the debate before we decide whether we will support the motion. I will say, however, as an outsider, that I like the look of the proposed new structure for Foras na Gaeilge. I listened to Mr Bradley's criticisms of it, but as an outsider looking in, it seems to me to be more modern, active and reactive, and the organisation will hopefully be more accountable to its funders and the taxpayers, North and South.

I note that the Northern Ireland Government have invested 25% of the overall funding, but over the years, only between 16% and 22% of that money has found its way back to the North. I also note the feeling that the needs of the Irish-medium sector in the North are different from those in the Republic, a fact, perhaps, that is not always recognised by Foras na Gaeilge. I hope that whatever changes are finally agreed will be introduced gradually, as it is important not to lose the expertise and experience that is available in organisations that, although they will have to change — as Mr Bradley said, some of them may disappear — are decades older than Foras na Gaeilge and have a lot to offer.

I am not fully conversant with the overall existing structures, but there is Plean 2030 and plans for a national language planning and implementation unit, so a co-ordinated and sensitive approach is what is needed. I hope that Foras na Gaeilge gets it right and that it does not rush things.

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

Mr Lunn: It must ensure that scarce resources are used in the best way possible for the benefit of the movement.

Mr Sheehan: Tá mé iontach sásta a bheith ag labhairt anseo inniu. It is important that we look at the background of this process and its aims. It is to improve the delivery of services to the Irish language community and to the broader English-speaking community, and, of course, to ensure better value for money, given the current economic climate. That is essential. However, what we are really looking for is the effective delivery of Foras na Gaeilge's statutory obligations. Those of us who support the promotion of the language should support those objectives.

The review has been undertaken because, among other reasons, of the increasing amount of core funding that is being spent on wages. In 2008, 50.48% was spent on wages. In 2010, it was 53%, and in 2011, it was 59%. This year, there is a 9% reduction in Foras na Gaeilge's budget and there will be a 3% reduction over each of the next three years. That is unsustainable. Of course we want to protect jobs in the Irish language sector, but Foras na Gaeilge's main purpose, along with other Irish language groups, is to promote the use of the Irish language. It is not to protect jobs, although we do want to protect jobs. No one could possibly disagree that funding to Foras needs to produce results in the promotion of the language, and that it should

not just be used for wages and administration. Let us take a look at the consultation process.

Mr Swann: On a point of clarification, if that is the purpose of Foras and the other language bodies, will the Member comment on the Minister's Líofo project? How will assigning additional DCAL moneys in the region of £30,000 to that project enhance the work of Foras and the other language bodies? Does it not place the project in competition with their work?

Mr Sheehan: I thank the Member for his intervention. The Líofo project opens another channel, or avenue, through which people can be enticed to engage with the Irish language community. It is separate from what Foras can do. I am not saying that, on occasions, there will not be overlaps. However, I argue that there is no duplication, and that Líofo stands on its own as a separate project.

The motion:

"expresses concern about the nature of the consultation process".

The current consultation process began in January 2012 and ended on 2 April. That was a new consultation process, after the previous process had provoked quite a bit of criticism last year. I am not here to defend the Minister — she is quite capable of doing that herself — but, as a result of that criticism, she initiated a second consultation process.

The motion also focuses on the new funding model proposed by Foras. However, if Members check the summary of the funding model in the consultation document put out by Foras na Gaeilge, they will see that the consultation process was based on the content of the draft schemes rather than the funding model. Importantly, the consultation also suggested that recommendations for other methods for funding the Irish language could be mentioned by respondents. Therefore, according to Foras, the funding model is not set in stone. I also note that the Hansard report of the meetings between the Department, representatives of Foras na Gaeilge and the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure shows that it was stated clearly that all options would be looked at and considered. Contrary to what Dominic said about the draft schemes having no basis in academic or socio-linguistic policy, when Ferdie Mac an Fhailigh appeared before the Committee, he stated in response to him:

"The schemes are based on the internationally recognised language-planning principles of status, acquisition and usage of the language."

Therefore, there is, at least, some dispute about the draft schemes.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat. Gabhaim buíochas leis an chomhalta as mé a ligint isteach anseo. I thank the Member for giving way. The Member is right about what Mr Mac an Fhailigh said about the language schemes. However, what Mr Mac an Fhailigh failed to mention was that in Wales, where those types of schemes are used, they are used by core-funded organisations. That is an important difference.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I am afraid that the Member's time is up. That is the danger of giving way for an intervention.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. During the contribution from the honourable Member for West Belfast, he referred to the honourable Member for Newry and Armagh as "Dominic". I think what he meant to say was "Mr Bradley". I notice that that error is creeping back into proceedings in the House and that Members are referring to each other by their Christian names. That is totally unparliamentary, and I am sure that if that trend were to continue, the Deputy Speaker would wish to pull other Members up on that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to refer to other Members by their surname.

11.45 am

Mrs McKevitt: I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I applaud my colleague Mr Bradley for securing this important debate on behalf of the Irish language sector.

The preservation and promotion of the Irish language is a priority for the SDLP, which is why we want to ensure that any change to the funding model of Irish language organisations does not have a negative impact on the Irish language. Foras na Gaeilge, which is the arm's-length body for DCAL that administers funding to the Irish language organisations, wishes to implement proposals that will move the funding structure away from being core-funding-based to being a competitive application process for the three-year period. I have serious reservations about the proposals, as do the 19 organisations that receive core funding.

As a party, we recognise the significant contribution that the 19 core-funded organisations have made, and continue to make, to enhance and encourage the use of the Irish language. Those organisations have employees with the specialised skills and expertise that are necessary to continue to deliver a high level of service to the Irish language community and the wider English-speaking community.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. As the Member has heard in the debate, this is a cross-border issue. Obviously, 75% of the funding comes from the Government of the Irish Republic. Has your party made representations to the Irish Government around these issues?

Mrs McKevitt: We will meet the Minister in the near future about the issues that you have raised.

It is worth noting that the organisations strongly oppose the proposed new funding model and firmly believe that its implementation would not only disadvantage their organisations but could be detrimental to the Irish language sector.

The second consultation on the new funding model, which was conducted on the recommendation of the North/South Ministerial Council, ran for 12 weeks and concluded on 2 April 2012. The chief executive officer (CEO) of Foras na Gaeilge informed the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure of the methods used by Foras na Gaeilge to interact with the necessary organisations. As part of that, he has held individual meetings; the document is on his organisation's website; there were public consultations; and focus groups for the young were set up, etc. It cannot be denied that Foras na Gaeilge has ticked many of the boxes during the further consultation process. However, I am concerned that although it may have heard the concerns

and reservations of the groups involved, Foras na Gaeilge is not listening to them. This view has been reinforced by the suggestion that Foras na Gaeilge will only consider the content of written submissions.

At one meeting, the core-funded organisations strongly urged Foras na Gaeilge to return to what the Irish language organisations termed "square one". The groups are of the opinion that further research and information-gathering are required. They feel that not enough research was done prior to the funding model being put forward. The return-to-square-one proposal was accepted by all the core-funded organisations as the key proposal to arise from the meeting. It is essential that Foras na Gaeilge not only hears the views of the core-funded organisations but takes them into consideration before making its final decisions. If it does not do so, the consultation process will have been pointless, reaffirming the groups' feeling that a decision has already been made.

Another concern expressed by the Irish language organisations is in regard to the timescale for implementing the new funding model and how it will impact on them. I understand that Foras na Gaeilge has prepared a project plan to begin a competitive-funding model from July 2013 and that the North/South Ministerial Council has agreed to extend interim funding to core-funded organisations until 30 June 2013. I urge the Minister to work with Foras na Gaeilge to extend the funding period for core-funded organisations beyond 30 June 2013 to prevent further instability and uncertainty.

Pobal has stated that without such an extension, the necessary evidence base for various proposals cannot be put in place. Organisations will be forced to reorganise and apply, if they are not disqualified for funding under the new proposals, during or before the adoption of the finalised strategic proposals for the Irish language in the North. It is envisaged that this will disadvantage North-based core-funded organisations and undermine the implementation of the Irish language strategy. A further extension to core funding, by at least six months or a year, would allow the public to comment on the DCAL strategic proposals, the Executive to give their response and Foras na Gaeilge to carry out the necessary groundwork on revised funding models, without this being done in a "done deal" atmosphere among the core-funded organisations.

Considering the concerns expressed by the Irish language organisations regarding the consultation process, the suggested timeline and the consequences that this change could have on the proposed Irish language strategy, I call on the Minister to review these proposals. We must do what we can to protect, preserve and promote the Irish language sector.

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a thabhairt don bhall fá choinne an rúin. I thank the Members for tabling the motion, and it is important to debate how Foras na Gaeilge funds the Irish language sector and, indeed, to discuss the progress that is being made by Foras na Gaeilge towards implementing the recommendations from the review of core funding.

As the Chair of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure said, a departmental official and the CEO and deputy of Foras na Gaeilge updated the Committee on 26 April 2012. It will be useful if I recap the background to the process

so far. Most Members have alluded to the fact that, in April 2006, Foras na Gaeilge undertook a review of core funding. The main recommendations were that core funding for the Irish language sector be reconfigured and, indeed, that applications be invited from one or a limited number of organisations, with representational information about dissemination, resource support and information on the role of the sector. Those recommendations were endorsed by the North/South Ministerial Council.

The current proposal is that funding will be awarded by way of a number of discrete schemes that will allow local groups to take an integrated approach to the promotion of the Irish language, including working in the community with family, educational and youth settings. Foras na Gaeilge engaged with the 19 core-funded groups, and that engagement included a public consultation on the proposed changes. The consultation closed in June 2011. A steering group, comprising senior officials from both sponsor Departments and the chair and senior executives of Foras na Gaeilge, was established to review progress towards implementation of that review.

Members have mentioned that concerns have been raised by a number of the groups. We listened to those concerns and brought them to the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in sectoral format. Following further discussions at the NSMC, we agreed that interim funding should continue to be provided by Foras na Gaeilge to the 19 core-funded groups until 30 June 2012. At a further NSMC meeting on 12 October 2011, we requested that Foras na Gaeilge engage in further consultation on the draft schemes. That is evidence of government listening to the concerns of groups. It is necessary to prepare the detail of the business case in support of the draft schemes, which included an updated RIA, and to prepare a revised project plan in conjunction with the sponsor Departments. From looking at the sequence of events, it is clear that Ministers had not taken any decisions about the future funding arrangements of the Irish language sector by that date.

That is where Cathal has a point. Dominic has every right, as any Member does, to bring any motion to the Floor of the House. I support that right, and I am delighted, as Cathal and others have expressed, that a motion has been tabled on the future proposals for funding the Irish language. I do think that it is a bit premature, but it is better having the debate than looking for it. I have absolutely no difficulty —

Mr D Bradley: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Ní Chuilín: No, I have heard enough, Dominic. Thanks very much. I have a lot to get through.

Mr D Bradley: You have not heard anything.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Well, I have heard enough from you.

Mr Wells: Disgraceful.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I remind Members to make any remarks that they have to make through the Chair. That is the custom and practice in this place.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. That was an absolutely disgraceful remark that was made by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to someone who

was making a very valid point. I ask her to consider her comments and withdraw them.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I hear what the Member had to say in making his point, but I have a lot to get through. Dominic, in fairness, has had several interventions from other Members. At this stage, I am not prepared to take an intervention. I will certainly not be reminded about the manners and courtesies of this House by someone like Jim Wells.

The points that Dominic raised on any proposed funding model for the Irish language are well made. It is about the long-term planning of the language and ensuring that the results of the consultation will dovetail with the 20-year strategy that has been developed by the Irish Government and, indeed, with any future strategy that will be introduced by the Executive through my Department as a result of the Programme for Government. I fully accept that. I also fully accept that it is all-Ireland in nature, but there are nuances for different groups depending on their work and their ability to reach out and bring people to the language who would not normally have that opportunity.

Pat Sheehan and other Members raised this. Indeed, Michelle McIlveen, the Chair of the Committee, outlined the whole process and the concerns of the group when it met the Committee that there was not an equality impact assessment or an RIA. The words and assurances of officials and Foras na Gaeilge that that would be included in the next consultation were accepted, and it was. At the end of the day, these very important issues were raised for a very important reason: to make sure that any adverse impact on the sector and the language was considered. That should be the case with all consultations.

Cathal Ó hOisín spoke about groups like Carn Tóchair, which I have met on several occasions, as I have met other core-funded organisations about their work. Other Members mentioned that. It is concerning that there is a lack of either understanding or appreciation of the direction that me, Jimmy Deenihan and Dinny McGinley are going in. William Humphrey raised in an intervention the funding split between Foras na Gaeilge and Ulster Scots. I am sure that he has since received the information. Within that funding set-up, there is a concern and an appreciation about support for long-term Irish language planning. Support for the groups is part of that planning for their core-funding arrangements. I accept that fully. I have absolutely no doubt that those concerns were articulated in the many consultation responses, which are on Foras na Gaeilge's website. I imagine that those concerns will be raised as part of any proposals that will be brought forward.

I also accept that there are huge concerns about the salaries and overheads in comparison with the money that is being spent on proposals and programmes that help develop the language. I think that we need to try to get a healthier balance. I do not think that any Member would disagree. It is important that that is taken into consideration, and we will look at that and every other issue that has been raised throughout the debate. In fact, I will share the Hansard report of this debate with my colleagues in the Irish Government.

Michael McGimpsey is not in his place, which is unfortunate, but the chaos that my colleague referred to, to be factual, is really around how the accounts have been brought forward

through the NSMC sectoral meeting. The Member left before I could say that that happened on his watch. In turn, every Culture Minister has inherited that chaos because he did not sign off on accounts that had an impact on every one of us who came behind him. That, I assume, is the chaos that Cathal was referring to.

At the end of the day, this is a very important subject. It is important for the future development and protection of the language, and, as Trevor Lunn said, for educational development, including preschool and post-primary. The Irish language sector has continued to grow, and people are very passionate about and committed to it. They are not dogmatic; they are asking us to make sure that they are supported and resourced as a matter of right. That is done through my Department as a matter of responsibility, and it is a statutory duty. I take that responsibility very seriously.

Pat Sheehan and other Members outlined the need and the desire for the Government to listen to the concerns out there, but also to listen to those concerns in a balanced way and to ensure that no decisions are made that will reduce the sustainability or viability of the long-term development of the language. I hear that, and I am absolutely delighted to hear that the SDLP is meeting the Irish Government to talk about its concerns about the Irish language. That is fit and proper.

We have not made any reduction to our budget, notwithstanding the award that was made as part of the new mandate, with the 3% reduction over that period.

Other than that, I have not reduced and will not reduce any funding for either Foras na Gaeilge or the Ulster-Scots community within those guidelines.

The CAL Committee, as its Chair and others have outlined, will get an interim report before the next sectoral meeting on languages about the future and about what the broad strokes of the consultation were. We will bring it forward to the next NSMC sectoral meeting for discussion, and it will then go forward to the sectoral meeting in the autumn with the business case for approval.

I do not think that any Member, regardless of the side of the House they sit on or their views about the language, can honestly and genuinely say that we did not take into consideration any concerns that were raised to our Department through this consultation or any other and act appropriately.

I welcome the debate. I welcome the tone of the debate and people's commitment to and genuine concern about the language. On the basis of that, I look forward to future debates on the language in a similar vein. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

12.00 noon

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Mo bhuíochas leis na baill uilig a bhí rannpháirteach ins an díospóireacht. My particular thanks go to all Members who participated in the debate. The Minister did a good part of the wind for me, but I am sure that she will forgive me if I recycle a number of the issues.

Mo chomhghleacaí anseo, Dominic Ó Brolcháin, thóg sé rudaí faoi leith; cuir i gcás an fiche faoin gcéad den airgead

a bhí gearrtha agus an earnáil dheonach agus an damáiste atá á dhéanamh dóibh siúd i dtaobh na teanga. He spoke about the cutbacks of 25% of the money and the potential for damage to the voluntary sector in particular. He talked about how much go raibh an oiread sin gearán faoin dóigh a ndearnadh an comhairliúchán. There were so many complaints about the way in which the consultation was done. I will talk more about that later. He moved on to talk about funding models, proposed all-island structures and the consideration of aspects of the funding, particularly referring to and drawing from the experience of the United States and Australia. He re-emphasised that core funding is central to voluntary organisations. I am particularly glad that Mr McGimpsey picked up on that point too, because it is central to the debate that we are having here.

Michelle McIlveen, as Chairperson of the CAL Committee, referred to the consultation exercises and the fact that the four recommendations were rejected by all the Irish language groups in Northern Ireland. She referred in particular to rud a chuireann diomá ormsa, is é sin nach ndearnadh na ceannlínte – treoirlínte, gabh mo leithscéal – a leanúint i dtaobh próisis chóir nó cleachtadh ceart ó thaobh forbairt polasaí de. They did not particularly follow guidelines on due process or good practice in policy development, particularly in regard to the EQIA and regulatory impact assessment.

We moved on agus chuala mé Cathal Ó hOisín ansin agus bhí sé ag rá arís eile i dtaobh an phróisis chomhairliúcháin. Ach dúirt sé rud éigin. He referred in particular to the consultation process, but he said that the motion was pre-emptive and premature. You can never be pre-emptive or premature about a core issue to the development of the Irish language. On this particular issue, whoever is responsible — I do not particularly care who is responsible — has been footering about with this for about two years. I do not know whether that is Ulster Scots or Irish. It has been going on since 2009, which is over two years. The Irish language sector is delighted that this debate is taking place here today. This is where the debate should take place. Pre-emptive or not, the debate has to take place here through the elected representatives and through the Minister so that we can add some focus to the discussion and eventually try to get things sorted out in regard to promotion of the language.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat as mé a ligint isteach. Thanks for giving way to me. The point was made that the motion was premature and pre-emptive. The fact is that the motion has been on the list of no-day-named motions since September, so we can hardly be accused of rushing to bring it forward. We waited until a strategic time, and I believe that this is the strategic time to debate it.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat féin, Dominic. Go raibh maith agat as sin. Agus arís eile, chuala mé an tUasal McGimpsey ag rá gur saineolaí thú. When we were listening to the debate, I heard Michael McGimpsey refer to Dominic as an expert in the field; I am sure he takes that as a compliment. He covers his broad remit and discussions in these matters expertly, comprehensively and well. Go raibh maith agat as sin, Dominic.

Trevor Lunn referred to the fact that the debate was taking place. Of course, this is a debate about language acquisition and how best we can encourage and nurture people to acquire a language or even to improve on what language

they have. You referred, of course, to the skill that children have to be multilingual at a very early age and how they adapt very readily and openly to that. It is brilliant to see that, and it is a reflection of a society that is maturing and recognises difference as something that can be enriching. Linguistic acquisition is great because it opens doors and understanding to people. We are here today to, at least, contribute to that debate.

Pat Sheehan referred to the potential difficulties of cost and cuts in wages. He provided interesting insights and figures on the percentage spent on wages. He said that, of course, we want to protect jobs in the language sector and promote the use of the language.

Chímse, agus chonaic mé cuid mhaith den obair atá á déanamh ar an talamh i dtaobh na ndaoine atá fostaithe ins an earnáil seo, agus go háirithe na hoifigigh ag na comhairlí áitiúla atá ag déanamh sár-obair ó thaobh chur chun cinn na teanga de.

I have seen people who are employed in the sector, and I have been party, in particular, to motions in Cookstown District Council, where we have seen language development officers who do excellent and sterling work encouraging the language and involving more people in acquisition of the language and in language-related activities. So, there is, as the Minister correctly says, a balance to be struck there.

Karen McKeivitt referred to the core funding of organisations and said that 19 organisations rely heavily on core funding. The funding models proposed would be disadvantageous to the development proposals of many of those organisations with regard to their consistency of development and the role they have in communities, which is paramount and uppermost in the promotion of the Irish language.

The Minister referred to the details of the core funding and commented on points made by Members. It is important that the Minister hears those. I am sure she is more than up to speed with what is happening.

A Aire, bhí rud beag diomá orm nuair a chuala mé go raibh do sháith agat cluinte as Dominic anseo, mo chara agus mo chomh-bhall den pháirtí.

I was a wee bit disappointed, Minister, that you said that you had heard enough from Dominic Bradley, my friend and colleague. I really do not think you could hear enough, seriously, on the promotion of the Irish language from Irish language speakers and those who are dedicated, many of whom have dedicated their life to the promotion of their language and culture. I know that Dominic, in the Assembly and wearing other hats, has spent a good part of his life teaching, writing about and promoting the language. So, really I am a bit disappointed, Minister, that you made that comment.

Concerns were raised about EQIAs and RIAs. Those are important issues. You referred as well, Minister, to the balance on the funding. At this point, however, in bringing the motion to the Assembly, we in the SDLP wanted to hear a bit more from DCAL about what exactly is happening at that level. What proposals have been drawn up in the Department to nudge or push the process on a bit? I would have expected the Minister to come here today a bit better prepared with information so that we can reassure many of those groups —

Ms Ní Chuilín: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: I will give way, surely, if we hear a bit more detail, Minister. Thank you.

Ms Ní Chuilín: This is where the premature aspect comes into it, Patsy. We have to look at the consultation process, what has been consulted on and the feedback on that and then bring it forward. I think it only right that we do that, then give the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee its place, then go to the sectoral meeting and then come back to the House. That is the process.

Mr McGlone: I appreciate that that is the process —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that they should refer to other Members by their surname.

Mr McGlone: I can work with that. Tá tú ceart go leor. You are all right with me.

It would have seriously helped, Minister, had we heard today, for example, some detail of the correspondence or discussions that you have had with your colleagues and other Ministers on the rest of the island. This is a delicate and difficult issue. Core funding has cropped up time and again as being central. I had anticipated some insight on the dialogue that has taken place with the Minister in the South on how this can be advanced ar mhaithe leis an teanga féin, for the good of the Irish language. To be honest with you, I anticipated a bit more than we got, rather than a rerun of what other Members said in the Assembly today. I am not in any way suggesting that you breach protocol, but I expected some detail of those meetings with other Ministers on how we can advance the cause.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat. Chímse go bhfuil an t-am thart agus tá mé ag iarraidh ar dhaoine eile ins an Chomhthionól anseo tacú leis an mholadh s'againne. I see the time is up.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr McGlone: I am asking other Members to support our motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the effects that the new funding model proposed by Foras na Gaeilge will have on Irish language organisations; expresses concern about the nature of the consultation process; and calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to review these proposals in view of her Department's emerging Irish language strategy.

Welfare Reform: Underoccupation Penalty

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

Mr Brady: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the underoccupation penalty provision within proposed welfare reform legislation, which has the potential to make many people homeless; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to outline the measures that he intends to put in place to mitigate the impact of this provision.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I ask the Assembly to support the motion. Like yesterday's motion on the assessment of incapacity benefit, this falls under the incoming Welfare Reform Bill. We, as a party, not only in this mandate but throughout the previous mandate, have spoken out against many of the changes — cuts packaged as reforms.

First, I will explain what underoccupancy is. Underoccupancy or spare bedroom tax is part of the British Government's Welfare Reform Bill, which will come before the Assembly in the near future. It is a reduction in housing benefit based on the number of bedrooms in your home that are defined as spare rooms. The definition assumes that couples are sharing and some categories of children are sharing. Tenants who are of working age will be penalised through a 15% loss of housing benefit — approximately £7 a week — for one bedroom deemed to be additional and a 23% loss — approximately £14 a week — for two or more. That is a cut of £364 and £728 a year respectively. Many families will be forced to seek alternative accommodation. Other families will accrue rent arrears and be at greater risk of eviction and homelessness. Others will experience greater poverty as they struggle to make up the housing benefit shortfall. This will be felt particularly harshly by tenants in the private sector in receipt of housing benefit, many of whom already struggle to make up the shortfall in benefit to cover their rent. Other families will be forced to move away from established support networks and extended family. That is particularly significant for people who already struggle with the challenges of poverty, disability, mental health issues or chronic ill health. There will be implications for the informal care of the sick or elderly, where continued care relies on family members living in the vicinity.

Reduced housing benefit is not cost-neutral when it leads to thousands of people on benefits seeking relocation. It will impact on the allocation of social housing, as it restricts the profile of suitable properties that a homeless family might be offered. Tenancies will have to be more strictly matched to property size, despite the profile of housing stock. There is a chronic shortage of two-bedroom properties.

12.15 pm

There are approximately 220,000 social housing tenancies in the North, of which 70%, which is 154,000, are underoccupied, according to the British Government's current definition, and for which, therefore, housing benefit is liable to be cut. Those statistics are provided by Shelter

from Housing Executive figures. That represents an annual cut of somewhere between £56 million and £113 million in housing benefit paid in relation to social housing in the Six Counties. In addition, around 38,000 tenants are in receipt of housing benefit in the private rented sector. That represents an additional cut of between £13 million and £28 million in housing benefit paid to private sector rental tenants in the North.

Private sector rental tenants are already making up an average of £28 a week housing benefit shortfall in their rent. When faced with homelessness, those tenants, given their low income, will seek to be rehoused in the social sector. A study carried out by Professors Gray and McAnulty of the University of Ulster, which was published in September 2010, found that over 60% of private rented sector tenants were in receipt of housing benefit and only 60% were in receipt of a partial payment. Of those who already paid the difference between the contractual rent and housing benefit, two thirds reported finding it very difficult to do so. Almost half of those from the private rented sector presenting as homeless in 2009 cited a shortfall in housing benefit as the main reason. Gray and McAnulty estimated that a 5% deinvestment in the private rented sector, which a cut in housing benefit represents, would displace 2,000 households and that a 10% cut would result in 3,800 households seeking alternative accommodation. In addition, changes in entitlement from 25-year-old singles to 35-year-old singles is likely to make 6,000 people homeless. Add to that a percentage of the 154,000 of those in the social sector seeking to downsize when faced with a cut in their housing benefit.

Many low-income, private rented sector tenants rent former social housing that has been sold off as part of the right-to-buy policy introduced by Margaret Thatcher. That is likely to result in increased overcrowding and all the social problems that entails, as rent-poor families share accommodation as a way of avoiding arrears, eviction and homelessness.

The profile of housing stock in the North will not provide sufficient housing of the type many families will need to meet the requirements of housing benefit entitlement. A cut in housing benefit is likely to be only one of a number of cuts in benefits faced by low-income families, whether in or out of work, in the wake of the British Government's imposition of welfare reform. The Six County Equality Commission and the British Government's parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights have criticised the British Department for Work and Pensions for failing to carry out impact assessments on the cumulative adverse impact of welfare reform.

Breaking the connection between insecurity of employment and insecurity of housing has been hugely significant historically. In the past, loss of job has been accompanied by loss of home. That is particularly disruptive where people are moving in and out of work, and it leads to more transient neighbourhoods and more crime.

The provision of and access to housing has particular historical significance in the North and is closely associated with the struggle for civil rights. Segregation remains a reality here, and disruption to established communities, if thousands of families are forced into seeking alternative accommodation, would have a destabilising effect. The imposition of regulations that are likely to have a destabilising impact

is unreasonable, given the fact that the North has only recently emerged from conflict. Parity has worked because, historically, it has not been strictly adhered to, and it allows for a level of flexibility, which takes into account different circumstances in the North.

The British Government have accepted that welfare benefits are possessions for the purposes of article 1 of protocol 1 to the European Convention on Human Rights. Article 1 of protocol 1 provides that any interference with or deprivation of established rights to property must strike a fair balance between the right of the individual to peaceful enjoyment of their possessions and the public interest. Since the British Government accept that benefits are to be considered as possessions, any loss of benefit has to meet a legal requirement of being for a legitimate aim and must be proportionate to that aim. A human rights adherence rationale presented by the British Government in relation to welfare reform relates to Britain. The human rights implications of welfare reform have not been considered in relation to the specifics of the North.

In the North, the imposition of underoccupancy rules does not strike a fair balance, because they are detrimental to the individual and to the public interest. The notion of a fair balance implies that any detrimental impact on the individual is counterbalanced by being advantageous to the public interest, which means that the British Government can justify one with reference to the other, and the general good takes precedence. It cannot be considered proportionate in the North, because the specifics of our housing stock mean that a cut in housing benefit is more likely to result in homelessness than in relocation. Unlike in Britain, underoccupancy rules will result not only in the deprivation of benefit as a possession but, as a direct consequence for a significant number of families, in the loss of housing itself, a more significant possession in relation to the European Convention on Human Rights.

Increased homelessness cannot be regarded as being in the public interest, the criterion cited by the British Government to legitimise cuts in housing benefit. Technically, it can be argued that adherence to the European Convention on Human Rights commitments in relation to the passing of the welfare rights Bill in the North is the responsibility of the Assembly. However, given the operation of parity and the financial and administrative restrictions imposed by the British Government, it is reasonable to argue that the British Government have an obligation to consider the European Convention on Human Rights in relation to the specifics of the North. That obligation should continue until such times as the Assembly has the kind of fiscal autonomy that will allow it to determine and meet its human rights obligations independently of Westminster.

One possibility is greater discretionary powers to exempt existing tenants from loss of housing benefit where suitable alternative accommodation is not available. Suitability would include type of housing stock, the importance of maintaining community cohesion and the recognition of extended family responsibilities. As that divergence is based on material circumstances that would result in unintended consequences rather than policy, it should not be declared as a breach of parity and, therefore, should be funded by the British Treasury. If all these people are displaced, where will they go? We already have a great shortfall, and I think the Minister would accept that there is a huge shortfall in the

provision of social housing. I know that he is doing his best to redress that balance, but that shortfall continues. Where are those people to go? I ask the Assembly to support the motion.

Mr Easton: We have to bring our social housing into line with the rest of the UK for two main reasons. First, it will ensure that parity with the rest of the UK is maintained, which we are required to do, and, secondly, it will end the two-tier system that we have in Northern Ireland. It is not just or fair that a person in our social housing system can remain in the same residence when their personal circumstances change with no consequences. In the private rented sector, people's housing benefit is dependent on size criteria. In my opinion, there is no reason why people of working age in our social housing sector should not be subject to the same criteria.

Let us be clear about what this change means. People who have one or more extra bedrooms will have a choice about what course of action they wish to follow. They can remain in their own home, making up the additional rent that housing benefit will not cover, or they can downsize to a property of a more appropriate size. For the majority of people, that will cost approximately £10 a week, which is a substantial amount for those already on a low income, but, given the welfare bill, it is something that we simply cannot afford.

For some people, the change will cause worry and alarm, as many who may be deemed to have an extra bedroom will not view it in that way. Some couples, for example, prefer to sleep in separate bedrooms. Children may use spare rooms to have their own bedroom, regardless of age or gender. Shared parenting can sometimes mean that a court judgement requires that a child visiting a non-custodial parent must have access to their own bedroom. For some of those scenarios, the option to remain in a residence that is deemed too large may mean some tough decisions. For others, it may not be a choice but a necessity. The changes that this will bring must be communicated in such a way as to ensure that everyone who is affected is aware of their choices and is made aware that they have a choice. We must also ensure that the stock for people to move to is available in a timely manner. This change should also ensure that the overcrowding in some of our social housing properties can be addressed.

I welcome the proposed safeguards that are already outlined regarding some pension-age tenants not being subject to size criteria. There are safeguards in place so that, if someone loses a partner, they will not be asked to relocate or find additional financial resources within a certain time, and disabled residents who use their extra bedroom to store vital equipment will not be affected by the change. I also welcome the discretionary nature of additional moneys for a person with exceptional reasons for needing to remain in their property. We must remember that the objective of the change is to encourage more accountable use of the social housing stock, to encourage more personal responsibility from those who have our welfare system to pay their rent and to encourage people into the job market.

This is not a change to be feared. It will bring benefits to people in the social housing sector. However, I recognise that there will be an impact on others and ask the Minister to further identify measures that will help to mitigate the impact of the changes.

Mr Copeland: Before I speak to the motion, I want to look at it. It states quite clearly:

"That this Assembly notes with concern the underoccupation penalty provision within proposed welfare reform legislation, which has the potential to make many people homeless".

That is the preamble, and there is not a word of it that anyone here could take any real exception to. We then have a call on the Minister that is yet again aimed at him. We can be forgiven for that, because the responsibility lies with him. He is called on to:

"outline the measures that he intends to put in place to mitigate the impact of this provision."

The truth is that there will be an impact from this, and it is an impact that the Minister may or may not be able to mitigate. In many ways, it symbolises and highlights what a number of people outside this place see as its inherent problem. The Minister is not required to service or acquiesce to the demands or views of the Chamber on the issue, but he is required to maintain parity with the rest of the United Kingdom. As other Members have said, there is some merit in the notion of stock management in social housing, but there are also factors that make Northern Ireland slightly different.

Cameron Watt, who, peculiarly enough, is a Conservative blogger, has some statistics that might be of interest. He says that many social landlords in the past have purposely allocated families properties with an extra bedroom, the view being that that would allow them to develop a stable home in a stable neighbourhood with stable relationships and allow for the expansion of their family. That is terribly laudable. In Northern Ireland, however, a consequence of that would be that two thirds of the Housing Executive's 90,000 tenants could fall foul of the penalty. We have already established and the Minister has accepted in the Chamber that 70% of the 90,000 households are already workless and are, therefore, benefit-dependent. In some cases, they will be faced with making up a shortfall of £13 a week. For those in well-remunerated employment, £13 a week is the price of two packets of cigarettes — it is not a lot. For someone on benefits, no matter what way you cut £13 a week, it is £13 a week spent on this that cannot be spent on something else. The notion that people can relocate to more appropriate properties, I am sure, flies in the face of what practically every single Member in the House who has people on a waiting list knows. The remark is so silly that it can only be equated with Marie Antoinette's famous faux pas, "Let them eat cake". If there is no bread, there is no cake. The problem is that the housing market in Belfast has developed over a period of years to suit the current system, and it no longer matches that need.

A house is a pile of bricks and mortar with a roof on it. It may or may not be double-glazed, and it may or may not be hard to heat. However, the truth is that, no matter how humble it is, it is someone's home. There is a difference between a pile of bricks and mortar with a roof, referred to as a house, and a home, be it, in some cases, ever so humble. A home and its walls contain memories. Although society may well view that as a social house belonging to society and feel that society can therefore do with it as

it wishes, the person who lives in that house may take a different view.

It is unfair of us to burden the Minister by consistently demanding that he does the impossible, but it is, sir, your role. I know that it is a role and responsibility that you shoulder bravely. However, the people outside will listen to the words that we use in here. We can all quote individual cases and say how terrible it is. You then go back to the heartland of your constituency, where somebody pokes you in the chest and says, "Fair enough, but what are you going to do about it?"

12.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr Copeland: I would not be so brutal as to say to the Minister, "What are you going to do about it?", but I await with interest information on the mitigating circumstances that may pertain.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately after the lunchtime suspension. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.30 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Social Development

Green New Deal

1. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the results of the economic appraisal carried out in relation to the £12 million budget allocated for the green new deal. (AQO 2016/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development):

A cross-departmental group, which was chaired by my Department and included representatives from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), developed a full economic appraisal to determine the most cost-effective use of the £12 million available to deliver maximum domestic energy efficiency improvements.

The economic appraisal was developed in accordance with the guidance in the Northern Ireland Guide to Expenditure Appraisal and Evaluation. The criteria used for the options within the economic appraisal were to determine the most cost-effective way of spending the £12 million, ensuring that the maximum benefit could be realised from the expenditure.

The options considered were a business proposal from the Northern Ireland Green New Deal Group and a business proposal from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive for increasing the domestic energy and thermal efficiency of the domestic building stock in Northern Ireland using the funding available. The options were assessed on the basis of what they proposed to deliver in the context of improving energy efficiency in domestic properties, any associated benefits or costs, wider economic benefits in relation to private sector expenditure, direct job creation income and multiplier effects. It also assessed any associated risks around the potential to deliver the proposal, including where those risks may lie.

The options submitted by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive have been successful and approved by DFP. I hope to be making an announcement on the details of that in the next few days.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for the update in that regard, but given that it is 18 months after that £12 million funding was confirmed, is this another case of Northern Ireland missing an opportunity to improve energy efficiency in our homes and create jobs that is being taken in the rest of the UK?

Mr McCausland: No, I do not think it is. The money that was allocated will all be spent on improving energy efficiency, which is, of course, one of our priorities in government. There were reasons for the delays — some of those were about getting information in order to carry out the proper appraisal — but we are in a position where all the money

will be spent, and spent on the purpose for which it was intended, which is a government priority.

Mr G Robinson: Does the Minister agree that, whatever option is chosen, the proposals and their associated outworkings will be aimed at tackling some of the causes of fuel poverty across Northern Ireland?

Mr McCausland: The money will indeed be spent in a way that will help to address fuel poverty by improving energy efficiency. We are all familiar with the causes of fuel poverty, and one of the ways of addressing it is by improving the energy efficiency of homes. It is not the only issue that we are taking forward in that regard. It is not the only measure to address fuel poverty. There is a range of measures that we have in that context, such as the warm homes scheme, and so on, but all those are certainly directed towards that single aim.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Minister for his answers. He will hopefully agree with me that the green new deal offers great opportunities for political leaders to create the right conditions for the private sector to deliver on key social and environmental objectives. Does he also agree with me that to compare and contrast an economic appraisal put forward by the Housing Executive, with its massive army of staff, and an economic appraisal put forward by the Green New Deal Group, which was headed up by a small number of committed volunteers, is a very narrow-minded thing to do, and that perhaps more credence should have been given to an economic appraisal put forward by a very small group, given that very little support was given by government?

Mr McCausland: The position is that an economic appraisal looks at what is put in front of it. It has to be carried out fairly and honestly, and we have reached a conclusion on the basis of the economic appraisal. People with considerable experience were involved in the Green New Deal Group's proposal, and I am sure their proposal benefited from that experience. They were afforded every opportunity to strengthen and build on it during the process. The process was almost iterative at times, but the outcome is the one that we have now concluded.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answers, although I am a little confused. Are all the studies and economic appraisals now complete? Are the timelines going to be followed? We have been told that the money will be spent, but when will it be spent? What is the real reason for its being stuck between two Departments? Perhaps we have just had a hint from Sinn Féin that it does not agree with the way in which we are going forward. What is holding up the green new deal?

Mr McCausland: The Member's questions betray some measure of confusion, because I thought that I had been quite clear: we have now reached a decision on the way forward. The money that is allocated will be spent on improving the energy efficiency of homes and addressing fuel poverty. It is a good proposal, and I will be making the announcement about it very soon. I am sure that the Member will be patient as he waits for that announcement. There were issues that led to the timescale for coming to the decision. It was most certainly not an issue between Departments. It was about affording the Green New Deal Group every opportunity to put forward as strong a case as it possibly could.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members, I omitted to advise you that questions 4 and 11 have been withdrawn and require written answers.

Employment and Support Allowance: Work Capability Assessment

2. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister for Social Development whether he has any plans to review the work capability assessment currently carried out by Atos Healthcare.

(AQO 2017/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I, too, have concerns regarding the work capability assessment, which are based on representations made to me by constituents. However, the work capability assessment is currently subject to review in accordance with the legislative requirement set out in section 10 of the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2007.

The Department for Work and Pensions and I commissioned Professor Malcolm Harrington to conduct independent annual reviews over a five-year period into all areas of the work capability assessment. Professor Harrington's first two reports were laid before the Assembly in September and November 2011, respectively. His third review is under way, and the report is expected in November or December 2012.

An example of how concerns have been taken on board is how the Department, in conjunction with the Department for Work and Pensions, undertook an informal consultation on proposals to make the work capability assessment work better for cancer patients, recognising the challenges for that particular group. In addition, the Social Security Agency appointed a health assessment adviser in August 2011 who is responsible for ensuring that the quality and standards of the assessment process are maintained at a high level.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his answer. As you are aware, Minister, this is a subject that was well-aired by a number of Members yesterday, when you gave some indication of how you would proceed in reviewing the work capability assessment.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's response. In light of the fact that there will be so many people with specific disabilities who have needs after losing their entitlement to employment and support allowance, will the Minister assure the House that he and his Department will bring about greater service opportunities for those people who have those specific needs?

Mr McCausland: The key point to make here is that we have a well-designed and well-framed customer journey set out. I indicated yesterday that we will make copies of that available to Members in diagrammatic form, because it is a complex enough process. I think that gathering information will help to inform Members and ensure that we are clear about the various stages involved when we engage with constituents about the process.

Clearly, there are people in our society who have disabilities and particular needs. I agree fully with the Member that it is important that we do everything as far as is humanly possible to try to meet those needs, whether through supporting people through the journey or ensuring that they have the right support if they are able to take up some form of activity in due course.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. What progress has been made in implementing Professor Harrington's remaining recommendation?

Mr McCausland: Professor Harrington had 14 recommendations, 13 of which have been implemented. The outstanding year 1 recommendation is recommendation 1, which was that Jobcentre Plus should better manage and support the customer during the course of their benefit claim.

There are four elements being considered to enhance the customer's journey: the issue of a new letter; a follow-up call; an allowance call; and the disallowance call. Following a pilot exercise, the disallowance call was introduced in April 2012. When the decision-maker considers that the existing evidence does not support an award of employment and support allowance, the decision-maker will contact the customer to provide them with an opportunity to present any further evidence. The decision-maker will then take into account that new evidence before finalising his decision. Pilot exercises on the other three elements of the improved customer journey have now been evaluated, and the agency will make a decision on the way forward in May or June; so, within a matter of weeks.

Mr Cree: The Minister is aware of the difficulties with the work capability assessment. Can he confirm the number of cases in which decisions to refuse have been taken where the claimant's GP has not submitted any medical opinion?

Mr McCausland: I do not have to hand specific figures on that. I will return to the Member with them. The point was made fully in the debate yesterday. We need to send a clear message that the provision of information at the earliest possible stage is absolutely crucial to this process. There is a lot of focus on Atos Healthcare, but it is only one part of the process. It is crucial that we get other information, whether from a psychiatrist, surgeon or doctor, as quickly and promptly as possible. When decisions are changed in due course on appeal, it is almost always because of additional information that was made available. If there are particular difficulties in gaining access to that information from any particular source, that will be kept under review.

Housing Executive: Double Glazing

3. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Social Development what impact his decision to suspend implementation of the double glazing of Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties will have on the completion date for the overall project. (AQO 2018/11-15)

7. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the roll-out of the double-glazing scheme in South Antrim. (AQO 2022/11-15)

8. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the double-glazing scheme, due for completion in 2015. (AQO 2023/11-15)

9. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister for Social Development how many Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties will be affected by his decision to put the double-glazing scheme on hold. (AQO 2024/11-15)

12. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the value for money of the total Housing Executive expenditure over the last two years on the supply and fitting of double glazing. (AQO 2027/11-15)

Mr McCausland: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 3, 7, 8, 9 and 12 together, as they all relate to double glazing. As I am answering so many questions together, with the Deputy Speaker's permission, I request a little additional time to answer them.

When I came into office, I quickly recognised that although the previous focus had been on the newbuild programme, it was essential that I ensured that the upkeep of existing homes and the need for Housing Executive maintenance work to continue were also a priority.

When I looked at the need for a double-glazing programme, I was astounded to learn that, initially, it was estimated that 48,000 homes required double glazing. I was even more concerned about the apparent lack of haste in dealing with this, as the Housing Executive originally planned to have this work completed by 2021. That is why I ensured that, in the Programme for Government, the Northern Ireland Executive gave a commitment that the thermal efficiency of all Housing Executive properties would be improved by 2014-15 through the provision of double glazing.

I was also shocked when the Housing Executive originally advised that the costs of the double-glazing programme for 48,000 homes would be around £120 million. Though it is now estimated that 30,000 homes require that work, at an estimated cost of £69 million, this is still a significant amount of taxpayers' money. The Housing Executive has reduced its estimate of the number of houses that require double glazing — these are estimated figures. I, therefore, need to ensure that this programme delivers best value for money and that the work is in line with industry standards.

I believe that there are further significant savings to be made around the Housing Executive's specification and bespoke procurement process. Therefore, I asked my officials to research the specifications used, as I have been concerned for some time that the Housing Executive's specification for the supply and fitting of double glazing did not offer best value for money. I am particularly concerned about the requirement to remove and replaster around frames, which destroys the decoration in a tenant's home, necessitates the payment of redecoration grants and causes inconvenience to tenants. I am also particularly concerned about the specification for hinges and handles; they are much higher quality than industry standards for other domestic properties.

2.15 pm

I am advised that there is potential for significant savings to be made, which would be very welcome. I wrote to the Housing Executive's chief executive to ask him to rigorously and urgently review the specification. The review will be completed urgently and will not have an impact on the target date of 2015. Although there may be slight delays while that is carried out, all homes will remain in the programme and no tenant who was promised double glazing will lose out.

Where the holding of contracts will cause budgetary pressures —

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

Mr McCausland: — I have advised the Housing Executive to give priority to advancing the heating replacement programme, which is part of the fuel poverty initiative. The more savings we make in this area —

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

Mr McCausland: — the more we can spend on other schemes, such as kitchens.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his very fulsome response to my question. Does he have any concerns about the quality of the window replacements that have been fitted to date?

Mr McCausland: There are certainly issues around the quality of some of the work that has been undertaken. I have personal concerns in that regard. My understanding is that the Housing Executive has not necessarily been using specialist glass and glazing contractors to deliver all the double-glazing schemes; it has been using contractors that also install bathrooms and kitchens and do general maintenance work.

Although I do not want to question the professionalism of all the different contractors undertaking the work, the lack of a specialist and single contractor can clearly lead to issues of consistency and, at times, quality. For example, in my constituency, I saw evidence at first hand of the workmanship to install new windows in one small development of homes that were being refurbished. To say that I was shocked by the poor quality of the work is an understatement. The work was so poor that the Housing Executive had to recall the contractor immediately on my staff alerting it. One resident told me that the window cleaner could not even clean her windows because they were fitted so loosely that he was worried that they would come out if he put a sponge on them.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. He made some reference to the funding of £67 million. I appreciate that we are looking at 2014-15 for completion, but is the funding in place to complete the total programme?

Mr McCausland: I assure the Member and other Members that funding is in place to ensure that the proposed double-glazing programme is completed by 2014-15.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his responses and for the action that he has taken to date. Will he give us some indication of the savings that will be forthcoming from the actions that have been taken? Does he believe that the action is worth the savings that will be made?

Mr McCausland: I am advised that the aggregated costs of the double-glazing programme and the associated potential for economies of scale are significant. The precise figures will emerge in due course. The work will have to be tendered. We will know at that point the exact savings, but they are significant and substantial. Any savings will benefit tenants and taxpayers, as money that is saved in the scheme will be used to advance the heating replacement programme, thereby contributing to energy efficiency and improving the Housing Executive stock.

Mr Eastwood: Will the Minister inform the House how many Housing Executive properties were completed with the double-glazing scheme before he put it on hold?

Mr McCausland: The scheme has been ongoing for some time. I do not have the precise figure, but roughly 9,000 homes have had work completed. There is a long way to go before all the properties are completed, and I am sure that the Member shares my view that the work needs to be done in the most cost-effective manner and that we need to get value for money. If we can save money on this, we can put in more kitchens, do more maintenance work and improve the standard of properties for people who have been living for many years in houses that are in urgent need of attention. That work was not carried out, but it will be possible to do it, along with the double glazing, if we go down the road that we are now going down. There will be work still to be completed this year because of contractual commitments in a number of cases. A very substantial contract of work is still to be completed, and it will be completed in time.

Mr B McCrea: As it was the last in the series, perhaps the Minister did not get to answer my specific question. He mentioned getting more precise details, but could he give a rough approximation of the amount of money that he thinks will be saved through the new process? Was there a problem before this contract? In other words, given that we have been putting in double glazing for some time, is this a systemic problem?

Mr McCausland: I am loath to give a figure because when we go out to tender for the work and see what tenders come in, we will be in a much better place to give a much more accurate figure. I am loath to speculate at this point but I stand over the point that the amount will be significant and substantial.

Has the issue been around for some time? Yes, it has. The Housing Executive has been installing windows in this way for some time, and apart from the cost issue, there are issues regarding damage to property, the fact that people have to be paid a redecoration grant and all the disruption associated with that. I have had windows fitted in my house, as I am sure you have. The workmen came in and went out. It was a very clean job and there was very little disruption. In some instances, this was not the case when I saw work being undertaken by some contractors. It can be done much more cleanly and much more efficiently in order to achieve a better outcome for the tenant and for the finances of the Housing Executive.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister recently announced the review, and I presume that we will await its outcome before we make determinations on whether contracts are being carried out to the proper standards. However, is the Minister aware that the Committee for Social Development was made aware last week by the industry that 200 people are likely to be put on protective notice in their place of work because of the uncertainty in the companies that are currently carrying out this work?

Mr McCausland: I question that figure, because workers doing one type of work may well be shifted to do another. For example, those who are fitting windows are the same ones who fit kitchens and doors. As I said, if we are not spending some money during the rest of the year on windows, it will be shifted across to other things. So, work will still be

undertaken in the sector. I query those figures; they are unnecessarily alarmist and probably unfounded.

Gambling: Legislation

5. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the proposed legislative changes on the regulation and control of gambling. (AQO 2020/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Following a consultation exercise last spring, I have been giving detailed consideration to the many complex issues that have arisen in the gambling review. I have had meetings with many major stakeholders and I am liaising closely with counterparts in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. The process is ongoing, and within the past few weeks, officials have met the Northern Ireland Turf Guardians Association and the PSNI.

The current legislation is outdated and has failed to keep up with the rapid development in the gambling sector. The highly technical and jurisdictional issues complicate the picture, and that has been particularly evident since the rapid development of online and remote gambling, which may require a UK-wide approach. Such issues make it extremely important that the new legislation not only deals with today's gambling environment but is adaptable enough to keep up with future developments in the industry. I hope, however, to make an announcement on the way forward by the end of the summer.

Gambling is complex and highly technical, and the onset of remote gambling has revolutionised the industry, making regulation and enforcement a serious concern throughout the world. It is important that the new legislation is flexible and adequately addresses the new gambling environment that now exists. I am liaising with colleagues in Great Britain to co-ordinate a United Kingdom-wide approach to remote gambling. Although there are issues that still need to be resolved, I hope to make an announcement on the way forward by the end of the summer.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his very detailed answer. The Minister said that he hoped to make an announcement at the end of the summer. What will be the nature of that announcement and when will the draft legislation be published so that the House can study the considerable implications contained within it?

Mr McCausland: Again, as with the previous question, I have to depend very much on the Member's patience. It would be wrong for me to announce now something that has not finally been settled and is to be announced at the end of the summer, but I can assure the Member that we will make an announcement at that point. We are looking at a whole range of issues, which I set out very clearly. It is a complex and evolving field, and it is important that we get the right result to make sure that we do not create legislation that is out of date very soon thereafter. The intention is to move on this matter at the end of the summer.

Ms Brown: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Does the Minister share my concern that there is a segment in our society who are often classed as problem gamblers? Will he give an assurance that he will do all that he can to protect the most vulnerable in our society?

Mr McCausland: The prevalence survey that was carried out as part of this work has shown that some 2.2% or one in 50 people in Northern Ireland are problem gamblers. Given that one of the three main objectives of the review is to protect the young and vulnerable, it is my intention to put in place adequate provisions in order to best protect the most vulnerable in our society. That figure of one in 50 people being problem gamblers in Northern Ireland causes me real concern, and it is one that the Member has raised and shares. The protection of the young and vulnerable is a key issue, and we will certainly make sure that that is accommodated in the way forward.

Mr Allister: Is the Minister satisfied with and supportive of the current state of the law in Northern Ireland on Sunday gambling at race meetings, and does he plan any change?

Mr McCausland: The general point is that I see no need to relax the Sunday gambling laws at this time. I reiterate what I said to the other Member about the nature of whatever legislation may come forward. I do not intend to speculate about what may or may not be in it at that stage, other than to make that general observation now.

Social Disadvantage

6. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister for Social Development what new approach his Department will introduce to tackle social disadvantage. (AQO 2021/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I recently presented a poverty policy paper to my Executive colleagues on the Executive subcommittee on welfare reform, which I chair. This reflects our changed and difficult times, which, in my view, can only be addressed by complementary social and economic policies relevant to the needs of Northern Ireland.

I have also established four key principles that now shape the work of my Department in addressing poverty and deprivation. These require that new social policies must complement economic policies; recognise the responsibilities of government, communities, families and individuals; tackle intergenerational problems; and make the best possible use of increasingly limited resources and be focused on outcomes that are shared across government.

These principles will apply while my officials continue the work to tackle social disadvantage through my key policy responsibilities of delivering neighbourhood renewal, which is the flagship policy; urban regeneration; the delivery of decent and affordable housing, which is a prerequisite to tackling poverty; action to address fuel poverty; the delivery of child maintenance arrangements; and our comprehensive social security provisions, together with the major welfare reform agenda, which are all key to addressing poverty and social disadvantage.

2.30 pm

My officials are also working with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and other Departments to put in place a cross-cutting policy approach, supported by effective interventions, to deliver a sustained reduction in poverty across all ages and to produce improvements in the life chances of children and young people. The cross-cutting actions are in the following areas: jobs for disadvantaged communities; affordable childcare;

addressing economic inactivity; early interventions for high-risk families; reducing fuel costs for poor families; and the developing measures of social actions that identify economic costs and benefits. Delivering on those key areas, through a collaborative and outcomes-focused approach —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister's time is up

Mr McCausland: — will ensure that we will not only manage social disadvantage but achieve real progress.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister's time is up, as it is for questions to the Minister.

Justice

Mr Deputy Speaker: I advise Members that questions 1, 3, 4, 7, 8 and 14 have been withdrawn. I feel as though I am calling bingo; it is a bit ridiculous.

Youth Justice Review

2. **Mr Murphy** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on any actions taken by his Department in relation to the recommendations contained in the youth justice review.
(AQO 2032/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): We have given careful consideration to the many views expressed through the public consultation on the review of youth justice. As part of that process, I have asked my officials to brief the Justice Committee on the responses received. I expect that briefing to take place very shortly, subject to the Committee's agreement. I would then wish to appear before the Committee to hear its views on the consultation and the wider issues covered in the review, particularly where implementation depends on legislative change. Following that, I intend to make an announcement on the way forward in the Assembly prior to the summer break.

Many of the issues raised in the review cover matters of policy that fall to me, as Minister of Justice, and I am moving forward on a wide range of those issues in advance of any announcement. In addition, criminal justice agencies have examined their practices and processes in light of the review recommendations and are introducing reforms and improvements.

Importantly, the report contains recommendations on a number of cross-cutting issues and recognises that success in reducing youth offending requires actions extending well beyond the boundaries of the criminal justice system. I have discussed a number of those matters with Executive colleagues and will bring proposals to the Executive to agree a collective way forward over the summer months.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am sure that the Minister is pleased to see me, given that so many others have abandoned him.

One of the key recommendations of the review was that all under-18-year-olds would be transferred from Hydebank Wood. Will the Minister assure the House that that transfer has been completed? I note that he did not give details on any of the other recommendations.

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Murphy for his point, and it is indeed a pleasure to have the opportunity to speak to him. Question Time would have been almost non-existent if one or two Members had not remained here or remained well, as I know was, unfortunately, not the case for my colleague Anna Lo.

Members may recall that, something over a year ago, there were approximately 20 under-18s in Hydebank Wood. The last time I remember answering specific questions on that, there were eight. I can confirm that there are now three under-18s in Hydebank Wood. As part of the work of the individualised assessment process, many young people have been managed, through case conferences led by the Youth Justice Agency, from Hydebank Wood specifically to the Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre. Looking at the age of those three and the type of sentences they have, it is likely that there will be no under-18s in Hydebank Wood later this year. Work is ongoing to address the legislative and other issues that will facilitate the permanent removal of all under-18s from Hydebank Wood within the 18 months that was specified in the youth justice review.

Mr Weir: Further to the last supplementary, will the Minister indicate whether any work needs to be done at Woodlands to make it fit for purpose for all prisoners under 18? If so, what is the timescale for the completion of any needed capital work?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Weir for his concern about that issue. To the best of my knowledge, no significant capital work is required. The issues are around management and ensuring that, if there are small numbers of disruptive young people, they are managed in such a way that Woodlands is able to cope with them without disrupting the regime for others.

Those who visited Woodlands will know that its style and layout make it possible to segregate certain areas, so that those who require a more robust regime are not in the same area as those who are more amenable to the normal regime. We can leave that matter to the professional standards and excellent work of the staff in Woodlands.

Mr A Maginness: One of a number of aspects of the review that do not require legislative change relates to changes in education and the skilling up of offenders in Hydebank Wood. What progress has the Minister made with changes to the educational and skills regime in Hydebank Wood?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Maginness for his question. I am not sure whether he was loitering outside Room 148 earlier today when I had a meeting with my colleague the Minister for Employment and Learning. Members will recall that the prison review team (PRT) recommendations include specific proposals that Hydebank Wood should become a "secure college". Since that term was not known before the PRT put it forward in its review, detailed work has been done between the Prison Service and colleagues in the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) to ensure that we can work on that. I am pleased to say that DEL officials will join a working group that will explore the issues this summer. It is certainly my intention that we build on that recommendation and ensure that we provide constructive, worthwhile activity for young offenders in Hydebank Wood so that we make sure that we help to protect society by reducing their propensity to reoffend when they leave.

Mr Dickson: Will you outline the procedures that are in place for determining whether under-18s go to Hydebank or to Woodlands justice centre?

Mr Ford: That issue is, perhaps, not necessarily understood terribly well. In some cases, courts may recommend specifically where people are to be accommodated. As far as I am concerned, the key issue in the way that the justice system responds is that the Youth Justice Agency has a role in case managing all young offenders under 18, including those in Hydebank Wood. That is why, as a result of individual case conferences, so many have been able to move from Hydebank Wood to Woodlands in the past year. The key issue is to ensure that such case conferences, involving the relevant people from both the young offenders centre and the juvenile justice centre, are able to examine the individual needs of those young offenders and the best way to manage them to ensure their safety and security and the safety and security of others. They are least likely to reoffend if given the best possible chance. That is why Woodlands has been able to work so well and to take so many across from Hydebank Wood. That process appears to have the continuing support of the House, which I am pleased to see.

Sectarianism: Legislative Definition

5. **Mr McDevitt** asked the Minister of Justice what plans he has to introduce legislation to define sectarianism.

(AQO 2035/11-15)

Mr Ford: I thank the Member for his question. The criminal law, of course, already provides for courts to deal with what we call hate crime. In effect, it therefore allows for sectarianism to be addressed and penalised. Hate crime legislation allows for those guilty of a series of violent and criminal damage offences to have their sentences increased where they are motivated by hostility based on religion, race, sexual orientation or disability. Public order legislation also makes it an offence to stir up fear or hatred on similar grounds.

As Members know, last year the Assembly was not able to agree a definition of sectarianism in chanting at sports matches. My priority is to deal with the practicalities of hate crime rather than to look to further legislative solutions. I therefore have no immediate plans, from a justice perspective, to define sectarianism.

Mr McDevitt: I think that society at large will be dismayed by the Minister's answer. We had a clear example of sectarian chanting at a high-profile football match recently. The PSNI is unable to properly pursue an investigative course, despite last year's legislation, because of the lack of a clear definition. Does the Minister accept that the Justice Act 2011 would be much more robust if it contained a clear legislative definition of sectarianism, which is the cancer of our region?

Mr Ford: If the Member is suggesting that that which he and I both wished to do when we were passing the Justice Bill last year to strengthen issues and to make a definition of sectarianism would have made things better, I am happy to agree with him. The reality is that a majority of the House did not agree with us, and, therefore, the police are forced to operate with the law as it currently operates. The House may wish to return to the issue of whether that aspect should be strengthened in future legislation.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is a mistake not to define sectarianism in legislation.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we have a question, please?

Ms J McCann: Will the Minister ensure that the gap in the current legislation is closed in the pending Justice Bill?

Mr Ford: Although I agree entirely with Ms McCann's sentiments, I can only repeat what I have just said. It will be a matter for the House as a whole, and it was clear last year that the majority of the House did not wish to make the changes that Conall McDevitt, Jennifer McCann and I wished to make. Perhaps, that will not be the case if we re-examine the matter this year or some time in the future.

Mr I McCrea: Will the Minister accept that sectarianism is not only rife in chanting etc but includes the naming of grounds after dead republicans?

Mr Ford: I have no doubt that any Member will take their own view on what constitutes sectarianism. It seems to me that anything that is designed to annoy, upset or damage whatever exists in the way of good relations in an area could be classified as sectarianism.

Legal Aid

6. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Justice what milestones have been established and met in relation to legal aid reform.

(AQO 2036/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Member will be aware that I have implemented a number of significant changes to the legal aid system, mainly in respect of criminal legal aid. In April 2011, I brought in new rules in relation to the remuneration of solicitors and counsel for their work in Crown Court cases. This followed extensive dialogue between my Department and representatives from the Law Society and the Bar Council. The effect of these rules was to introduce a comprehensive system of standard fees and do away with the provisions for very high cost cases. These rules are expected to save the legal aid fund in excess of £18 million a year. I have recently brought in new rules that tighten up the criteria to be met for a Crown Court case before the court can assign a second counsel. I had hoped to introduce these rules earlier, but this proved not to be possible because of the need to consult widely to ensure that the new criteria did not impinge on defendants' access to justice.

In September 2010, I launched the review of access to justice. This fundamental review examined many aspects of the justice system, including the reform of both civil and criminal legal aid. The final report, published in September last year, made 159 recommendations. This was then followed by a public consultation, which received 47 responses. My Department has carefully considered these responses, and I will shortly be finalising my response.

I am committed in the Programme for Government to publishing my departmental action plan, setting out how I will take forward the recommendations contained in the review, including the legal aid recommendations. This action plan will provide a timeline detailing how my Department, working across government and with stakeholders from the judiciary, the legal profession and the community and voluntary sector, will implement some of the biggest changes seen to the justice system in Northern Ireland for decades.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. Minister, you have covered quite a bit of what I was going to ask in my supplementary question. What progress has been made on the alternatives, and can you explain how they will operate?

Mr Ford: I fear that Mr Gardiner is tempting me to announce the outcome of my response to the review before that is actually the case. It is absolutely clear that we are well on track to being able to make those announcements in a short while to ensure that we move on alternative dispute resolution, for example, and to ensure that we are not just seen to be cutting legal aid but are seen to use the money in the best way to promote the best kind of resolution of disputes.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. Agus ba mhaith liom an méid seo a fhiafraí de. Whatever changes are introduced to the legal aid system, especially on the civil side, can the Minister assure the House that the principle of access to justice will be applied and maintained?

Mr Ford: I can certainly assure the House that that is the case. The cuts that have been made so far have been in the amounts paid to criminal defence lawyers, not in the access that individuals have to justice. The changes that might be made in alternative dispute resolution on the civil side are designed to ensure that people get the best possible service and outcomes, not simply to reduce spending.

2.45 pm

Court Estate

9. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister of Justice what reports on the court estate have been produced during the last four years. (AQO 2039/11-15)

Mr Ford: Two reports have been produced on the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service estate over the past four years. In December 2009, a report was produced by a consultancy firm to support the development of a future estate strategy for the then Northern Ireland Court Service. The report proposed the creation of three super-courts and six satellite courts in Northern Ireland at a cost of approximately £75 million.

On 1 May 2012, Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) published its report on the adequacy of the court estate. That report made a number of recommendations, and I have accepted its assessment of the variable quality of court venues across Northern Ireland. I have instructed the Courts and Tribunals Service to develop a new estate strategy that is affordable and appropriate. The CJINI report, correctly in my view, concludes that the proposals in the 2009 consultancy report are not achievable in the current economic climate and that an alternative strategy should be implemented.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he explain why the PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) strategic outline case final report was not acted on sooner, given that it stated in 2009 that the Northern Ireland Court Service estate was clearly not demonstrating value for money and was not fit for purpose?

Mr Ford: I thank Mrs Overend for that supplementary question, but, of course, by examining the position of the five part-time hearing centres, the Courts and Tribunals Service has, in fact, been proceeding to see what type of rationalisation may be necessary. I repeat the points that I made, which were ratified by CJINI in its most recent report: the proposals made in 2009 are simply not affordable and raise serious questions about geographical access to the courts. That is why the matter is being re-examined and why I believe that we will get a better proposal than was produced three years ago.

Mr Givan: I welcome the Minister's comment that that report will not be put in place. I do not believe that they were good recommendations to take forward. The report contained a recommendation to close Lisburn court. Does the Minister agree that what is needed there is a brand new purpose-built court? The crimes committed in that area and the accessibility of Maghaberry prison mean that it is a suitable location for a newbuild.

Mr Ford: I am reluctant to agree with any Member who talks about the crime level in their constituency as a particular problem. I am sure that Mr Givan did not mean it entirely in that way. I agree with his general sentiment that we need a court estate that is fit for purpose. We clearly have problems: too many of our buildings do not meet modern needs for, for example, the segregation of vulnerable witnesses and victims, and disability access. I cannot, today, agree with a particular plea, even from the Chair of the Justice Committee, that any one constituency merits consideration in advance of the overall consideration being carried out.

Mrs McKevitt: Will the Minister acknowledge that, given recent assessments of the court estate, serious pressures will arise on the existing space in a significant number of courthouses outside Belfast?

Mr Ford: The assessment that was prepared specifically on the five hearing centres demonstrated that the necessary court space could be provided if they were closed. However, there has been a genuine consultation exercise. I have asked for further, more detailed work to be done on the implications of closure, including what other work might be needed in other courthouses and the suitability of other courthouses. The response to that consultation is ongoing and will ensure that, before I am given a final report, all the available options are covered.

Prisons: Full-body Imaging Scanners

10. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the pilot scheme for full-body scanners in Magilligan and Hydebank Wood prisons. (AQO 2040/11-15)

Mr Ford: As I previously announced, I have made a commitment to pilot the use of full-body imaging scanners. There is a range of technologies available, and the pilot will focus on two of those — transmission X-ray and millimetre wave — with a view to assessing their suitability for use in Northern Ireland's prisons.

Transmission X-ray scanners have not yet been approved for use in UK prisons, and authorisation must be obtained under the Justification of Practices Involving Ionising Radiation Regulations 2004. An application for use in a prison setting

has been made for Holme House prison in Yorkshire. However, it is clear that that process will take some months to complete. I will therefore be writing to the Environment Minister this week regarding the submission of a separate application in respect of prisons in Northern Ireland.

The use of millimetre wave scanners does not require the same level of approval, and the Prison Service will therefore be able to commence a pilot of those scanners sooner than the pilot of the transmission X-ray scanners. Prison Service officials have received a written proposal from one supplier to facilitate the pilot of millimetre wave body scanners at Magilligan prison and Hydebank Wood YOC. I hope to receive proposals from the other supplier later this week. I can also confirm that I wrote to the Justice Committee on 3 May to provide further details on the necessary steps for the piloting of full-body imaging scanners.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he give us dates or at least a time frame for the pilot schemes to start and, more importantly, finish so that, if the scanners work, they can be given to all prisons to stop the controversy around full-body searches?

Mr Ford: I appreciate Mr Kelly's point, but I regret that I cannot give any timescale for the pilot of transmission X-ray scanners because of the issues of approval, which lie beyond our responsibility. I am hopeful, as I have said previously, that we will see the millimetre wave scanners in the two units at some point during the summer for a trial period of between three and six months and an assessment as fast as possible thereafter.

Mr S Anderson: Is there a security assessment for the scanners? Is there an estimated cost for a scanner in each prison or scanners in all prisons?

Mr Ford: I appreciate Mr Anderson's point, but the security assessment will be done on the basis of seeing how the scanners operate as opposed to the current full-body searching.

As far as the costs are concerned, given the sensitivity of the negotiations that are under way between two suppliers, it would be a little bit foolish to go into the detail of costs at this stage. Obviously, costs will be made available when it is possible to reveal them without damaging commercial sensitivity.

Mr Elliott: I know the Minister is hampered somewhat by the commercial sensitivities, but can he give us an indication of who will carry out the evaluation of the pilot schemes?

Mr Ford: The pilot schemes will be evaluated by Prison Service staff, who will call in such outside expertise as they require.

Mr P Ramsey: Does the Minister agree that, in going forward, the aim is to end the protest and tension in Roe House? Will he assure that House that, in expediting the pilot scheme on full-body scanners, he will implement the findings as quickly as possible across all prisons?

Mr Ford: I agree that there is an urgency about ending the protest by some prisoners in Roe House. However, in support of the prison review team's (PRT) recommendation 8, we are trying to find suitable alternatives to full-body searching to meet the needs of prisoners and prison staff across all three institutions, not just those of separated prisoners.

Prison Review: Implementation

11. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the structures in place for the management and oversight of the implementation of the prison review team's recommendations. (AQO 2041/11-15)

Mr Ford: I can confirm that the prison reform oversight group continues to provide robust and impartial scrutiny of the performance of the reform programme. When it met for a second time on 10 May, the terms of reference were amended to reflect the decision by the permanent secretary of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to accept my invitation to join the group. In light of the significant number of healthcare-related recommendations in the report, his decision is to be welcomed. That will add to the oversight arrangements already in place and give further confidence that the reform programme is being properly scrutinised and challenged. Of course, the Justice Committee also plays an important role in the scrutiny of prison reform, and it will have the opportunity to discuss the programme further before the end of the month. I will shortly provide the Committee with a written update on progress.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his response. What effect, if any, will the recent resignation of the head of the Northern Ireland Prison Service have on the full implementation of the prison review team's recommendations?

Mr Ford: I hope that the honest answer is that the resignation of Colin McConnell will have no effect whatsoever. There is absolutely no doubt that, as director general, Colin made his mark on the Prison Service and played a key role in starting the process of reforms, which we now have under way. However, it was not a reform programme that depended on one single individual; it was a programme of reform being run by a team, including a number of key issues around estates, HR matters and so on. Progress is well under way on the staff exit scheme and the recruitment of new officers, and work is being done on the outline estate strategy. All of those are aspects of work that were started on Colin McConnell's watch and will, I believe, be carried forward quite adequately in the months and years ahead. I simply wish him well as he proceeds to a more significant job, in his terms, in his home town in Edinburgh.

Mr McLaughlin: I note the Minister's confidence that the review board can continue its work. However, leadership is essential. What is the timeline for replacing Mr McConnell, and has the board considered the implications of his resignation?

Mr Ford: It is a fair point as to what the timeline is. I understand that the shortlisting process for his replacement has happened. A number of candidates will be interviewed in the coming weeks, and it would be difficult to go beyond that. This is proceeding, I believe, as fast as any similar post of such significance in the Civil Service has proceeded in recent time. I am optimistic that we will see a full-time replacement in place shortly. I am also confident that the team that will be continuing to carry that lead will be able to carry on, pending that full-time appointment.

Mr Cree: Would the Minister agree that so many positions being filled on an interim basis in the Prison Service may result in a lack of continuity in the implementation of the prison review team's recommendations?

Mr Ford: No. Although Mr Cree makes a valid point about the concerns we may have, I am confident that we have a team approach and there is strength in that team, including the external work being done by those implementing the change programme. The staff currently in post, including those on temporary promotion, alongside the change management team, are capable of carrying forward the work in the way that is required. I also believe that the work of the oversight group, which I chair, will ensure that that work is kept on track.

Crime: Attacks on Older People

12. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Justice what proposals his Department is considering in relation to preventing attacks on older people. (AQO 2042/11-15)

Mr Ford: The safety of older and vulnerable people and ensuring that they can live free from the fear of crime are important issues for my Department. Although the evidence shows that crimes against older people in Northern Ireland, especially violent crimes, are relatively rare, I know that older and vulnerable people still have very real concerns about crime. Fear of crime can have a very negative impact on quality of life, particularly for older people. It can lead to loneliness and isolation.

The importance of the safety of older people is reflected in the new Programme for Government, with a commitment to tackle crime and the fear of crime against older and vulnerable people by more effective and appropriate sentences and other measures. Although that is a new commitment, it is an area to which the Department of Justice has always given considerable focus. Much good work is going on at regional and local level to prevent attacks on the elderly. For example, neighbourhood watch, local alert schemes and community safety wardens provide a valuable service to neighbourhoods and provide reassurance to young and old alike.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his answer. Has his Department any plans for a campaign to highlight the areas that he mentioned, such as neighbourhood watch and community safety partnerships, to reassure older people? Although incidents are relatively rare —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question.

Mr Brady: — they impact on the people who are affected.

Mr Ford: I think that Mr Brady highlights the point exactly. Although the incidence of crime against the elderly is relatively rare, the fear of crime is very significant. I believe that that is where the new community safety strategy, which will be published shortly, will provide some reassurance. As they get under way, the work of policing and community safety partnerships (PCSPs), in bringing together the best practice of community safety partnerships (CSPs) and district policing partnerships (DPPs), will also help to provide that kind of assurance in the different areas where it is seen as a particular need. I have certainly been impressed by what I have seen on some of my visits out and about and by the range of work that the new PCSPs are doing in conjunction with a number of NGOs and the various statutory bodies. A lot of work is being done, and it is important that we emphasise the good work that is being done, not the negativity that there has been in a small number of cases.

3.00 pm

Private Members' Business

Welfare Reform: Underoccupation Penalty

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes with concern the underoccupation penalty provision within proposed welfare reform legislation, which has the potential to make many people homeless; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to outline the measures that he intends to put in place to mitigate the impact of this provision. — [Mr Brady.]

Mr Durkan: I support the motion, and I thank its proposer for highlighting this extremely important issue. This call to the Minister is one that we have made consistently, as we have been seeking a conversation on and exploration of the flexibilities in parity that this region might have so that the harsh realities that welfare reform will bring can be mitigated. The underoccupation penalty is one of the most alarming and draconian features of the Bill, and it stands to attack many vulnerable people in our society. Many tenants living in homes with one room underoccupied will see a loss of £9-50 a week from their housing benefit, while others with more rooms unoccupied could lose up to £20. On average, that equates to individuals losing £670 annually. That is a huge amount for those in low-paid employment and for those out of work. For those who are already struggling to make ends meet, this will be a massive blow.

As such a huge percentage of our housing stock consists of three-bedroom houses, it is inevitable that this punitive legislation will affect many thousands of people here. The over-reliance on houses with three bedrooms or more is matched by a dearth of single tenant accommodation and two-bedroom accommodation. Where are people supposed to move to? The shortage of properties is compounded in Northern Ireland by the sad reality that our social housing stock is segregated. That makes mobility even more difficult. Those factors are, I believe, enough to argue that Northern Ireland is a special case and that it will need a specific solution.

The rurality of Northern Ireland is another issue that must be considered. People will have to move away from their friends, family and community completely to find smaller, affordable accommodation.

Coupled with other cuts that are being imposed under the guise of reform, the underoccupancy penalty will hit those who are most vulnerable the hardest. Here, we have higher rates of disability living allowance (DLA) claimants and higher child poverty rates than elsewhere on these islands. We also have a high proportion of low-income families with children. Therefore, changes to disability benefits and working tax credits will be felt much more acutely here than elsewhere. Families will be forced to bridge gaps in the money that they are losing out on to care for their families. Some will be unable to afford to bridge another cut with a reduction in their housing benefit. People will fall into hardship, debt and homelessness.

It is very important that we pass the motion today and that we then work with the Minister to explore potential mitigation provision for Northern Ireland. Although there has been a very welcome increase in discretionary housing payments, that is only a short-term measure and it is unsustainable. It is evident that the Westminster Government are clearly out of tune with reality, and it is very important that we demonstrate to the public here that we are not. It is also important to remember that many of the individuals who are affected here are employed in low-paid jobs, struggling to find higher-paid work or longer hours of work. Housing benefit is the only benefit that they claim and the only option that they have. The fact that they are in a house deemed too big for them is hardly their fault, and penalising them certainly does not meet with the Government's aim of making work pay.

I am heartened by the Minister's previously expressed acceptance of the need for conversation and the fact that there are significant areas in which we can differ in our implementation of welfare reform. I am hopeful that he will listen to our call today and act swiftly and decisively to allay our concerns and our constituents' fears. I support the motion.

Mrs Cochrane: I apologise to the proposer of the motion for not being in the Chamber when he proposed the motion.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion because it raises some very interesting and important points. Currently, those living in the social rented sector have next to no financial restrictions placed on the size of accommodation that they occupy, as the number of bedrooms they require does not affect the amount of housing benefit to which they are entitled. Those in receipt of housing benefit who live in the private rented sector have their claims assessed using the local housing allowance rules and receive housing benefit based on the reasonable accommodation needs of their household. The proposed changes seek to bring those of working age who are living in the social rented sector under the same rules as those who receive housing benefit and live in the private rented sector.

As has been discussed, the eligible rent will be reduced by a percentage rather than to a fixed level, as it reflects the additional rent associated with additional numbers of bedrooms. Inevitably, many tenants will find that very difficult, particularly if they have no other source of income from which to make up the difference, and they will be forced to move. The fact is that there are not nearly enough one-bedroom properties in Northern Ireland to cope with demand, so we need to be very conscious that the penalty is going to affect those who were allocated a two-bedroom property through no fault of their own.

I agree that the social housing stock needs to become more flexible in order to allow us to have an effective housing market. With so many families in housing stress, we need to make better use of our resources. Currently, there is no review process for the allocation of social houses. Properties that may at one stage have housed a family with three or four children may now house only the parents, as the children have grown up and moved elsewhere. Numerous Housing Executive and association houses are left significantly underoccupied, with larger families remaining in overcrowded, inadequate housing. Unfortunately, I do not believe that the proposed underoccupancy penalty will address the full issue, as it will apply only to people

of working age, and many of those underoccupied larger properties are allocated to those over 65.

Although I agree with the idea that the introduction of size criteria will mean that claimants in the social rented sector will face similar choices to their counterparts in the private rented sector, I do not believe it is right to expect people to pay more because the UK Government suddenly say they have a spare bedroom, when they would quite willingly move to another property, if one were available.

We must wake up to the issue that our most vulnerable will face when this legislation is introduced and try to act now to soften the blow. Time is of the essence, and I call on the Minister to analyse the current housing stock to see whether modifications can be made to alleviate the harsh effects of the penalty. We need to be creative and come up with innovative, cost-effective solutions that can be implemented as soon as possible.

We should probably look to other cities and see what they do to create more properties in a limited space. Creating an additional entrance on the side of end-terrace properties, for example, could create more one-bedroom flats. I understand that the Department is carrying out some research with the University of Glasgow to try to fully assess the implications of this aspect of welfare reform. That is a step in the right direction, and I look forward to hearing in more detail what plans the Minister has to help to mitigate the impacts of the proposed penalty.

Ms P Bradley: I, too, apologise to the proposer, Mr Brady, for not being present at the start of the debate, and I thank him for bringing it before us today. The premise of all welfare reform is to ensure that the system is clear, transparent, easy to understand, and just and fair. The new proposed criteria will bring our social housing stock, which is paid for by our housing benefit system, onto a more level playing field. Currently, there are two main groupings of tenants in Northern Ireland: private tenants and social housing tenants. The location of a tenant within those groups will reflect on how their housing benefit is calculated.

For instance, if a tenant in the private sector is deemed to be underoccupying, the amount of housing benefit is reduced accordingly. If a tenant in a housing association property is deemed to be underoccupying, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, which administers the housing benefit, has the option to restrict that person's housing benefit, although that power has rarely been utilised. By contrast, tenants in Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties whose circumstances mean that they are underoccupying do not face such sanctions. That disparity must be addressed in order to ensure that the system is fair.

The proposal has three main aims at its centre. First, it aims to limit housing benefit expenditure, a move that reflects the growing need to ensure that our welfare system continues to help the most vulnerable in our society. Secondly, it will encourage greater mobility in the social sector and create better use of available stock. We have a situation in our social housing stock whereby families are overoccupying because stock is not available. If we can release some stock from underoccupation, that issue can, in some way, be addressed, which will benefit a number of people who are waiting on housing. Finally, the change can encourage work initiatives. A tenant can remain in an underoccupied

property if they can afford to pay the rent themselves or make up the shortfall. The main premise is clear: if the taxpayer is paying the rent, the property should meet the needs of those who reside there, without being too large for the number of people who live there.

Some people will be impacted by the change. The latest figures from the completed equality impact assessment suggest that 78% of properties are currently underoccupied, and the average housing benefit, as has been stated, will be reduced by £9.50 per week in 2013-14. While 96% of tenants who live in underoccupied properties will experience some reduction in housing benefit, they will be entitled to some level of support. No one can argue with the fact that people who receive social security benefits should receive assistance according to their needs. If a tenant wishes to reside in an underoccupied property, they are within their rights to do so, as long as they are willing to pay the difference between their need and their want.

I welcome the fact that some of the most vulnerable groups have already been protected in our society, and I also welcome the motion, which calls on the Minister to further outline other measures that he is planning on putting in place in order to reduce further any negative impact the change will have on the people of Northern Ireland.

Ms Brown: I, too, rise as a member of the Social Development Committee to speak on this motion. We are all aware of the reforms to welfare being led by the Tory-Lib Dem coalition Government in London. Although some of the reforms are questionable and concerns exist over the impact they will have on people, the issue over differences between those claiming housing benefit in the public and private rented sectors deserves attention, and, in the case of this motion, explanation.

In recent years, expenditure on housing benefit in Northern Ireland has increased significantly — from £312 million in 2003-04 to £397 million in 2008-09 and £455 million in 2009-2010. For 2010-11, the total cost of housing benefit was just short of £600 million. Therefore, it needs to be realised that the cost of housing benefit is on the rise and needs to be controlled, especially at a time when there is less money available and resources are stretched.

As has already been mentioned, there are two groups, in the housing sector: the social rented sector and the private rented sector. People who live in what is termed the social rented sector include those who live in Housing Executive properties or in houses provided by a housing association. Those who live in private accommodation will receive housing benefit in place of rent.

Currently, someone who is in receipt of housing benefit in the private rented sector is treated very differently from someone in the social rented sector. The person living in the private rented sector receives a set amount of housing benefit based on their needs and according to where they live, while the person living in the social rented sector receives the same amount in place of rent, regardless of their circumstances. Their circumstances will be taken into account on a point system when they seek a house in the social rented sector, but that is not subject to ongoing review. The outcome is that the person living in the private rented sector will have to pay more of the rent themselves for every bedroom they have in absence of someone living there.

It is, therefore, unfair to allow tenants in the social rented sector to enjoy more spacious accommodation than their needs justify or they could sustain if they were living in the private rented sector. That cannot be allowed to continue. Single occupants, for example, might be occupying a house that could home a family at a time when social housing stock is limited. However, I share the concerns that some have, especially in relation to vulnerable individuals, such as the victims of domestic violence, that the changes may impact on decisions that those people have to make about their living arrangements.

3.15 pm

The changes ensure equity between the two rented sectors. No one is being made homeless, as stated in the motion. Tenants in the social rented sector can choose, like their counterparts who live in the private rented sector, to pay more money themselves for the house they live in or to move somewhere more suitable to their needs. In doing so, those tenants could provide someone else with a home. The social rented sector accounts for about 90,000 people, and these changes will affect approximately 25,000 people of working age who will be faced with the choice either to stay and pay £11.50 a week on average or to move somewhere that better accommodates their needs.

Mr Hussey: I undertook a little bit of research to enable me to take part in today's debate. Unlike some of the complicated research that we heard about earlier, in my research, I looked up the definition of a home. My colleague Mr Copeland referred to that earlier. The dictionary's reference of it being "an environment where one's affections are centred" immediately caught my eye. You may wonder what underoccupancy has got to do with the definition of a home, but I believe that it is very relevant to today's discussions.

Someone who has lived in a house for 20 years or more with an elderly parent and who becomes the sole tenant will naturally have very strong bonds with the building that he or she regards as home. If that person is unfortunate enough to have to depend on benefits, they may have to decide either to use part of their benefit to pay the additional charge that will apply or to move out of the family home. Where do they go from there? The Housing Executive has a very limited number of one-bedroom flats. Therefore, a private tenant may have to leave their home and attempt to find a home in the private market. I am aware that there are absolutely no houses of multiple occupation registered with the Housing Executive in west Tyrone, and I am not aware of many houses of multiple occupation where the tenant can obtain a bedroom with the additional luxury of a shared kitchen or toilet facility via a private landlord.

Many have had to remain in the family home because they simply cannot afford to pay for a home of their own. Should someone find themselves in that position, they have to go through what has been described as one of the most stressful actions in human life, which is to move home. Home, they say, is where the heart is. Unfortunately, in the circumstances that I am describing, there is no heart, because rules are rules are rules.

The Housing Executive may be pleased to be able to rehouse family units into a three- or four-bedroom home, but it does not have the facility to rehouse people in good-

quality, single-person flats. Underoccupancy penalties will be imposed on tenants who have chosen to live in a two- or three-bedroom home. Perhaps a single man has a child who stays with him occasionally, and he is entitled, indeed expected, to have a separate room for that child to sleep in. However, the benefits system will only see him as an individual and may push for a single-occupancy home.

How will the Minister deal with the issue in hand? The motion asks the Minister what measure he intends to put in place to mitigate the impact of the provision of the underoccupation penalty? Clearly, a rural constituency such as West Tyrone is entirely different from a central city constituency in Belfast. However, someone who becomes unintentionally homeless because they cannot afford to pay the rent on their home becomes the responsibility of the Housing Executive. I know, and many Members of the House know, that there is no provision for that type of housing in the pipeline. This particular situation will lead to homelessness because, quite simply, there is no provision, or little provision, of the type of accommodation that the legislation seeks to impose on those on benefits who live on their own.

I contacted the Omagh office of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive yesterday to see how many single-occupancy flats it had available. It has four out on offer, and if all are accepted, it will have none to offer to new tenants. The bubble is about to burst with horrendous consequences for those affected by the legislation, and steps need to be taken to ensure that the appropriate accommodation is available throughout Northern Ireland. Ms Brown commented that no one is being made homeless, and, technically, no one is being made homeless. However, if you cannot afford to pay your rent, you will be made homeless. People who have to decide between paying rent and buying food or between paying rent and paying their electric bill will become homeless, destitute and very depressed, and they will become a major problem for the Northern Ireland health service.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hussey: No, thank you.

Therefore, I have concerns about that and about the fact that there are very few one-bedroom properties available, particularly in rural constituencies.

Mr A Maginness: I am very pleased to be able to participate in this debate. I was in Cambridge about a year ago, and when I was punting along the Cam, the guide with us pointed out a house dating from, I think, the 17th century that had all its windows blocked out and asked, "Do you know where the term 'daylight robbery' comes from?" It comes from the fact that the Government of the day imposed a tax on glazed windows. Therefore, what did people do? They blocked them up. Of course, that was not the intended consequence of the Government's introduction of the tax, but it became the consequence.

Of course, the consequences of the bedroom tax, which may or may not be daylight robbery in another sense, have yet to be determined. However, they could be devastating, which is a point that Members here today and in the House of Commons — if I am bold enough to refer to the House of Commons in this august Assembly — have referred to.

We have had comments from, for example, Mr Frank Field, the Member for Birkenhead, who is an expert in the whole

field of social welfare. He referred to the bedroom tax as a "nasty, mean little measure" within a package of welfare reforms that he, in part, supports. He said that the change that the Government are making was "shameful" and that the policy had been forced on the Department for Work and Pensions by the Treasury and would not work in any event. He also said that there were no houses for families to move into in order to resolve the underoccupation issue. Furthermore, he said that even if the measure were implemented, the Government would not raise the revenue that they wanted from it. Therefore, the provision falls down not just on the issue of revenue-raising, cuts or whatever the Government intend to do but on the fact that it will impose misery on many families in Britain and, should it be introduced here, Northern Ireland.

What my good friend Mr Durkan said today is very important. He said that what we want to see is flexibility in parity, which, I think, is the intent behind today's motion. From the contributions of Members on the DUP Benches, I detect their support for the provision — perhaps not full-blooded support, but support all the same — because they feel that they have to back the proposed legislation. That position is, in fact, ill-judged. I think that you can have flexibility even with the parity principle. Mr Durkan made that point strongly, and it is one that I also make.

Death, divorce and moving home are the three most traumatic events in any person's life. What will happen as a result of the measure is that there will be forced removal or dislocation —

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: Surely. You are spoiling my —

Mr Wells: You are getting an extra minute, Mr Maginness, so do not worry. You are assuming that, in every case, the changes will lead to the eviction of a tenant. Landlords are not stupid. They will watch developments very carefully, and rather than lose the tenants, on many occasions they will reduce their rents in order to retain the tenants under the new system. It will not be done in a vacuum. They will understand the situation and the market will react accordingly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr A Maginness: The Member is totally wrong, because we are talking about the social housing sector. I cannot see social housing landlords lowering their rents in order to accommodate tenants. The point I further make in relation to that is that the determination of over-occupation, or underoccupation, whatever way you want to put it, is surely something that cannot simply be measured in a uniform fashion. There are variables in any domestic situation. Indeed, as another Tory Member of Parliament said:

"people come and go and relationships are flexible."

It is an important point. He went on to say:

"I was concerned to hear the ideas about how people can find extra funding."

In other words —

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

Mr A Maginness: I will just finish now by saying that it applies to people of working age, but what defines working age? Working age is now rising from 65 to 66, and maybe to 67 —

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

Mr A Maginness: — and people will suffer. Elderly people or older people will suffer as a result of it.

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I have listened with interest to all Members who spoke in the debate. At times, it was quite an erudite debate, with all sorts of literary and other allusions. I thank all those who have spoken for their input.

I can certainly understand and appreciate the concerns that quite a number of Members — indeed, most Members — have expressed, and they are genuinely felt concerns. However, I will just add the caveat that we need to be careful in anticipating the outcomes of the proposed changes. For example, there is a reference to:

“the potential to make many people homeless”.

I ask Members to reflect on the concerns cited for previous housing benefit reforms, which, so far, have proved to be rather overstated.

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

As I said previously, I intend to introduce a welfare reform Bill for Northern Ireland in the Assembly in the very near future, which, in line with parity with Great Britain in social security matters, will include provision to restrict housing benefit expenditure in respect of working-age claimants who live in social rented sector accommodation that is too large for them. Generally, housing benefit claimants living in the social rented sector have no restrictions placed on the size of the accommodation that they occupy and the amount of housing benefit to which they are entitled.

When tenants are allocated accommodation in the social rented sector, the housing needs of the household are considered by the housing provider. However, although those needs may change over time, there is no systematic review of whether the accommodation remains appropriate. Under the reform implemented in Great Britain and under consideration here, housing benefit claimants living in accommodation that is considered to be too large will face a reduction in their housing benefit entitlement. Under the new proposals, any household deemed to be underoccupying their home by one bedroom stands to lose 14% of their housing benefit, and those underoccupying by two or more bedrooms will lose 25%.

Some customer representative groups have raised concerns that vulnerable customers may not be able to cope with the impacts of welfare reform. However, the coalition Government's view is that the housing benefit changes, which are preceding the introduction of universal credit, are essential to ensure that state help for housing costs is sustainable into the future.

Over the period from 2006-07 to 2010-11, the cost of housing benefit in Northern Ireland increased by almost 38%. That was over a period of just four years.

The coalition Government also consider that reform will assist efforts to better use limited social housing stock. Support will be required from landlords to assist those who wish to downsize in response to the reform.

3.30 pm

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has informed us that the most recently published house condition survey in 2009 indicated that around 27,400 housing benefit claimants would be affected by the introduction of underoccupancy rules. That number includes Housing Executive and housing association tenants and refers to the housing stock of 120,000 properties. Of those 27,400 people, around 23,000 underoccupy by one bedroom and would face a 14% cut, and 4,400 underoccupy by more than one bedroom and would, therefore, face a 25% cut. Although those figures come with heavy caveats, it is estimated that the average weekly loss for each claimant would be £9.50 for those underoccupying by one bedroom and £18 for those underoccupying by more than one bedroom. Preliminary steps are being taken to identify tenants in Housing Executive and housing association properties who will be affected by the change.

It is worth noting that, of the 120,000 social housing units available in Northern Ireland, we estimate the profile to be made up of a stock of 30,000 self-contained units provided by housing associations and a stock of 90,000 units provided by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Over 90,000 are two- and three-bedroom properties. Although we do not yet know the number of one-person households, it is highly likely that, for a large number of those affected by the proposals, no smaller accommodation may be available. The nature of our communities here is also a factor and may further limit people's ability to move.

In examining potential demand for future social housing, we see that the current waiting list is made up of 28,270 people of working age, 16,081 of whom are in housing stress. Taking that into account, we see that underoccupancy in the social housing sector is a significant issue. It is the tenants' housing benefit that will be cut, not necessarily the rent received by social landlords. However, on the basis of rough departmental estimates and assuming that nobody downsizes and all are unable to pay the shortfall, the potential worst-case scenario is an annual loss of over £15 million in Housing Executive and housing association rents, which could have a significant impact on capital and ongoing spend across social housing.

There is still much work to be done in bottoming out the exact impact of the change, particularly the response of tenants and landlords. We need to ensure that problems with housing benefit shortfalls do not result in increased repossessions or add to the number presenting as homeless. We cannot have a situation in which, for example, a social tenant presents as homeless as a result of underoccupancy. The challenge is to ensure that we do not add to the level of underoccupancy through new allocations and that we take whatever steps are necessary to assist those who currently underoccupy to maintain their tenancy until suitable accommodation might become available.

My Department has been considering what policy interventions and initiatives need to be developed and put in place in response to the changes in underoccupancy rules. A

working group with representatives from across the housing sector has been established to consider the matter, and considerable work has already been done with the Housing Executive and the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations as providers of social housing. A number of actions and initiatives are already under way.

I continue to have discussions with the Department for Work and Pensions and Lord Freud on what policy and administrative flexibilities might be available. Those discussions are focused on the direct payment of housing costs to landlords, which is seen as a way of ensuring that tenants and landlords can prioritise rent payments and providing confidence to landlords and their potential lenders about income streams. I have also made Lord Freud aware of the particular challenges that we face, such as the existing housing stock and the lack of opportunities for tenants to transfer or downsize, in addressing underoccupation.

Furthermore, my Department is funding research on the impacts of welfare reform, so that mitigation is targeted and evidence-based. Already, the discretionary housing payment budget has been expanded to provide transitional help for tenants in the private rental sector who have been affected. Discretionary housing payments are extra payments for tenants in the private and social rented sectors to help pay the difference between the rent charged by the landlord and the rent used by us to work out their entitlement to housing benefit. Those payments are not at present available to Housing Executive tenants. My Department will consider any legislative amendments to extend DHP availability to Housing Executive tenants affected by the welfare reform changes.

The discretionary housing budget has increased to £3.426 million in the current year, £6.944 million next year and £5.939 million in 2014-15 respectively. The budget for 2015-16 and 2016-17 will be £4.431 million. I have also asked the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to consider and advise me on what further housing services might be needed, particularly in the areas of guidance and advice.

The make-up of the social housing development programme will also be considered, particularly in the light of changing patterns of demand resulting from the application of size criteria. Pilot projects could also be taken forward to examine the allocation and management of smaller units. When the Housing Executive brought forward its social housing development plan towards the end of the last financial year — just a few weeks before the end of the year — I asked them to look at it again in the context of welfare reform. One of the things we asked the officials specifically at the meeting was “Was this done in the context of welfare reform?”. The answer at that point was that it had not really been, so that was something that they had to take back and look at because, moving forward, we have this reality which, whatever may be done in mitigation, is still a reality that we face and needs to be considered to make sure that we have a housing stock that is more suited to the particular needs of today.

Advising the tenants impacted on by the changes, as well as taking steps to identify claimants in the Housing Executive properties affected, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive continues to work with individual housing associations and the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations to provide a similar service for housing association tenants if required. Both the Housing Executive and the Federation

of Housing Associations are exploring the development of services and initiatives to facilitate transfers between tenants and are looking at pilot initiatives being tested in the United Kingdom. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive is reviewing allocations policy to ensure that underoccupation is not increased, for example, by allocating shared tenancies where appropriate, examining flexibilities within and adaptations of existing stock to meet potential occupancy demands, and developing subletting policies and strategies as well as the provision of financial management services and advice to tenants.

Later this year, the University of Glasgow and the Newhaven Research team will report on the impact of housing benefit reforms in the social sector. That report will illuminate the impact of applying the size criteria, the increase in non-dependent deductions and the overall cap of £500 per week on benefits. It will show who will be affected, by how much and the extent of underoccupation. It will equally look at those who will be unaffected. The wider impacts on housing markets and housing providers will be considered.

Finally, my Department is undertaking a fundamental review of the regulation and registration of houses in multiple occupation. It is anticipated that the review consultation will commence this month, and my Department's analysis should be finalised in the autumn. That will dovetail with emerging policy recommendations that will seek to mitigate some effects of housing benefit reform. I accept that this restriction will not be popular, and I recognise that some of those who spoke during the debate have very real concerns about how the measure will impact on some claimants. However, it was never the intention that housing benefit would guarantee that people on benefit should have unrestricted access to accommodation at any price.

I do not intend to pre-empt the Assembly's due legislative process by responding in detail to every point made by Members in the debate. As I have already said, I will shortly introduce the Welfare Reform Bill to the Assembly, and I consider that this proposal is best viewed in the context of all the proposals in the draft Bill and the wider reform agenda. However, I can perhaps alleviate some unnecessary worry by saying that there will be exemptions and general easements that will go some way to lessening the impact of the proposal. I can confirm that the shared accommodation rate will not be extended to those living in the social rented sector, and, at the other end of the age spectrum, the restriction will not apply to pension-age claimants.

Undoubtedly, concerns raised by Members today will form part of the overall discussion on housing benefit reforms, particularly during the progress of the Bill. I expect that the need for any additional mitigating actions will be taken forward then. Along with others, that is a matter that is very much for consideration by the Executive subcommittee on welfare reform. There have been some useful discussions. We had a visit from Lord Freud last week, which was very helpful, and there was good engagement with him. The members of the subcommittee were very active and forthright in expressing their views to him, and he was very good in responding. There has also been good engagement with the voluntary and community sector.

In considering the motion, Members should be mindful of the spiralling costs of housing benefit and the need to manage that and other social security benefit expenditure

effectively in times of austerity. I reiterate that, as with all the proposals in the Welfare Reform Bill, there will be a more appropriate juncture in due course to fully debate the proposal, as the Bill undergoes its legislative passage through the Assembly. I welcome the opportunity today to consider what is an important issue.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank all the Members who spoke in the debate this afternoon. As in yesterday's debate in the Assembly, very importantly, we have all-party support for the motion. I do not wish to pre-empt the vote, but all the Members who spoke expressed concerns similar to those expressed in the motion. I thank the Minister for his quite comprehensive response. He went some way to allaying some of the concerns that people have already expressed. Although I do not want to rehearse all the arguments that were presented to the House this afternoon, I think that it is important to remind ourselves of a number of them.

In the past year, this measure and others, such as shared accommodation, were discussed. A range of stakeholders, particularly people who are involved right across the housing sector, and the Department briefed the Committee for Social Development and lobbied elsewhere. I know that all Members have been lobbied with all that information. It is really around the concerns that people have identified about the real potential of the measure, which is due to come into practice in April 2013, to have a negative financial impact on a number of individuals, not least those who already live on subsistence levels of benefit or are low-paid workers. Mickey Brady and the Minister addressed that. The cost will be anywhere from £7 or £9 a week for some individuals right through to double that amount. Obviously, in these times, when people are already on what are described as subsistence levels of benefit, that will have a huge impact. It is bound to lead, by its very nature, to people having to move from their current home.

The essential element of our concern is that, given our housing stock here and even with the commitment to build a further 8,000 social and affordable homes during this mandate as part of the Programme for Government, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, for many of the people who will be affected by the provision to secure alternative accommodation in the public housing sector. Although we are still working with the Minister and the Department to develop an overarching housing strategy that will deal with issues around social housing, the housing association movement and the private rented sector, until we see that working out as an overarching strategy with the various protections built in, we will maintain the concerns that people may fall prey to people in the private rented sector. Although a lot of people in that sector are very professional and have the utmost integrity, some do not. I think that all parties have recognised that in the past. Until we have a fully regulated system in which we can have confidence, we will retain our concerns.

The other problem is that people may almost suffer a triangular whammy because, clearly, the provision will have a negative impact on some people. The shared accommodation measure has also been introduced, and there is the universal credit element of the new Welfare Reform Bill. So, a number of factors may well bear down on people who rely on social and public housing.

3.45 pm

We are very grateful that the Members who have spoken so far have expressed their own concerns and shared those that are inherent in the motion. Given the concerns, we have a responsibility, and we are not entirely sure of the outworking of the measures because it is difficult to quantify. Therefore, it is important to point out that we need to make a proper assessment and carry out the reviews, some of which the Minister has referred to, so that we can establish what the baseline will be here and how many people may be affected by the measures. It is important to do that work. It is incumbent on us to plan for the worst-case scenario and work to get the best. That is the approach that we need to take.

I am pleased that the Minister has made reference to mitigating measures that he, the Department and the Executive subcommittee are looking at. As I said, the purpose of all of this has to be to make sure that those who are most vulnerable and those who either opt for or rely on public housing are able to have security of tenure so that they, literally, have a roof over their head. All the key stakeholders, particularly those who are experts in the housing sector and have worked there for a very long time, have expressed serious concerns that the measure may well lead to significant numbers of people being forced into homelessness. Neither the Minister nor any other Member of the House will want that to happen, and I know that they will support measures that are necessary to make sure that we prevent that problem. The last thing we, as an Assembly, need is to preside over a situation where more people are homeless, given that it is our responsibility to get more people housed, with security of tenure in the time ahead.

On that note, I thank all the Members who contributed and expressed their support for the content and essence of the motion. I urge all Members to support it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the underoccupation penalty provision within proposed welfare reform legislation, which has the potential to make many people homeless; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to outline the measures that he intends to put in place to mitigate the impact of this provision.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Ballyhornan and Bishopscourt, County Down: Environmental Neglect

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

Mr Hazard: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Business Committee for scheduling this Adjournment debate, and I welcome the opportunity to highlight the environmental impact of the ongoing neglect of the Ballyhornan area and, indeed, the opportunity to illustrate some of the issues that continue to affect the health and well-being of some of my constituents.

At the turn of the 20th century, Ballyhornan was a quiet coastal community where approximately 30 families lived in small thatched cottages, each earning a living on the sea or off the land. In a self-contained community, village life centred around the general store, the post office and, of course, the local pub. Indeed, the renowned local writer John Bryce commented that people in Ballyhornan were so close that the death of someone was looked on as a national disaster.

Major change came to the quiet village, however, in the early 1940s as the British MoD requisitioned land and the adjacent Bishopscourt airfield was built. Ballyhornan became part of the British military camp on the east Down coastline. The base was divided into one main site that included the radar area, runways and main buildings and five smaller sites that housed mess blocks and minor buildings. Having been downgraded in the post-war years, the base was restored to full operational status in 1956 as Cold War tensions escalated. Undoubtedly, Bishopscourt's importance lay in its strategic position on Ireland's eastern seaboard, which made it the ideal location to guard against air attacks at the back door to Britain's main defences. Indeed, Killard Point near Ballyhornan was strategically selected as the site of the air defence radar unit, which, for the duration of the Cold War, searched the Atlantic skies for signs of Soviet intrusion.

Despite the widely held belief that Bishopscourt would continue to play a significant role in British air defence in the post-Cold War era, the base was closed abruptly and without warning at the end of 1990. In the words of a contemporary 'Down Recorder' editorial, the camp that was once a thriving mini-village has become a ghost town in the heart of County Down.

Having helped nurture a community around the military camp, the RAF had a sizeable impact on the local area, especially when it came to services and facilities. Many of the RAF amenities were available to the public and contributed to the well-being of the locals. As was to be expected, however, in the years following the military's departure from the area, the extent to which the Ballyhornan

community relied on the benefits that their lodgers conferred on them has become glaringly obvious.

There can be little doubt that the secretive and hasty departure of British military forces from Ballyhornan was a determining factor in the rapid decline of the village. In the light of the traditional heritage of the seaside community, the arrival of British military forces in the 1940s prevented expansion and development in areas in which Ardglass and Strangford made progress and unrealistically sustained a community when it should have been evolving with the conventional natural resources.

When the British military forces moved out, the local community was left in limbo, as the facilities and services once offered had suddenly disappeared. Ballyhornan then found itself in the undesirable situation of requiring 50 years of infrastructural development all at once. Most of the houses are former RAF barracks and homes that were simply sold off to a private individual at the time of the withdrawal. Disposal of the land by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) took place in 1991 in three lots. Lot one was the main airfield; lot two was the married quarters; and lot three was offices, stores and residential units. Lot one now houses Bishopscourt racetrack and a number of original military buildings that remain in a derelict state. Lot two, now known as The Fairways, comprises some reasonable-quality residential units along with some derelict premises. However, the general environment is somewhat unkempt, arising, it seems, partly from ambiguity over ownership of and responsibility for common areas. Lot three, now known as Killard Square and Killard Drive, was sold to a developer who subsequently sold the majority of the former barrack blocks with little or no adaption at very low cost.

Since the MoD withdrawal from the area, the former RAF accommodation has changed to varying degrees and standards into residential accommodation now supporting a population in the Bishopscourt and Ballyhornan area of approximately 1,000 people. That includes a mixture of permanent residents and holiday home owners, but the past few years have seen a trend towards permanent occupation. However, basic physical infrastructure in the area is wholly inadequate to support that population.

In much of the Ballyhornan area, housing units and the general environment are of extremely poor quality. In fact, it is difficult to overstate and describe adequately the extent of the problem. That is particularly the case on the former main airfield site and to an even greater extent in Killard Square and Killard Drive. Although exhibiting variation, residences in the latter area are, in the majority, former temporary structures and, in many cases, in very poor condition, particularly externally. Many were bought cheaply by people without means to bring them up to standard. Although some individuals have undertaken development and renovation over the years, that has often been done without the involvement of the planning and building control authorities.

Although there has been some private investment in homes in the Bishopscourt and Ballyhornan area, there has been little investment in basic infrastructure. The area lacks the basic infrastructure common to normally constructed residential settlements, and significant deficiencies are evident in roads, water and sewerage provision. Those problems are particularly acute in Killard Square and Killard

Drive, where the procedure for adopting services has not been followed through on, and they remain unadopted by the relevant authorities.

As well as contributing to the general impression of dilapidation and unkemptness of the environment, the situation has led to specific problems, including the regular overflowing of the sewerage system, resulting in raw sewage being deposited in homes and gardens. Incidences of a brown tinge and suspension in water supplies have also been reported. Roads are pitted with potholes and are inadequate for normal traffic. However, the roads, water and sewerage infrastructures are not of an adoptable standard, so the Department for Regional Development (DRD) cannot fund their upgrading within existing legislative and policy constraints.

The beauty and splendour of the Irish countryside is regularly cited as one of our major attractions, and most will agree that it should be a prime local heritage and economic asset. However, in places such as Ballyhornan, that valuable asset is being battered by various environmentally damaging practices. Despite the fact that Ballyhornan is situated in a designated area of outstanding natural beauty (AONB) and is set among spectacular coastal scenery with a wide variety of wildlife and vegetation and a rich environmental heritage, the local environment continues to come under severe threat. Indeed, I share the views of many when I say that it is imperative for the residents of the village and the wider Lecale and Down District Council areas that the environmental problems in Ballyhornan be speedily and effectively addressed. Urgent action should, in due course, help with the regeneration of the village by creating a safe and sustainable environment for residents and visitors.

The disposal of sewage in Ballyhornan has become the most pressing environmental issue in recent years, as the original system that was built to service the military camp can no longer function safely. Raw sewage from hundreds of homes is being pumped through a rusty, leaking pipe that leads directly into the sea in front of the village, where it washes back up to the sand on the main beach. Local residents and those who visit the beach have to pick their way through sanitary towels, used condoms, toothbrushes and other waste that is being washed up to the tideline on a daily basis.

Residents are increasingly angry about the ongoing situation. Indeed, they are fearful that the health and safety of their children is being put at risk through exposure to growing levels of unsatisfactory pollution. The sewage is a mixture of water, human waste, micro-organisms, toxic chemicals, heavy metals, excreted pharmaceuticals and, potentially, pathogens, such as cholera, typhoid and hepatitis B. It is widely recognised that inadequate or no waste water treatment has an exceptionally negative impact on aquatic life, human uses of water, fisheries and human health. With that in mind, it is short-sighted and totally unacceptable not to maintain and upgrade the infrastructure as soon as possible. Recently, the Minister for Regional Development, Mr Kennedy, announced that work on the much needed infrastructural improvement in Ballyhornan was not progressing as he had hoped and that the much awaited upgrade to Ardglass waste water treatment works will not be completed at any time in the near future. After the best part of 25 years spent waiting for the required sewerage upgrade, patience is wearing thin on the ground

and people are becoming increasingly irritated with the glacial pace of change.

The Ballyhornan area has suffered long enough, and it is time that the issues were addressed. Furthermore, the site of pollution is within an area of special scientific interest and a marine reserve. It is imperative that the practice of pollution be banned as soon as possible. It is vital that we stop pumping raw sewage into our waterways and seas. I call on the Minister of the Environment to enforce the solution to the problem if need be. We must take a stand against the ongoing destruction of our local environment.

There is also a persistent issue with the general decline and neglect of the beach at Ballyhornan. A number of years ago, a local newspaper reported that, according to a Beachwatch survey, Ballyhornan had the dirtiest beach in Ireland and Britain. The investigation, sponsored by the 'Reader's Digest', found 69 items of rubbish per metre in a 100-metre stretch of the beach, and an article commented:

"if we do not dispose of our rubbish more carefully we will be guilty of ruining our beaches for future generations and damaging our own tourist economy."

Subsequently, at an NIEA spring clean event, more than 130 large bin liners of rubbish were collected from Ballyhornan beach. I think that it is pertinent to note that, whilst the mission statement printed on volunteer T-shirts that day proclaimed "Don't throw waste in the sea", the irony was not lost on locals as they looked out on the raw sewage.

As far back as 1984, the 'Down Recorder' reported on the problem of erosion at Ballyhornan beach. That issue was never tackled to any responsible level, with the Department of the Environment (DOE) providing only a short-term solution by placing boulders along the base of the cliffs. The 'Down Democrat' covered the issue 15 years later in 1991, and 13 years on in 2012 I am reasonably informed that the erosion problems have never been suitably addressed. Therefore, 28 years after the erosion of the cliffs was first mentioned, it continues unabated.

What was once a picturesque village on the Lecale coast has become visually dilapidated as the result of decaying buildings, wire fences and other rotten reminders of the military's presence, such as unkempt grass verges and bricked-up windows in houses. Unco-ordinated and hasty development of residential buildings in the immediate aftermath of the military's departure has led to disjointed and disorderly-looking properties that will noticeably not stand the tribulations of the elements and time. Residents have cited bad planning as one of the major reasons for the environmental degeneration of the area.

Agreeable solutions to some of the issues would include the removal of unsightly remnants of the military fortifications, including high metal fences, concrete posts, barbed wire and various outbuildings; replacement or screening with hedge and tree planting and the provision of attractive open spaces; and the clean-up of illegal dumping. Addressing the major infrastructural and environmental issues that I have touched on would act as a stimulus to significant private investment in new and existing developments, including the Bishopscourt racetrack. In turn, the viability of Ballyhornan's future would be secured, leaving it able to attract and maintain basic services such as shops, healthcare and public transport, resulting in much improved

social conditions. Importantly, it would also facilitate the area to capitalise on its huge potential for tourism and would provide a boost to an industry that has previously thrived in the area but has suffered from the physical deterioration of the built environment and trends in the global tourism industry. The focus for coastal areas in Down is to provide a high-quality setting for day trips and short breaks, particularly for those who are interested in outdoor activities. Given its natural setting on the Lecale coast and its proximity to developing visitor areas such as Ardglass and Strangford, Ballyhornan has many of the attributes to re-emerge as a successful tourism destination.

The situation in Ballyhornan that I have detailed today is arguably unique. That uniqueness has its origins in military history and the rather unmanaged transition from that. As a result, the area does not conform to the various statutory norms relating to settlements and development, which makes the problems difficult for authorities and service providers to address.

4.00 pm

The multifaceted nature of the problems faced and the fragmentation of remits and responsibilities in the public sector mean that it is not in the gift of any one agency or community to address the situation that they have inherited. As a result, a significant barrier exists to community and statutory agencies — the need for co-ordinated action. In the absence of that, it is difficult for any agency to jump first in committing its time and resources. For instance, there would be little point in adopting a roads infrastructure and carrying out remedial works until water and sewerage infrastructure can also be addressed. In the absence of a central source of funds, agencies are in limbo while each waits for the other to make the first move. In turn, potential private investment is dependent on the infrastructural issues being addressed. In short, the present inability of agencies to address the infrastructural issues affecting Ballyhornan acts as a brake on further physical development and stunts economic growth.

Conversely, addressing, through creative public investment, the debilitating factors — the blight of poor-quality housing, dereliction and inadequate sewerage arrangements — on the outstanding environmental attributes of Ballyhornan will pump-prime further investment. It will also leverage private sector interest and achieve the outcomes discussed. That process has already begun through the collective action of a number of agencies and the community to develop coherent and co-ordinated integrated local development plans, and through the establishment of the Ballyhornan Task Force as a multi-agency structure to take forward these ideas.

In light of the issues that I have illustrated, I call on the Environment Minister to instigate a thorough environmental impact study into the Ballyhornan/Bishops court locality. I also press upon him the urgent need to enforce improvements to the area's sewerage system and to help end the shocking practice of pumping raw sewage into our waterways and sea. Finally, I ask the Minister to commit his Department to an extensive clean-up of the area and to help set in place best practice for future development.

Mr Wells: I have been in this Chamber for far too many years. The issue of Ballyhornan and Bishops court has come up time after time. A flotilla of Ministers — DRD, DOE,

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), you name it — has been down there to look at the situation. Council set up a task force, of which I was a member, and many hours were spent trying to unravel the problem of Ballyhornan. Really, if truth be known, very little progress has been made.

It is regrettable that the Member took the opportunity of raising the legitimate concerns of the community in Ballyhornan and Bishops court to have several digs at what he calls the British military establishment, which we call, of course, our defence forces. If he talks to some of the locals down there, the reality is that they welcomed the presence of the RAF because it provided employment for an awful lot of people in a deprived rural area. Many of those who have lobbied him and other MLAs were the very people who got their first job through what he called the British military establishment, which provided them with income and employment. Therefore, it was not a question of the vesting of land, the driving out of local farmers and the ruination of the economy; in fact, it brought an awful lot of money into the Bishops court/Ballyhornan community.

The ending of the RAF presence was quite sudden and unannounced, but his party is also demanding the removal of the British presence from Ballykinler — the third largest employer in Down district. If he had his way, the army would be out in the morning. What would that do for the economy of that area? Very similar situations would arise.

The Department and the Executive face the problem that is an absolutely fundamental and immutable fact of life: if you own private property, it is your responsibility to look after its roads and sewerage infrastructure. The difficulty is that if you break that rule at Ballyhornan/Bishops court, you are faced with the problem that there are hundreds of similar developments throughout Northern Ireland.

If you accept that Ballyhornan is a special case — and I accept that it is very unusual — and you break that fundamental rule, you will have hundreds of other small communities demanding exactly the same treatment. Therefore, I understand the reluctance of the Minister for Regional Development or the Environment Minister to intervene and use public money in this situation, because the principle in question also applies to private developments throughout the country, where developers have gone bust or gone into liquidation and have walked away, leaving housing estates without proper road and sewerage infrastructure.

If the Government were to move in and use taxpayers' money to fix those situations, the dyke would burst and people would be walking away from developments all over the country. That is not to belittle the concern that we all have for the community in Ballyhornan but to somehow paint the picture of the difficulty that the various Departments have.

I am also slightly disappointed that he failed to mention that, where possible, action has been taken. The one thing that he forgot to give proper recognition to is the local strategic partnership, which I served on for many years. When money was available, it provided a new community centre in that area, which is used for playgroups and all sorts of activities that bring considerable benefit to that community. We worked closely with the local community to deliver that service.

That was a situation where it was legal to use European money through the local strategic partnership to deliver a service. The problem is that, at the moment, the law does not allow state money to be used to move in and repair the clear and obvious deficiencies in infrastructure in Ballyhornan. That is the problem that we are facing. Once the sewage leaves Ballyhornan and is then pumped into the Irish Sea, there is a statutory responsibility upon the Department to provide proper treatment facilities and to stop the outfall. I accept that, but within the confines of that large former RAF base, it legally cannot be done. If we are to solve the problem of Ballyhornan in the long term, we will have to change the fundamental legislation that governs the provision of roads, footpaths, street lighting, drainage and sewerage in Northern Ireland. Do that at your peril, because I can see that stirring up a hornet's nest over how we deal with private developers.

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

Mr Wells: There are many similar cases in my constituency.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the Adjournment debate, and I congratulate Mr Hazzard on securing it. I also pay tribute to the Member of Parliament for South Down, Margaret Ritchie, who has highlighted the issue and encouraged me and colleagues, including Jim Nicholson MEP and the Minister for Regional Development, Danny Kennedy MLA, to visit.

I agree with many of the comments that Mr Wells made. When looking at and visiting the site at Ballyhornan, one can be shocked at the quality of the housing that we are asking people to live in. The road and sewerage infrastructure there is appalling. That might be a legacy issue, but the problems certainly did not seem to be there when the RAF was there. They emerged after the RAF left, and there may be a lesson to be learned about how you handle something like this when returning it to private ownership. Indeed, there may be a lesson about how the selling off of the houses was dealt with. The houses may have been a bargain at the time, but many of them are now not fit for human habitation. It is appalling that, in this day and age, people are living in such housing.

Mr Hazzard and Mr Wells both mentioned that there are environmental issues there. There is illegal dumping, and there are the waste issues, which Mr Wells mentioned, about sewage going into the Irish Sea. That is a major problem, and it is such a shame, because it is in a beautiful and picturesque part of our constituency. There is a collective will to do something, but the difficulty is that deciding what that something will be is proving very elusive, considering that almost every Minister has been down to visit and look.

Almost every Minister is equally appalled at the state of the housing, the roads and the general infrastructure. How do we move that situation forward and tap into and attract private sector investment, rejuvenate the infrastructure and use facilities that can attract thousands of people, such as Bishops court race circuit? How do we attract people to stay in the area and spend some of their hard-earned money? How do we rejuvenate it and build up the tourist potential of what is a very beautiful part of the County Down coast? It is in an area of outstanding natural beauty, but, looking at the state of Ballyhornan, one would not think it.

There are huge problems, including the quality of the housing. However, as Mr Wells said, the hardest nut to crack

is the fact that the housing is all in private ownership. How does the state, through its various agencies, intervene in that? How does it actually improve the outcomes for the people who are almost trapped in low-quality housing with poor infrastructure around them? It is all privately owned. How do you tackle that without, to use Mr Wells's phrase, bursting the dyke and replicating this situation throughout Northern Ireland?

I genuinely believe that there is a political will to do something. I am sure that the Minister will have some information for us, but I imagine that he will probably not be able to solve all the issues that confront him, apart perhaps from how we address the issue of pollution going into the Irish Sea, which is obviously a very strong focus of his Department. However, it would be great if we could find some way —

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

Mr McCallister: — to deal with these issues to improve the area dramatically, particularly for those who live there.

Mr Rogers: I thank Mr Hazzard for securing the debate. A multidisciplinary and multi-departmental approach is required for a programme of regeneration for the local environment that makes up and surrounds Ballyhornan and Bishops court. Away back in 1990, the Ministry of Defence in London announced that it would be rationalising its bases, and shortly after that, RAF Bishops court, near Ballyhornan, closed. An area of wasteland was immediately visited upon the local population. A significant tract of housing with airfields, which had once been used to accommodate members of the RAF, was sold off to private entrepreneurs. The bottom line is that the Ministry of Defence left no structure in place for regeneration. The roads, water and sewerage systems were not considered to be of an adequate standard, and Roads Service, along with the water service, have refused to adopt a substantial infrastructure. They resort to their ancient position, which is that the frontagers must bring up the infrastructure to their standards before they will adopt and maintain them. Many of the frontagers and local residents are in receipt of low incomes and cannot afford to undertake the infrastructural works.

Since 1991, we have tried to achieve a multidisciplinary approach, but Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water (NIW) refuse to play ball. Ballyhornan and District Community Association, with the direct representation and support of the then MP, Mr Eddie McGrady, was successful in obtaining funding for a family centre, which was opened in 2008-09. A very active community association has been able to secure the support of Down District Council for the provision of a 3G pitch.

Support was secured for the engagement of various consultants over the years to work towards bringing forward a regeneration programme. They all identified the problem as the need for the upgrade and adoption of the local infrastructure, but Roads Service and the water service refused to bite. Eventually, Down District Council established a multi-agency group in June last year, comprising political representatives, representatives from DARD, Roads Service, Northern Ireland Water, the council, etc, to ascertain the possibilities for an upgrade. Consultants have been appointed, are involved in assessing the situation and are due to bring forward a programme shortly. It is important

that connections are put in place that link Ballyhornan with Bishops court and Ringawaddy, but the roads, water and sewerage infrastructure needs to be upgraded to an acceptable standard. It is also important that the statutory authorities agree to maintain that infrastructure. Furthermore, it is an area of outstanding natural beauty and needs to be marketed and promoted as an area of tourism and visitation by the council, the Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland. Activities such as motor racing take place on the track, but the local economy does not gain from such events as the vendors generally come from outside.

4.15 pm

Some social housing has been approved for the site. The current MP, Margaret Ritchie, has led delegations from the council and the local community association to the First Minister and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. She also brought the Minister of the Environment and the Minister for Regional Development to the area to examine the requirements and the level of dereliction and asked them to explore the potential for rejuvenation.

Out of the consultant's report must emerge a multi-agency approach to regeneration and priorities for action to which all Government Departments and agencies must sign up. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) must spearhead that regeneration initiative with DARD and the Department for Social Development (DSD). The rural areas at risk programme currently being thought about in DARD must signpost Ballyhornan and Bishops court as such areas and dedicate resources and staff to work with the community to bring forward economic and environmental regeneration as well as opportunities for job creation. This place must no longer be abandoned.

The consultant's report should be ready within a few weeks, after which intergovernmental action is required. A demilitarised site must be used for positive environmental, economic and job-creation opportunities for the local community that resides in the Bishops court/Ballyhornan area along the east Down coast.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht seo agus gabhaim buíochas le Chris Hazzard. I welcome the debate and thank Chris Hazzard for securing it.

Chris has given us a very thorough history of the area, and I do not propose to repeat that. What I will say is — and I do not know why anybody in this House would express surprise at it — that the British military and the British Ministry of Defence disposed of the site in a very irresponsible way. They did so without any regard for local people or their duties to them. That does not surprise me: I have seen it in every continent in the world where the British had their troops.

It was sad to hear my colleague Jim Wells, who claims to be interested in the environment, justifying what the British military did. I was very disappointed to hear that. It is also a bit disingenuous for Mr Wells to try to say that developers and the British Ministry of Defence somehow have the same responsibilities and are guided by the same laws.

The British Government failed in their duty to local people and did not dispose of the site in the way that they should have. Our position is that they should not have been there in the first place. We should not have had militarised sites.

The least they could have done was to move out and, when they moved out, to leave the site as they found it — a beautiful part of Ireland on the beautiful County Down coast — so that it was safe for people living near it.

Sinn Féin wants to see the demilitarisation of every site in the North of Ireland. I do not know why Mr Wells finds it surprising that we also want to see the demilitarisation of Ballykinler, as many local people do. I understand that there are jobs there, but I have been to Bishops court, I have been to Ballyhornan and I have been to Ballykinler, and people do not want militarised areas. Those days are gone, hopefully for ever.

I strongly believe that a joined-up approach is needed among Departments, with the Department of the Environment playing a key role. I note what Mr Rogers said, but he hardly mentioned the Department of the Environment, the Minister for which comes from his party.

So, I am making a plea to the Minister of the Environment. I am asking that his Department gives a commitment to a common vision and understanding on the value of rural areas that are vital to social cohesion in south Down. I am asking that he deals with the asbestos. We heard about the sewerage and I will not repeat that, but it has to be dealt with. We cannot have raw sewage going into open sea.

The lack of infrastructure and the substandard roads highlight the extent of the problem, which is made worse by the fact that many of the houses are built out of hazardous materials such as asbestos, a throwback to the days when the villages were home to the British forces. We all know the dangers of asbestos, and, day to day, families are forced to live with that in Ballyhornan and Bishops court. I am calling on the Minister to examine how we deal with that and, once and for all, to commit to dealing with the problem. Asbestos is a silent killer, and the eradication of that dangerous substance must be a priority for the Assembly.

I am also calling on the Minister of the Environment to commit to an independent assessment of what hazardous materials have been used in the construction of buildings and what materials have been left dumped in both villages. I am asking him to give a commitment that his Department will remove those materials, such as asbestos, and replace them with safe building materials.

We are in a new era and time, and I had hoped that we had moved forward and were not justifying bad action by the Ministry of Defence. It created this problem and it failed to deal with this problem, as did successive direct rule Governments.

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank Chris Hazzard for securing this Adjournment debate, and I am pleased to have an opportunity to contribute to it. As Members outlined, the Ballyhornan/Bishops court area is a small coastal settlement that is deprived and vastly underdeveloped, with serious infrastructure problems in relation to roads and sewers, and with a substandard water supply.

The regeneration and development of Ballyhornan/Bishops court is an important issue to my party. My colleague Margaret Ritchie, MP for South Down, and SDLP councillor Dermot Curran have worked on the ground with residents from the area over a long period. My colleague Alex Attwood, Minister of the Environment, visited the area, and our MP has in recent months made representations to

the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, urging that Ballyhornan be considered for the rural areas at risk scheme. Although that scheme is only at the consideration stage, I join my colleague in expressing to the Minister the need for it to be implemented, and request that Ballyhornan be considered as a pilot area.

There are serious environmental and health concerns regarding that location in relation to housing. Many of the houses are of poor quality. Of those that have been developed and renovated, as Mr Hazzard outlined, most were done without the involvement of the authorities, such as building control. As Ms Ruane highlighted, asbestos roofing exists in a number of former barracks blocks, which poses a potential health risk.

The most pressing environmental issue is the sewerage system, with reports of regular overflows of the system into homes and gardens. There are also many issues in relation to the breakdown of water supplies, asbestos and poor road conditions. I will not go through other stuff that other Members highlighted; I will just finish here.

The residents from the Ballyhornan/Bishopscourt area have a commendable self-help attitude. They have taken the lead in helping their area, but in order to make the necessary improvements, they require support from Ministries such as DOE, DRD and DARD, along with strong backing from the Executive. I hope that as a result of this debate, the Ballyhornan and Bishopscourt area will become a priority.

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker, for being some seconds late for the commencement of the debate. I welcome the debate, and I welcome Mr Hazzard to the House. I reassure the House and Members that I will forward a copy of the Hansard report to all Ministers who have competence and authority when it comes to dealing with all the issues around Ballyhornan because if we are going to deal with Ballyhornan, we have to deal with all the issues around Ballyhornan. That is the standard against which any Minister and Department should judge themselves.

There was a strange moment in this debate when Mr Rogers was criticised for not mentioning DOE. He was followed by a Member who in her contribution did not mention OFMDFM, which technically has responsibility for military sites, or DARD, which has responsibility for the overall site because it is a rural settlement that falls, for development purposes, to DARD not DSD. If we are going to deal with this issue, let us deal with all the issues. Let us not be partial. Let us not be selective. Let us not pick our target in the way that some people have chosen to in this debate. That will not be the standard that I will deploy when it comes to this issue. I will raise these matters with DARD, because many of them fall to DARD. I will raise these matters with OFMDFM, because some of these matters fall to OFMDFM. And so on and so forth with DRD. Those environmental issues that fall to my Department, I will deal with in my Department. I will not adopt the standards of others, which are, in my view, partial and selective.

Mr Hazzard said that Departments were not jumping first. That is not the case. Let me explain why. When it comes to DOE's responsibility in respect of the site, DOE has adopted a development plan for Ards and Down that specifically deals with the small settlement that is Ballyhornan and

how expansion might be appropriate. In addition, DOE has identified two industrial policy areas to grow local employment given the decline of the fishing industry. More than that, DOE has granted planning permission. In order to see the proper development of the area, determining weight was given to economic benefit. That is why a community centre has been approved. That is why retail units have been approved. That is why a petrol station and shop has been approved. That is why 12 units of social housing have been approved.

When it comes to enforcement, my Department is dealing with the issue of drift racing on the site. The Department is interrogating in a very serious way a proposal to extend motorcar racing on the site beyond the permitted development rights limit of 14. And so on and so forth. So, when it comes to the claim that nobody has jumped first, I argue that DOE has clearly jumped. It and other Departments may not have jumped high enough, but, clearly, Departments have jumped.

Beyond that, on a broader narrative, look at what DOE has done in convening four beach summits. Why did we convene four beach summits? To bring into the life of the Department external advice about how to deal with water and sewerage and beach issues that affect all beach areas in the North of Ireland. What is the consequence of that? Tidy NI and the Marine Conservation Society have escalated their efforts to encourage people to clean up beaches, a point made by Mr Hazzard. Even today, in the 'Belfast Telegraph', there is a campaign to clean up our beaches. I will certainly encourage Tidy NI and the Marine Conservation Society to take forward what Mr Hazzard asked in his concluding remarks, namely to clean up the area. I will ask them to do more, and I will interrogate what more DOE can do.

The treatment of raw sewage is a crucial issue. Under European directive, my agency, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, has determined that the appropriate treatment for Ballyhornan is a long sea outfall and fine screening. The problem is that DRD and NIW have not dealt with the issue of fine screening to deal with the sewerage issue. As a consequence —

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will let you in, Mr Wells.

As a consequence, warning letters were issued in 2009, 2010 and 2011 to compel NIW to deal with the fine screening issue. It has not done so. In my view, it should have done so. In my view, further enforcement should have been taken against it. That is why, as of some recent weeks, a water order enforcement notice is going to be served on NIW, to ensure that the requirements of the agency in respect of sewage treatment in that area are complied with by 2013. However, that is not good enough in my view. That should have been done before now. However, at least it is getting done now. NIW will be advised that, by March 2013, it will have to have complied with the requirements established four or five years earlier to have not only a long sea outfall for sewerage, but fine screening to mitigate the risk. I will give way to Mr Wells now.

4.30 pm

Mr Wells: That is very welcome, Minister. However, having listened to the Minister, and with all respect to him as

Minister of the Environment, I have to ask why he was nominated to respond to the debate when the vast majority of the issues affecting the people of Ballyhornan, such as unadopted streets, footpaths, roads and the sewerage infrastructure, lie with DRD. That Department has the key role. Frankly, if there was something that allowed DRD to move in and fix all those issues, 90% of the problems would be solved.

Mr Attwood: The clue is probably in the subject of the debate, which is trying to address the environmental impact. I may concur with the Member that, if I am sitting here, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development should be standing there; the Minister for Regional Development should be there; and somebody from OFMDFM should be over there, so that we could all deal with the totality of the site's issues. However, I do not mind coming here to account for what DOE is doing in that neighbourhood, in the way that I outlined, and what it has failed to do in enforcing the waste water treatment directive.

Ms Ruane: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will.

Ms Ruane: I draw the Minister's attention to the fact that someone has to take leadership. When I was Minister of Education, I took the lectern and took responsibility for the Lisanelly site. I fought for money for it. Obviously, different organisations and Ministers also had responsibilities, but I showed leadership. I accept that there needs to be a joined-up approach, but I call on this Minister to do the same.

Mr Attwood: Can you point out to me where, in my Department, I have failed to show leadership on this matter? There is now an area plan and approved planning applications. I am about to, essentially, serve enforcement proceedings upon NIW, and so on, never mind the fact that my Department is putting more money into South Down by way of the Mound of Down and the Saint Patrick's heritage project, for example, and trying to more fully profile the quality, scale and wonder of our natural heritage, a point that your colleague raised in respect of economic development. So will you point out where —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask all Members to address their remarks through the Chair.

Mr Attwood: Given that narrative — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Attwood: Given that narrative, will you point out to me where it is that you claim that I am not showing leadership? I would argue quite the contrary. The fact that I am prepared to come to argue this case on the Floor; the fact that DOE has had a good narrative; the fact that I acknowledge that more should be done; and the fact that I think that government, across government, should be doing more shows active leadership. Any suggestion to the contrary is, I think, contradictory. I will give way to you.

Ms Ruane: I asked you specifically for two things that could be done. Maybe I will repeat them. I asked for an independent assessment of the hazardous materials used in the construction of buildings and dumped in both villages, and to commit your Department to removing hazardous materials, such as asbestos, and replacing them with safe

materials. My colleague Chris Hazzard, who secured the debate, asked you to deal with sewerage.

Mr Attwood: Let me point out that I dealt with the sewerage, and I dealt with the clean-up of the area. If there is an issue across the Department's range of environmental responsibilities, I bear down on the Department to assess the risk and enforce where necessary. Of course, I will look at the matters that you raised about the dumping of asbestos and other items in the area. A Member who raises with me an environmental risk in a certain neighbourhood will see that I am not a Minister who will neglect that information. I will take that information forward, I will interrogate it, and I will make assessments. If the responsibility falls to my Department, to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) or to some other Department, I will try to ensure that the appropriate Department lives up to that responsibility.

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

Mr Attwood: Don't you suggest, on the basis of this debate, that DOE is failing in its responsibilities, lock, stock and barrel, across the needs in Ballyhornan. Do not suggest, as seems to be implicit in your comments, that, somehow, previous leadership in the constituency of South Down failed the people of Ballyhornan. Clearly, it has not.

Adjourned at 4.34 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 28 May 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Extension of Sitting

Mr Speaker: I wish to advise the House that I have been given notice by members of the Business Committee of a motion to extend today's sitting beyond 7.00 pm. Under Standing Order 10(3A) the Question on the motion will be put without debate.

Mr Dickson: I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 28 May 2012 be extended to no later than 7.30 pm.

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Special European Union Programmes

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): You would think that, on a day like this, we could move proceedings outside, like I used to do in school on a nice day. We could sit out and enjoy the sun, as well as doing the business.

The North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) met in special European Union (EU) programmes sectoral format in Armagh on 4 May 2012. Council last met in Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) sectoral format in November 2011. I represented the Northern Ireland Executive, accompanied by junior Minister Martina Anderson. The Government of the Republic of Ireland were represented by Brendan Howlin TD, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, who chaired the meeting.

The meeting began with a presentation from the rural enabler programme, a £2.7 million initiative aimed at the Rural Community Network and funded under the Peace III programme. The programme aims to build positive relationships between all communities in rural areas of Northern Ireland and in the border counties of the Republic. The presentation was a welcome opportunity for the Council to learn directly of the benefits of EU Peace funding and its delivery. I commend the project leaders for their achievements to date and for the very interesting and engaging presentation they gave to the Council.

Mr Pat Colgan, the chief executive of the Special EU Programmes Body, updated the Council on progress since the November 2011 meeting. The Council noted and welcomed the ongoing work being undertaken to close the Peace II and INTERREG IIIa programmes. It is anticipated that the closure process for the two programmes will be complete before the end of the year.

The Council also noted SEUPB's progress in implementing the current Peace III programme. As at the end of March 2012, Peace III had approved 158 projects worth £284 million; that is, 98% of the available budget. To date, the programme has spent £108 million, and that exceeds its EU spending target for 2011. It will need to spend £11 million in 2012 in order to achieve this year's EU target, and SEUPB is confident that that can be achieved.

With regard to the INTERREG IVa cross-border co-operation programme, the Council noted that, at the end of March 2012, 71 projects worth £170 million had been approved.

As a result, just over three quarters of the programme's budget has been allocated to projects. The programme has to date spent £60 million, enough to pass the EU spending target for 2011. However, it will need to spend £32 million in 2012 if it is to meet this year's target. Again, SEUPB is confident that that can be achieved.

The Council had been previously advised by SEUPB that INTERREG faced a potential risk in achieving one or more future EU spending targets, possibly in 2013 or 2014. The risk was due primarily to the fact that the programme budget was not yet fully allocated to projects. SEUPB advised that, if the programme budget was not fully allocated to appropriate projects by the start of 2013, EU spending targets could be missed, either in 2013 or 2014 or in both. When a programme misses its EU spending target, any shortfall between the actual and the target expenditure is deducted from the programme budget. SEUPB had advised the Council that up to £35 million might be at risk on account of missed spending targets, if the risk were not addressed.

I am pleased to report that, since then, there have been some positive and welcome developments with the INTERREG programme. In January this year, the SEUPB held a call for projects. That attracted 91 applications, seeking nearly £190 million, which is around five times the remaining INTERREG budget. The top-scoring applications have been shortlisted and are currently being assessed in detail. SEUPB aims to have all the top-scoring projects fully assessed and the funding issued by the end of the year. There are also a number of applications from previous calls that are still under assessment. Again, SEUPB aims to have those assessed in full before the end of the year. If all the assessments are completed on schedule and the funding allocated, the programme should be back on track. It will have allocated its full budget, and any potential risk will have been greatly reduced. My officials are, therefore, working closely with SEUPB to ensure that that end-of-year target can be achieved.

The Council was also updated on the progress that has been made by the five local authority-based groups under the INTERREG IVa programme. The groups now have 34 projects approved, worth £37 million. In addition, they have a further £25 million worth of projects under assessment, including the North West Regional Science Park. On the basis of projects approved and projects under assessment, it appears likely that they will secure at least £55 million. That is their notional share of the programme funding. It is good to see that the programme's local dimension has made a strong showing, because there were concerns that that would not happen. The INTERREG programme was developed to have both a regional and a local focus, and it is vital that there are good local projects to balance the more regionally focused initiatives that have been funded.

With regard to future funding, the Council noted that we are still at an early stage in the process. The EU budget will not be agreed until the end of this year or perhaps early 2013. Until that happens, there will be no decision on how much individual member states and regions will receive. However, the Council was satisfied that there is likely to be a further INTERREG cross-border programme, and the prospects for a fourth round of Peace funding remain good. In view of that, the Council noted that, in line with its statutory responsibilities, the SEUPB will shortly initiate

work on the development of future Peace IV and INTERREG V programmes.

The Council noted that the work will be consultative and evidence based. It will take account of the performance of previous programmes and will be led by a steering group, chaired by the SEUPB. The group will be made up of programme stakeholders from across the eligible regions. The Council noted the key priorities for the SEUPB, as set out in its business plan and budget, and noted that the SEUPB's annual report and accounts had been prepared in draft for certification.

Finally, the Council noted the November 2011 plenary meeting's recommendation concerning the establishment of a board for the SEUPB. The Council agreed that the cost of a board would be difficult to justify. Given the existence of the current EU programme monitoring arrangements, a board would, effectively, deal with only the SEUPB's administrative budget, which is just 3% of the total SEUPB budget. However, it was agreed that the two sponsor Departments would examine the governance arrangements that are in place for the SEUPB and report back to the Council at the next meeting in sectoral format, which is scheduled for October 2012. The decision will be referred for endorsement to the next NSMC plenary meeting, which will be held in June 2012.

Assembly Business

Extension of Sitting

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Chair of the Finance Committee, Conor Murphy, I will take you back to the business motion and get the agreement of the House, because that must be done by cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 28 May 2012 be extended to no later than 7.30 pm.

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Special European Union Programmes

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire fosta. I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the more positive indication that was given on INTERREG spend. I know that he shares the concerns of many representatives in the House about the level of spend and some of the issues with getting INTERREG money spent.

It has been suggested to the Finance Committee that implementing more simplified decision-making arrangements for the next INTERREG programme that are similar to those in the other European jurisdictions could avoid the bottleneck and delays that have occurred in the current programme. What is the Minister's view on that? How confident is he that all the necessary arrangements will be completed on time to ensure that the existing programme gets back on track and avoids any budget deductions?

Mr Wilson: I thank the Chairperson for the question. He is quite right: we cannot continue with the current assessment method for programmes. I would like to think that the changes will occur not for the next set of programmes, but that we will actually see material changes. In fact, we have to see material changes in the assessment method. I cannot understand why programmes and projects can be assessed and letters of offer can be out within 26 to 28 weeks in other jurisdictions, while assessment takes 56 to 58 weeks in our system.

To meet the targets for the current programme, the SEUPB has said that it will cut that assessment down to 40 weeks for the current applications that have gone in through INTERREG. That has been done in a number of ways. First, there has been an early assessment of projects, so we are now down to a shortlist of 13. Secondly, a more detailed economic assessment will then be carried out. At the same time, there should also be work with Departments and a parallel arrangement to ensure that there is input from economists in the accountable Departments. Since, at the end of the day, the accountable Departments carry the can on this, there must be input from them. Can we marry some of the views in there, so that we get questions at an earlier stage? If it can be done in other jurisdictions for the same kind of programmes, there is no reason why it cannot be done with SEUPB. The other thing is that, perhaps in the longer run, we will need to go back and look at devolving this down again to local partnerships rather than it being centralised to SEUPB level. I hope that that will come through in the consultation when we look at further programmes.

12.15 pm

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his statement. Unlike other Members, I am somewhat apprehensive about the way in which SEUPB delivers some of the funding. I am pleased to see, between INTERREG IVa and the cross-border project, that there are a number of applications, amounting to £190 million. What measures are being taken to ensure that that funding is dispensed on an equality basis? I ask because we understand that certain Members make a big issue about

that. I want to be sure that the community that I represent gets a fair crack of the whip. I do not believe that —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member —

Mr Girvan: That is the question.

Mr Wilson: First of all, programme money is not allocated on a community basis. The individual projects that come forward are assessed on the basis of how they meet the objectives of the particular themes and programmes. I am pleased to say that there appears to be a wider range of projects coming in. There is a very strong one for the north-west science park, which I know that you will be interested in, Mr Speaker, and which should benefit the whole community. Certainly, if it has the same impact that the science park in Belfast is having, it will be valuable to the north-west. In my area, I am pleased that one tourist project, the Gobbins path, has already received money, and the refurbishment of Magheramorne quarry, which is not too far away, will have massive tourist potential in east Antrim. It really is up to areas and people in those areas, whether that is local authorities or businesses, to bring forward quality projects so that they can be assessed.

Mr Cree: Like other Members, I have a concern about the operation of SEUPB. We were told by SEUPB some time ago that it was having difficulty meeting targets. Suddenly, it takes the step, which is to my mind a normal governance issue, of issuing a new call, and it has now got a lot more. I notice that the Minister put a note of caution in his statement:

“If all of the assessments are completed on schedule and the funding allocated”.

Is he happy that that will actually happen, or is it going to be another tactic of SEUPB — stop, go, stop, go, panic, save it, panic, save it?

Mr Wilson: First of all, I do not think that I have ever been anything other than honest with the House about the difficulties that SEUPB has experienced and will always experience. I have made it clear that I will not defend the indefensible. Where I believe that there is something to be highlighted, I will highlight it so that Members have full transparency. Even if that leads to uneasy questions for me, I am quite happy about that.

All I can say is that, first of all, there was a call for projects, and that call has brought in some very good projects. Indeed, the worrying thing is that, had some of those projects been submitted at an earlier stage, they would probably have got through the scoring process because they are very good projects. It is not that we are simply throwing money out and saying, “It does not matter what the project looks like, let us just get the money spent”. The 13 that are shortlisted are all good, high-quality projects. I mentioned the Magheramorne quarry regeneration project in my area and the north-west science park, both of which are good economic drivers and will be important.

In all the discussions with SEUPB, we have looked at what was wrong in the past, why it was taking so long and what we can do to advance the assessment. I have been given an assurance by SEUPB, as has the Minister in the Republic, that these will be assessed within the 40-week period. Consultation groups have already been set up to assess the

projects, and they are starting their work now. I think that there should be a report from the consultants by September, and then allocations can be made. Letters of offer must go out by the end of this year; I put that on the record in the House so that Members can make their own judgement. If that leads to questions coming back at the end of this year, I am quite happy for that to happen. Of course, it is then up to the groups to spend the money; that is the next stage. Sometimes, that is slow, with spending starting around 18 months after letters of offer have been issued. So, again, that is the next big challenge: to make sure that the money is spent once it has been allocated.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his statement. What progress has been made on recouping moneys from groups that were found to be in breach of the terms of their letter of offer?

Mr Wilson: First, there is a requirement that, where moneys have been allocated and the terms of letters of offer have not been met, the money should be recouped. A number of things have to be taken into consideration, the first of which is the circumstances that led to the breach of the letter of offer. In some cases where genuine mistakes have been made and the fault does not lie totally with the group concerned, the funding body has to accept some culpability. Secondly, there has to be a proper investigation. Given that individual groups are seriously affected when money is recouped, it is only fair that they should have the opportunity for comeback. Thirdly, of course, a judgement then has to be made on what percentage of funding needs to be recouped. In the past, the levels have varied from very small percentages to — I think that there are examples of this — up to 100%. All those things have to be borne in mind.

Let us just remember that many of the groups that undertake work in their community have a grave responsibility, and some of them need their hand held more than others. I do not think that we want to run in willy-nilly and penalise people who, despite acting in the best interests of their community, very often find themselves falling foul of the very bureaucratic system of European funding and find that their personal assets have been put in jeopardy. We have to bring a bit of humanity to this as well.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful to the Minister for reporting back to the Assembly this afternoon and, particularly, for his last comments. I pay tribute to all those on the ground who work hard to bring a lot of benefits to all our communities. I have sat through many laborious and lengthy meetings with partnerships, which you mentioned. My question has already been asked, so I will ask one about the board. The last paragraph mentions the recommendation that a board be set up. That has been set aside, I think wisely, because of costs. What was the board going to do?

Mr Wilson: The board's role was to oversee the expenditure of SEUPB. As I pointed out in the statement, only about 3% of its expenditure is for administrative purposes. The board's only role would be to look after that expenditure, which is such a small amount. I do not support building more quangos on a cross-border basis or on a Northern Ireland-only basis. The Minister from the Irish Republic took the same view. He and I are like-minded on this: we are not quango builders. We want to knock down as many quangos as possible. It was, therefore, decided that the board

probably was not necessary. However, a process has to be gone through, and we will go through it. I have the same view as the Member: why set up another unnecessary body?

Mr McQuillan: I also thank the Minister for his statement. Has there been any work done on the future Peace IV and INTERREG V programmes?

Mr Wilson: The work on future programmes will be undertaken and chaired by SEUPB. There is probably about an 18-month lead-in period for that. The work will mostly be consultation and written submissions. We will look at and evaluate past programmes to see the good things and the bad things, the things you want to repeat and the things you do not want to repeat. We will look at what themes people who have an interest in the issue would like to see taken forward for the future, and then a report will go to the Executive on what we see as our priorities for Northern Ireland. There will be extensive consultation, and I expect that any report on that will go to the Executive, probably towards the end of 2013.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers. Will he give some clarification on the overall cost of consultants engaged in the economic appraisal of funding applications? My concern is that a lot of the basic structure of applications is similar, and it is paid for over and over again. It could cut down both the cost and the time to complete the applications, so perhaps the Minister can comment.

Mr Wilson: I do not have the figure off the top of my head, but I think, in answer to questions on another occasion in the House, I indicated that I was concerned about the level of consultancy spend through many of the European programmes. Of course, some of it is imposed on us by the EU rules. There is a requirement that projects are properly assessed and there is an economic case for them. That is a necessary step. If that step was not undertaken, it could be declared that the project itself is not valid.

I will come back to the Member, but the consultancy spend has come down. I have raised this with SEUPB on a number of occasions. On one occasion, when I raised the question of consultation and the cost of consultees and refused to approve it, it came back to me within a week at a 40% reduction. I sometimes think that maybe we need to push some of the consultants, to indicate to them that this is not some easy ride where they just put their hand out and grab a lot of public money.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Minister, what is your opinion of the recent INTERREG IVa call?

Mr Wilson: The Member, since he represents East Antrim, will be pleased, as I am, that, in the recent INTERREG IVa programme, a major project in his constituency — probably worth about £6 million or £7 million — has been shortlisted. That project at Magheramorne quarry will be of immense benefit to East Antrim, so, from that point of view, I am very pleased with the recent call and the outcome of the shortlisting. I would like to claim credit for it, but this is a totally objective assessment of the projects. At some later date, after it has gone through, I may have something more to say about it.

The recent call has attracted £191 million of applications, which is about five times more than the money that is

available, so many will be disappointed. Yet, had some of those come forward at an earlier stage, when money was more readily available, they would have easily got the score to get them through to a final selection. That shows that there are very good projects out there and that, although some cynics might say that we are panicking now and just want to spend the money and throw it at anything, that has not been the case. It has been a very competitive process, and I believe that the projects that have been selected will be very worthwhile and great economic drivers in the area when they finally get on the ground.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his statement. Does he agree with me that, when SEUPB has indicated that there are future risks for INTERREG funding, primarily from the lateness of the Budget, that is not a good way to spend public money?

Lessons should be learned from our Budget; it is much better to have more forward planning so that money can be better spent.

12.30 pm

Mr Wilson: There are a number of reasons for that. I have given reasons; I have not tried to hide what the problems have been. At an early stage, some of the projects coming through were not well thought out and required a considerable degree of sifting. Secondly, SEUPB has not covered itself in glory when it has come to the assessment of projects. It takes twice as long for projects to be assessed by SEUPB than it takes in other countries. That needs to be improved.

However, I would be more worried had some of the shortlisted projects looked fairly iffy; then, I think the Member's criticism might have been more justified. Perhaps it is because of the current economic situation, but projects that would normally never have come near INTERREG are now coming. I am fairly sure that we are not throwing good money after bad with the projects that are being shortlisted. We have good, quality projects. However, I suppose it would have been better had those projects come through at an earlier stage so that work could have progressed on them much quicker.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. One issue that has cropped up, particularly with some of the rural development projects, has been the problem that some groups are having in acquiring matched funding, especially from finance organisations. Will the Minister advise whether that has been an issue and whether any representations have been made through his Department to financial or lending institutions to try to ease the situation and help projects develop?

Mr Wilson: There have been a couple of issues around matched funding. In some cases, letters of offer or projects have been held up because matched funding, especially from Departments in the Republic, has not been forthcoming. I discussed that issue with the Minister in Armagh. I have been given an assurance that although the money has been held up because of budgetary considerations, it will be made available and letters of offer will go out.

I have not been made aware of the problem that the Member raised about financial institutions not being prepared to

make matched funding available for projects. I would have thought that any group going to a bank with a guarantee that it was getting EU money for a project and knowing that the amount of money coming from the bank would probably be a fairly small proportion of the total funding package would have been offering the bank good collateral. However, I meet banks on a regular basis, and if the Member is aware that this is a widespread problem, I would love him to give me the details and I will take it up.

Mr Humphrey: Since the Minister has made it clear that all politics is local, I commend the SEUPB for its funding for the Shankill Women's Centre in north Belfast recently. Credit must also be given to our Ministers and MEPs who have been lobbying for a Peace IV; I hope that happens in the near future.

Evidence was given by the chief executive of the SEUPB to the Committee, and members raised a number of concerns in relation to funding, applications being made and the length of time it took for the letters of offer to be sent. In administration, financial governance and management, as well as practice and structure —

Mr Speaker: The Member should come to his question.

Mr Humphrey: The Minister should be aware that lots of groups have struggled to get letters of offer. That affects their output, outcomes and delivery to the community and impedes them in their work. That means that when they come to review, the work has not been maximised because of that system. Will the Minister give an assurance that the process will be shortened?

Mr Wilson: I want to look at all the issues, and I have asked the SEUPB to look at all the issues that lead to the delay. If one reason is the stringency of the governance arrangements that are required to be put in place, that needs to be addressed. However, I point out to the Member that, since we are dealing with public money and since there very often will be matched funding from other public bodies in Northern Ireland, we cannot simply hand money out willy-nilly to groups whose credentials have not been established.

There has to be a balance; there has to be proper governance and accountability to make sure that money does not go astray because, as sure as you relax the rules, things go wrong, and as sure as things go wrong, there will, quite rightly, be a barrage of questions around this room about what was being done with public money.

Mr Allister: Is the Minister satisfied with how SEUPB conducts itself in regard to its investigation of funding spend by groups? I refer in particular to how it has treated the victims' group Families Acting for Innocent Relatives (FAIR). The investigation denied FAIR the basic rules of natural justice by denying it the opportunity to comment on the report before it was concluded and as issues emerged. Does the Minister think that that indicates that SEUPB handles matters in a fair and even-handed manner?

Mr Wilson: I made it quite clear in an earlier answer to another Member that, since the outcomes of many of the investigations can be fairly draconian for the people who are involved in the groups, it is absolutely right that every opportunity is given to groups to explain why they breached the rules if they did so. There should also be a proper investigation into the severity and the intention because if

something has been done unintentionally, the penalty should be much less than where somebody simply says, "Those are the rules, but we don't think that the rules are very good", and throws them over their shoulder and decides to go their own way.

I have met the Member privately about FAIR. I have made my views known to SEUPB, and I am quite happy to state publicly that, a report having been done and it being clear that the police did not believe that there was anything worthy of prosecution, the group should at least have had an opportunity to bring forward some points and state how it saw the investigation as being inadequate, because that may well have changed the view of what sanctions should be imposed. I expect SEUPB to give the group that opportunity.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for the detail. Although I appreciate the answer that he gave to Mr Humphrey about being certain of certain projects, is there any possibility of a speedier resolution from SEUPB on some of the economic projects that come through the cross-border bodies like the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN)? There are serious delays, which jeopardise the investment of private investors.

Mr Wilson: It seems to have been the theme of this statement that people are unhappy about the speed. Of course, as the Member has quite rightly pointed out, that can have severe economic consequences for an area in which there is perhaps a good project. Sometimes, the timing of the projects is quite important because you are aiming for certain events or times or whatever. All that I can do is to continue to emphasise to and plague SEUPB to make sure that the shorter time commitment that it has now given is met. It should not be complacent about that, and it has to look at ways of bringing that down since it is quite clear in other jurisdictions that 40 weeks or 58 weeks is not the norm; half of that is the norm. That is what we should aim for.

Rates (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2012: Implementation

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I have a number of statements here, Mr Speaker, so I want to make sure that I have the right one. I would hate to start off on the wrong foot and for you to call me to order.

I wish to make a statement to the House on the implementation of the Rates (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2012. There has, quite rightly, been quite a lot of discussion recently in the newspapers about the economic problems that are being experienced by town centres and small businesses in those town centres. I felt that it was worthwhile to put on record what the Assembly has done to date and also to explain some of the limitations on what can be done by the Assembly.

My statement today will update Members about the initial success of the implementation of the Rates (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2012, which we passed in February, and respond to calls for positive action to be taken to alleviate the impact on the local business community during these difficult and changing times.

Every week — I am sure that Members will have experienced it in their constituencies — we hear of shop closures and the impact that the downturn is having on local traders in our towns and cities. I see it for myself in my constituency and as I visit other towns and cities in my capacity as Finance Minister, and I hear about it in the media and, of course, in the House from Members during Question Time, and so on. Only last week, research by one retail organisation revealed that one in five shops in Northern Ireland is empty. That is the highest vacancy rate in the United Kingdom.

It is not simply the economic downturn that is causing the problem. Online shopping and bigger stores are taking an increasing share of consumer spending, and the recession is leading to, at least for this period, consumers having less money to spend. The retail industry has been undergoing a revolution, and that is having a sudden impact on local traders because, overall, retail spending is down. Times are changing for local retailers, and it is clear that there are simply too many shops in some areas, and no amount of public money will be enough to sustain them all. However, I want to give those with a future an opportunity or a fighting chance to help maintain the commercial and social core of our towns and cities.

Furthermore, we must recognise the wider context. Other sectors of business need help, as consumer spending comes from those in employment. It is not simply a matter of helping the retail sector alone. Allow me, therefore, an opportunity to outline the measures that I, as Finance Minister, have taken to create the right conditions for businesses to survive and flourish.

It is well known that people in Northern Ireland enjoy the lowest household taxes in the United Kingdom. We ought to remember that. Every day on the radio, we hear people talking about the level of rates in Northern Ireland. We have the lowest household taxes of anywhere in the United Kingdom, and that is a result of policies that have been actively pursued by the Executive in deciding, in the previous Budget period, to freeze rates in real terms and to do the

same in this Budget period up to 2015 to enable people to keep as much of their money as possible in their own pockets. That is better than us simply taking the easy way out and looking for the kind of increases that occurred under direct rule or, indeed, that are being undertaken, even in these recessionary times, in other parts of the United Kingdom.

It is not always fully appreciated how competitive our business rates are compared to those in England, Scotland and Wales. For a start, as I have said, the regional rate is being held constant in real terms. That is part of the four-year Budget that the Executive have agreed, and businesses can bank on that. It will not change; it is set in stone until 2014-15. That gives certainty and stability. That means an increase of 2.2% in the regional rate for business ratepayers over the 2012-13 rating year. That builds on the regional rate freeze over the past four years, keeping rate increases as low as possible and meaning that, unlike anywhere else in the United Kingdom, business rates will have been frozen in real terms in Northern Ireland for seven straight years.

We have also adopted the lowest inflationary index, the GDP deflator. Business rates in other parts of the UK are geared to the retail price index and, this year, went up by 5.6%, which is more than double what was experienced locally. In addition, the Executive have agreed to hold manufacturing rates at 30%. That helps 4,300 manufacturing businesses with £60 million in rate relief alone. That is an economic support that is unique to Northern Ireland. We have also retained the empty property relief at 50%. It has been removed in England and Wales and is being removed in Scotland. This is the right policy, given the growing number of empty shops.

12.45 pm

In addition, of course, freezing domestic rates and deferring water charges have bolstered spending power. Do not forget the 19% increase in the domestic regional rate in the year before devolution, the absence of a cap on domestic rate bills and the water bills that were ready for posting before the Assembly was set up. We saved most households hundreds, if not thousands, of pounds in the process, at a cost to public expenditure. There is an opportunity that will be foregone here if we do not collect this money because it will not be available for other public services. It has been of real benefit to the retail sector by reducing its costs but also by giving people more disposable income to spend in the shops.

Together, all these actions complement the commercial rating measures that this Assembly approved through the Rates (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2009. We passed that legislation, despite significant pressure from some quarters not to, precisely because we understood that small businesses needed help now.

I will briefly address some of the criticisms of the large retail levy and what has happened in reality. Some said that the 15% increase in rates for large stores would see the attractiveness of Northern Ireland as a place for large retailers to invest diminished, yet the Environment Minister's desk is strewn with planning applications for large retail premises in virtually every part of the Province.

I will turn now to the measures enacted in the Rates (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2009. The expanded small business rate relief scheme provided around 8,200

extra business ratepayers with a 20% discount for the next three years, bringing the total number of business ratepayers who benefit from that relief up to 23,000 businesses. The percentage of Northern Ireland properties now covered by the small business rate relief scheme is 33%; a third of all businesses and commercial properties, representing a total rate relief of £12million.

The extension to the scheme was achieved by charging the very largest retailers a levy rather than imposing an additional burden on local business ratepayers, which is the way in which similar schemes are paid for in other parts of the UK. I will consider extending the scope of the scheme next year, again at no cost to other ratepayers. What I am able to do will depend on the outcome of my Department's evaluation of the scheme, which will be carried out later this year. That evaluation will include consideration of how best to recycle the savings that have been achieved through the exclusion of ratepayers with multiple premises.

However, it is already apparent that the extended small business rate relief scheme is making a significant difference. It was dismissed by some as being too small to be of any benefit, but I have been approached by retailers who are keen to thank me, this Executive and this Assembly for the reduction in their rate bills in these challenging times. This reduction sits, on average, at around £1,500 over a three-year period. For those who availed themselves of the enhancements introduced in April, the average amount awarded over the three-year period will be around £2,000.

Other measures have been introduced this year to help regenerate town centres, including a concession that allows new occupiers of long-term empty retail premises to receive a 50% rebate on their rates for 12 months. The rates holiday has already received a positive response from businesses; close to 50 enquiries are being dealt with by Land and Property Services (LPS). Although this might not seem a lot, when it is multiplied up over the remainder of this year, it will mean lots more shops being occupied in our towns and city centres and a lot more people being employed. I encourage all MLAs to actively promote this innovative scheme in their own areas in whatever way they can. Unlike small business rate relief, which goes to businesses automatically, businesses have to apply for this because it is not an automatic scheme.

In addition, the use of any empty shop window displays for non-commercial purposes will now be disregarded for rating purposes, allowing unoccupied properties to be given some life and stop them from bringing down the appearance of other premises around them. I have got to say that, as I have walked around town centres, I have seen some marvellous examples of that. Shop displays have made it look as though there is activity going on in shops, rather than the shutters being pulled down, which, of course, creates an air of dereliction on the street.

The measures are unique to Northern Ireland and, along with the large stores levy and the recent announcement of a business rates revaluation, they deliver the majority of the recommendations of the 'Fair Rates for Small Traders' campaign document. That was produced by a coalition of more than 31 business organisations and trader groups, which published a five-point plan last autumn.

The Northern Ireland Executive have offered the retail and small business sector a suite of measures that are, in my view, unprecedented in the United Kingdom. Understandably, and especially in the midst of a recession, we have been lobbied for even more interventions. I am sympathetic to the plight of our business community and, instinctively, I want to see them hold on to more of their profits and invest further in their firms. I hear the calls for more targeting of rate relief, in particular for certain town centres or enterprise zones within them. However, such measures present major difficulties in choosing exactly where to designate and the likely impact that they will have, such as the unfair competitive disadvantage they may create for those outside the chosen areas and the likelihood of causing displacement. Furthermore, even if I wanted to intervene in that way, the risk of someone successfully challenging such a policy is unacceptably high. I would rather direct scarce resources to the business community than waste them on defending well-meaning schemes that are vulnerable to challenge in the courts. I would rather give money to the businesses that I want to help than to barristers and solicitors. For those reasons, I prefer the broader approach I have outlined.

The Executive have also agreed to LPS starting work immediately on a general revaluation of 72,000 non-domestic properties in Northern Ireland. That will redistribute the rating burden from April 2015, based on more up-to-date assessments. Unfortunately, that cannot be rushed through or brought forward, nor should it be regarded as a panacea for all businesses. It will mean that sectors and trading locations that have not fared as well since the last revaluation in 2003 will pay less and those that have fared better will pay more, even if rental values overall have gone down. Just because a property has halved in value over recent years, it does not mean that rates bills will halve. When rental prices doubled in some instances, it did not result in a doubling of rates and nor does it work in the reverse. Although it is far too early to judge, many of our smaller local businesses may not benefit much or at all. I have heard some individuals call for the revaluation to be brought forward by two years. Not only is such a suggestion impractical but it could result in some businesses paying more in their rates two years early. In the meantime, the rebalancing measures that we have agreed — the extension to small business rate relief and the large shops levy — will help many local businesses without adversely affecting our public expenditure position.

I also need to recognise that there are limits to the concessions we can make and still raise enough money to help pay for essential services. I say that because, every month, someone with a worthy cause comes along and asks for more rate relief or further exemptions. This month, it is the equine industry; last month, it was town centres; the month before, it was sports clubs; and so it goes on. I would perhaps be more sympathetic to using the rating system as a means of relief if the politicians who are often responsible for calling for those benefits were not the same ones who call for more money to be spent on this or that. I am looking in a particular direction, but I could probably look around the whole place and apply that statement. It is a local taxation system, not a benefits system. If sectors need to be supported, we should look to other ways of doing that, rather than immediately jumping to the conclusions that the rating system is the best vehicle for delivering help and that it is somehow not real money.

Any revenue forgone is less money for public expenditure, and we still have to raise similar amounts of money. Every pound raised in business rates is a pound that supplements our Barnett share. It goes to hospitals, schools, roads and council services. It does not disappear into a black hole somewhere. We need to strike the right balance. Rebalancing the economy during the continuing downturn and through to recovery means keeping as much money in the control of local businesses as possible.

I have made the promise before and I make it again that we will not dip into those pockets any more than is necessary, until we have made all the savings that are to be made in delivering efficient and effective regional government services. If there is a better way, I am keen to hear what it is, but it is not viable to re-engineer the rating system and change the way that rates are measured to somehow distribute the rating burden based on individual business performance. There are other taxes that do that, and even if we were to find a simple way — no regional or local government in the world has managed that — it would take years to implement.

Let us take a collective or cross-departmental approach to tackling the underlying issues and not simply look at rates bills. My colleague the Minister for Social Development, Nelson McCausland, is due to bring forward legislation on business improvement districts, and that is a good example of this. The rating system has a role to play in developing a policy that suits businesses, suits government and suits Northern Ireland. Let us not forget the direct investment that the Department for Social Development (DSD) is making in our towns and cities. We have already spent over £20 million in a three-year period on town centre public realm schemes, and another £40 million of planned spend is in the pipeline. Then there are the restore and revitalisation projects, funded since last year with £1.5 million plus another £1.5 million on town master plans. Towns in my constituency have benefited from that.

If anyone doubts that this is a worthwhile investment, they should look at the Newcastle experience, where footfall is up threefold. That is something that can make a real and lasting difference to the fortunes of our business community. For my part, and with your support, I will be focusing on getting the right balance back into the business rates system to help pay for investment and to fund efficient public services, recognising that the system must act for business, not against it. I hope that Members will appreciate that we have taken the right approach, which is one of adopting Northern Ireland policies that are tailored and responsive to Northern Ireland needs. Devolution has allowed us to do that and to do things differently in Northern Ireland in a way that has benefited local businesses.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for his statement, and I share his view in his closing remarks that we should be looking to have the economic levers available to us to adopt our own solutions that are tailored and targeted to our economic situation. The Committee for Finance and Personnel is keenly interested in the process of non-domestic revaluation, which is due to take effect from April 2015. What methodology will be used to ensure that robustness and objectivity are achieved in assessments? Can the Minister outline what the appeals procedure might

be for non-domestic properties? He has been keen to allay any sense that this is likely to lead to a windfall or a substantial reduction in rates bills for properties. Can he suggest what he considers the overall impact of revaluation of non-domestic properties will be?

Mr Wilson: The Chairman is quite right to say that that must be done on an objective basis. One of the reasons why it cannot be rushed is that we have to be able to stand up and justify each individual rates bill, because there will be an appeals mechanism, which will be as it is at present. Where business owners do not believe that their properties have been properly assessed, they will be able to challenge that right up to court level. The first thing that we have to do is an analysis of the market, and we are starting that now. That information will come from a number of sources. Forms will be sent out to businesses this year, and they will be sending us back information about rental values and other information on that. We will use all the information that comes back, including from professional bodies and chartered surveyors who are carrying out work for us. We will then design valuation models for different sectors and for different trading locations and start applying that to individual properties. That requires considerable work on the ground because, of course, you can sometimes get things wrong when using a computer model. There will be quite a lot of footwork as we go around looking at how the results of the model tally with what we find on the ground. So, there will be that to consider.

In 2013-14 we will probably apply that model to the entire stock and look through the figures to see whether we have got our estimations right, etc. By 2014, we will have to have established a rate for each of the properties. We need that to be done by at least September 2014 because councils will need to know what is happening to their rate base so that they can make judgements about the rates for the following year.

That is the kind of deadline and process that are involved. So, we have to go through quite an extensive process to have a model that we believe we can stand over.

1.00 pm

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his statement, which contains a number of very good elements. We know that we have a certain amount of money to raise from rates, but it depends how we break that up. There is a misconception out there. We are asked why the revaluation was cancelled for the non-domestic rate in the first place, but a lot of people are ignorant of the amount of money that we have to raise. So, why was the revaluation cancelled in the first place?

Mr Wilson: In answer to the Committee Chairperson, I probably said why it was not possible to carry through such an analysis in 2010. We cannot simply say, "I think that it is a bit less. Fewer people are using those kinds of areas. Rental values may have gone down there and are maybe a bit higher here. Let's do an estimation and get a rates bill." As the Chairperson pointed out in his questions, those things will be rigorously tested because the rates bill that someone gets is an overhead for their business. Therefore, if it is wrong, if they think that it is wrong, or if they think that it has been created in a shoddy way or that data were not sufficient, they will make sure that they challenge it.

Do not forget that we have to collect a huge amount of data on what is happening with businesses and rental value and on what is happening to the various sectors and locations and the rental values in them. If you go back to 2010, you will see that the market was all over the place. Property values were up and down — down rather than up — and people were panicking, and traders or people who held property were trying to do anything to hold on to it.

Sometimes very low valuations or low rents were given just to get concessions into a new shopping centre. Long term, that shopping centre might have had huge potential, but given that it was built in 2010, it had no potential. What do you do? Do you fill it up with short-term leases and give them away practically for nothing? How robust would those data have been? They would not have been robust. Therefore, any valuation that was done around that time would have been, at best, fairly shaky and, at worst, useless. For that reason, we made a conscious decision to delay the revaluation. It was in the interests of everyone to delay it because there was no point in us putting huge resources into it and finding that we were getting all kinds of legal challenges.

Mr Cree: I also thank the Minister for his statement. He will remember that when we were discussing the Rates (Amendment) Bill, many businesses pointed towards business improvement districts as the way to go. Has the Department undertaken any work on that since that date?

Mr Wilson: The business improvement districts fall under the responsibility of Department for Social Development and work will be ongoing there. Indeed, I think that the Minister for Social Development intends to bring forward legislation on that fairly soon. However, business improvement districts are not an alternative to the rating system. They allow for local businesses to come together to pay a supplementary rate of some sort that is to be spent on things in their area that they want it to be, whether that is improved security, improved environmental measures or marketing or whatever. The only question for the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) in that is whether the current rating system can be used to collect the money or whether the database that we have can be used to enable the source of the money from different businesses to be identified. There will be small amounts of money locally. It is really to allow local businesses to do their bit in saying, “Here are choices that we want to make. Central government might not make these. We believe they are priorities and will have such an impact on our area that we will put some additional money in to make them happen”.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for his statement. On Friday last, a young businessman called to my office. He opened a coffee kiosk in one of our shopping centres. He is being faced with a bill of £27,000 in rates. He employs six people. The burden of rates could lead to the closure of his fledgling business. Can the Minister take any further measures that will help smaller businesses, especially new businesses, regardless of their location?

Mr Wilson: I do not know whether the £27,000 was a yearly rate bill or an accumulative rate bill with arrears, so I do not know the individual circumstances. Any business has, of course, the option of appealing the level of a rate bill, and

I advise him to do that. Appeals are being dealt with much more quickly now.

As I said already to the Assembly, I will be looking at a revaluation of the small business rate relief scheme this year. If we can find ways to improve or extend it next year, we will do that. I cannot give definite details on that because I do not know what extra money may be available. However, it will be at no cost to existing ratepayers because there is no point taking money off one group of ratepayers to give to another. We did that with the large business levy because we believed that there was an inequality, which has been sorted out.

As I said in the statement, only so much can be done through the rating system. The rating system cannot solve all the ills that are experienced through increased competition between businesses, changing shopping habits or because people have decided to shop in different ways, such as online. Those are things that the rating system will never sort out. We are sympathetic to the sort of issue the Member raised and we will do what we can within the limits of the financial constraints that are imposed on us.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for his statement. Has there been much uptake of the opportunity around the shop window displays to improve the appearance of areas, and how is that being controlled to ensure that the displays are in line with the scheme’s intention?

Mr Wilson: If they are not in line with the scheme — if, for example, a business simply decides to extend its activities into a shop window — it will not get rate relief. Those sorts of things will be checked out.

I do not have figures for the number of businesses that have taken up the scheme. We are now two months into the financial year, and we have had enquiries. I have seen some schemes in town centres. I saw one in the centre of Belfast the other day, so I know that it is beginning to happen. I hope that chambers of trade will work with local art colleges, charity groups, etc, to look at innovative ways to use shop windows so they can have attractive displays and at least give the appearance of activity. That was the whole purpose of the scheme. Since it was heavily supported by chambers of commerce in all the towns that I visited, and I may have been with nine or 10 chambers of commerce, hopefully they will encourage estate agents and shop owners to do that.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister once again for his latest statement. Is location taken into account when valuing a property, whether town centre, out of town or rural?

Mr Wilson: Location will be taken into consideration in so far as the rental value of a location will be reflective of its footfall and popularity. That, of course, is what the rates will be based on. You would expect that rental values of very popular locations, which lots of retailers want into, would go up, and the rates would reflect that. The rental values of places that have fallen in popularity will go down as landlords try to attract people into those properties. That will also be reflected in the rates. Location will be taken into consideration, but only through the mechanism of what the market says about the rental levels in those areas.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his comprehensive statement today. I very much welcome the restatement of the various initiatives

that the Executive and the Assembly have approved, on the basis that eaten bread is soon forgotten. I very much hope that the local media will reflect that, because we have been talking about very significant statistics with regard to the families that are being driven into poverty and the businesses that are being driven out of business.

I have been glad that I have been able to endorse and support what the Minister has done. However, there is the issue of the enterprise zones. I take some encouragement from the fact that, in his statement, the Minister has considered that issue and considered the problems. Perhaps there is a case to be made for localised initiatives on a pilot basis in the form of four to six enterprise zones with a defined lifetime. I think that the affordability issue and any possible legal challenges could be addressed that way. We should try to indicate that —

Mr Speaker: Time.

Mr McLaughlin: — we are prepared to think outside the box, if necessary.

Mr Wilson: We have had a discussion on a number of occasions, in Question Time and whatnot, about enterprise zones in Northern Ireland, be they the enterprise zones that the Secretary of State believes we should be setting up and which have been set up elsewhere, or enterprise zones in town centres, as suggested by some retail organisations. I know that the Member has said that he believes that the difficulties could be overcome, but they will not be easily overcome. Can you imagine an enterprise zone stopping at the end of one street and the next bit of the street or the next street not having the same advantages, especially if the advantages are to be significant enough to help the area? You would get all forms of displacement, distortion of trade, etc. I have absolutely no doubt that there would be immense legal challenges to that.

Even if there were not legal challenges, there would be economic distortion. That is why, if we are going to look at local initiatives, it would be more beneficial in the longer term for local people to have the ability to decide to put in additional money through the bids process, define where they want the improvement district to be, give the money locally, have a say over it and make the judgement on it. That is more likely to be robust. I would prefer it if we were to look at more general applications of changes to the rates system, and I think that that is the route that we will have to continue going down.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister and welcome the statement and the measures contained therein. Minister, will you provide additional help for more than three years?

Mr Speaker: That is an excellent example of a very focused question; it was straight to the point.

Lord Morrow: Let us hear the focused answer.

Mr Wilson: That is even more demanding, of course. I will give a focused answer. The current small business rate relief will stop. The legislation for it stops in 2015. However, we said that, beyond the revaluation, we would be looking for ways to help small businesses. In the consultation, we asked for suggestions on that. Not very many came through at that stage, other than the business improvement districts. As we approach 2015, businesses and business

organisations will, hopefully, start to look at ways in which we can replace small business rate relief. However, do not forget that the idea of the revaluation was to try to create the even playing field that did not exist because of the huge change that happened between 2001 and today.

1.15 pm

Mr Beggs: Current business rates for town centres reflect the 2005 rate evaluation. Does the Minister accept that the 20% discount that has been given may not be sufficient and that if we really want to value our town centres and town centre retailers in the future, a much greater reassessment may be required? Why were England and Wales able to proceed with the 2010 revaluation, which might have had an even bigger impact than the 20%, when we could not?

Mr Wilson: First, we are going to have a much greater reassessment. I do not know whether the Member has been listening. We are going to have a full rate assessment for 2015. It will be a rigorous examination of what has happened in the market. I outlined all the steps, from data collection to modelling to investigation of individual areas and premises to levying individual bills. This is a major, internationally recognised assessment that will take two-and-a-half years, which is the same length of time that it would take in any other part of the United Kingdom.

Secondly, he asked why they could have it in England but not here. All the indications and measures show that the turbulence in the property market in Northern Ireland, although not as great as that in the Irish Republic, was far more extensive than in any other part of the United Kingdom. I explained why that turbulence in the property market would not have enabled us to revalue the rates in a way that was robust, fair and that we could have stood over and that would not have made us subject to widespread appeal. That is the reason.

We are where we are. We are undertaking the revaluation, and it will be a full evaluation. In the meantime, I believe that small business rate relief has compensated for whatever differences may have resulted from the necessary delay in the revaluation in 2010.

Mr Dallat: I also welcome the Minister's statement. I note that he told us that the Environment Minister's desk is strewn with planning applications from large retailers. Does the Minister agree that that is not good news for small shops? What can the Executive do collectively to ensure that we do not get into the situation that exists in Britain, where 60% of even modest-sized villages and towns have no shops at all?

Mr Wilson: I was simply making the point that, when this was introduced, the Assembly and I were lambasted by some people for putting up a sign outside Northern Ireland that read, Business Is Not Welcome. Apparently, large businesses would take their cue and not invest in Northern Ireland. At the time, I said that that was nonsense and I rubbished it. I rubbished it to their faces when they came to see me, and some of them left with fairly red faces. They now look even more foolish than they did at that stage, because applications have, of course, continued to come in.

I did not say whether business was welcome or not welcome. There are some places where those planning applications will be of benefit to the location, and there are

some where they will not. Of course, that is a job not for the Finance Minister but the Environment Minister. If the Member is not happy with some of the decisions that are made, he should direct his fire at Mr Attwood, not at me.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the initiatives that the Minister has introduced: the 50% empty premises relief scheme; the rebate scheme; the regional rate freeze; and, of course, the small business rate relief scheme, which averages £1,500. All that is very welcome for local businesses. I know that the Minister has met the Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce and Belfast City Centre Management to discuss the dire situation that exists in Belfast city centre. Can the Minister assure the House that he will continue to engage with chambers of commerce and businesses across Northern Ireland, as he has done in the past year?

Mr Wilson: I can. Let me say something about the engagement with the Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce. It brought forward the idea of dressing empty windows, and we responded to that. It brought forward the idea of a 50% discount on empty shops, and we responded to that. Some of the big city centre stores were being affected by the large retail levy, so the Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce asked us to ensure that it is limited to a three-year period. We responded to that. Given the impact that it might have had on some of the large stores in Belfast city centre, it indicated that 20% was probably too high, and we responded to that.

I listened to chambers of trade and chambers of commerce during the consultation, and changes were made to the initial proposals to reflect all the aforementioned concerns. There were some things to which we could not respond, however. In addition, through the Department for Social Development, extensive work on street furniture and refurbishment has been carried out in Belfast city centre. Members have probably found that, when work is being done in their town, traders complain that it has the effect of cutting down on footfall, and so on, and although the work in Belfast was disruptive, the extensive investment has helped to brighten the city and make it a very attractive location.

Therefore, lots of work is being done across Departments, and we are listening. Despite what some people may say, we do not sit here with cloth ears. We put forward ideas. If those ideas can be improved on, I am not so proud that I will not say that somebody has a better idea than me. If somebody does, I will steal it and use it.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for his statement. I congratulate him on his work as Finance Minister to try to help lessen the burden on our local businesses, especially independent retailers across our town centres. I also congratulate him for the benefit that the rate relief scheme has brought to over 1,300 properties in my constituency —

Mr Speaker: Do I detect a question?

Mr I McCrea: — to the value of around £1.2 million. That having been said, the Minister referred to extending the programme. May I encourage him to give serious consideration to doing that?

Mr Wilson: Yes. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister for his statement and for outlining the generous nature of some of the changes that he has introduced. I am sure that he is aware of some of the surveys that have shown some parts of Northern Ireland to have higher rates of empty businesses than other parts of the UK, so heaven alone knows what the situation would be like if our rates had been roughly the average of those in the rest of the UK.

Has the Minister been able to get examples of best practice from other parts — for example, from England and Scotland — of programmes and proposals that could be implemented here to assist those empty businesses?

Mr Wilson: I expect that England, Scotland and Wales could learn from us. We have a wider range of measures than in other jurisdictions. However, as I said in answer to an earlier question, I am always open to any suggestions that come along. They will be given serious consideration. If they are affordable and workable, of course we will look at them.

Lord Morrow: I, too, welcome the Minister's statement. It was fairly comprehensive. If the Act is to be an even greater success, however, does he not accept that the banks must come on board and be more constructive? I read continually about the 0.5% lending rate. I would like to know who qualifies for that rate because it is certainly not those with a mortgage, an overdraft or a personal loan. Does he agree that we need the banks on board to make this a total success?

Mr Wilson: The Member raises an issue, but it is probably the wrong morning to ask me about it, because before I came to the Chamber, I was with someone in my constituency and then someone in the office upstairs who, if their side of the story is correct or even half correct, told me the most horrific stories about the way in which banks seem to be determined to put businesses under. This week, I will speak with the banks concerned and, at some stage, I think that I will be at the point at which I will name some of them because I am increasingly worried that some banks, or some bank managers, seem to be totally cut off from reality and do not recognise that although they have a commercial responsibility to their organisation, they have a civic responsibility to ensure that they do not stand in the way of economic progress in Northern Ireland.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Allister: I do not pretend that there are easy answers but I suspect that a lot of businesses feeling crippled by rates will be disappointed by the statement because although it is very strong on reviewing what has been done, there is really nothing new in it that will bring immediate relief. There have been many recent warnings of what is in store. The Minister's colleague the Member of Parliament for North Antrim said recently that if something is not done urgently, we are going to hear more of the sound of shutters coming down and not going up again. The Minister's statement says that he is:

"focusing on getting the right balance back into the business rates system."

However, that may be too late for many. Can no current further relief be given to those who are in dire straits?

Mr Wilson: These are new measures that came into operation in April this year, and I spoke today about their review. It is not a historical review of something that we did three years ago and our saying how wonderful we are. Problems were drawn to our attention, and we responded quickly by introducing a relief scheme in this financial year. Let us look at the situation. This year, the manufacturing industry will save £90 million as a result of the relief that it receives. Small businesses will save £12 million in overheads as a result of the relief received. I cannot quantify what has been done for an average business by freezing rates for the past four years, or what will be done by freezing rates for the next three years. All I can say is that no other part of the United Kingdom has responded to businesses in this way. I explained to the House that revaluation cannot be done more quickly. If I could wave a magic wand and have premises revalued more quickly in a way that I could stand over, I would do it. However, for all the reasons that I outlined and despite all the work that has been done, revaluation cannot be done more quickly.

I bet the Member is sitting there thinking that I have not mentioned the last bit of his question. However, I am not going to dodge that. When constituents bombard their public representatives, and the news media also bombard us with a diet of how something has to be done and nothing is being done, it is easy for that to drip-feed into everybody's psyche, even those who are politically involved. Within resources and constraints, we have done what we could, and we have done our best. If people think that there is some value in me, as Finance Minister, holding back on anything that could be reasonably done and watching businesses close down, I do not know what kind of world they live in. People can say that shutters are going to come down, but we have not, and will not, hold back. Let me be clear: shutters may come down but that will not be as a result of our being cloth-eared and not listening, or being indolent and not working. We will do what we can because we realise that people's livelihoods are at stake.

European Priorities 2012-13

Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Executive's recent European successes, including a major engagement event in Brussels undertaken by the Barroso task force working group, and to explain how those efforts have shaped the Executive's European priorities for 2012-13, which are published today.

I am pleased to report that the past year has seen a substantial step-up in our collective engagement in European Union policies, funding programmes and networks. All Departments have been involved in the work, which has seen us raise our positive profile, commit additional dedicated resources to support our efforts and has helped us to achieve increased financial successes.

1.30 pm

I turn to the European successes of 2011 and 2012. While the euro zone's financial problems have been making all the headlines, this has been a hugely important year for us in Northern Ireland to be very actively engaged with Brussels as the first firm proposals and draft regulations for the next European funding period, which is 2014 to 2020, have emerged. Departments have been following the policy debates closely and working to ensure that the proposals, and the new funding programmes that will eventually emerge, accommodate our regional needs as fully as possible.

The Executive have strengthened their European support infrastructure to assist Departments in their efforts, funding nine additional European secondments, including four desk officers operating from the Executive's Brussels office. Those desk officers are dedicated to supporting the Barroso task force working group and its four thematic subgroups. Since taking up their posts in early March, they have made a significant impact. They have opened new doors and helped Departments to engage more, maximising the benefits for our businesses and citizens over the coming year.

A significant and tangible outcome from our collective efforts can be seen in the increased drawdown of competitive EU moneys over the last year. The Executive set themselves a target in the Programme for Government of a 20% increase in EU competitive funding by March 2015. Over the past year — year 1 of the target period — Departments drew down £15.8 million of competitive EU funds, and that is an increase of £4.9 million over the 2010-11 baseline. That is an excellent start and provides a strong springboard for delivering even greater success across the remaining three years of the target period.

I turn to the Barroso task force and the context for the event. All these efforts culminated in a highly successful Brussels engagement programme by the Barroso task force working group between 27 and 29 March under the chairmanship of junior Minister Anderson and me. We led a delegation of officials from all Departments to Brussels to engage in an extensive and comprehensive programme of meetings and discussions with the European Commission's members of the Barroso task force. The purpose of the programme was to take stock of progress made to date against the Executive's agreed priorities, to pursue current

issues and to share our future strategic priorities with the European Commission.

It is an important time to make our voice heard in Brussels. For example, negotiations are currently under way on the size of the EU budget for 2014-2020. That will determine the funding available for the next generation of EU policies and programmes, such as the common agricultural policy, the structural funds and the new research and development framework — Horizon 2020 — all of which will be highly significant for us. We must, therefore, continue to exploit the unique opportunities that are presented to us by the Barroso task force and opportunities such as our Brussels programme to identify fresh funding opportunities, to influence policy and, more generally, to further our interests in Europe to help strengthen and support our economy.

President Barroso has invested personally and politically in this process. In 2007, he was the first European leader to visit us following the agreement on the restoration of devolved government. He underlined the support of the European Commission for the peace process at an important time in our political and economic development, and he established a task force to enhance our engagement in Europe, reinforcing our newly established political institutions. In December 2010, President Barroso again restated his personal commitment to us when he joined the First Minister and deputy First Minister in opening new premises for our Executive's office in Brussels, and he reinforced and renewed the work of the task force.

In response, through the Barroso task force working group, we have built up a strong infrastructure of our own, allowing us to work with the Commission task force to engage effectively in Europe and, through mechanisms such as the Programme for Government, to mainstream Europe within the Executive and Departments. The Barroso task force working group aims to promote participation in EU policy development that will benefit the region; engagement in European networks, allowing us to benchmark our performance and learn from best practice across Europe in the delivery of services to citizens and businesses; and the drawdown of resources from competitive EU funding programmes, strengthening our economy and delivering competitive advantage to our businesses. Through the group and its various subgroups, we aim to harness European programmes and policies to help us make progress across a number of areas, including competitiveness and employment; innovation and technology; climate change and energy; and social cohesion.

Recognising the time-limited advantage that the Barroso task force offers us, we have, even in the current difficult financial environment, provided additional resources to boost the number of our Brussels-based officials to ensure that every opportunity for greater European success is being maximised.

In respect of our engagement with and the outcomes from the Brussels programme, we have strengthened significantly our engagement with the European Commission, following and building on the previous inward visit to Belfast by the Commission task force in March 2011. While there, we were able to outline to the Commission areas where we have made significant progress against our targets during 2011 and 2012.

Our most recent visit to Brussels gave us once more an opportunity to express our appreciation for the work of the Commission task force, including the work of Walter Deffaa, who is the recently appointed director general of DG Regio. In addition, it gave us unprecedented access to Commission officials. Over three days, 54 meetings took place, involving 35 Civil Service officials from all our Departments. In addition, our Executive office in Brussels hosted a plenary session attended by over 50 officials from the European Commission and our own Departments. That focused on the current world and European economic context and the strategic thrust that will be necessary in 2012-13 to stimulate growth and help regions such as ours recover from recession. The session was chaired jointly by the lead Commission official on the Barroso task force and the head of the Executive office in Brussels and was addressed by the director general of the Directorate General for Regional Policy (DG Regio) and the permanent secretary of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, David Sterling. The Brussels programme also provided junior Minister Anderson and me with the opportunity to raise specific issues of importance.

During the first six months of 2013, Ireland will take on the presidency of the European Council. It is expected to preside over key EU decisions such as, possibly, the agreement of the EU budget, the future of the common agricultural policy and the cohesion policy. We used the opportunity of the visit to explore with the Irish Permanent Representation to the EU areas where we could contribute to and benefit from this important Irish presidency. For example, the possibility of secondments of our civil servants to Irish Departments was raised, following agreement in principle at a previous North/South Ministerial Council. One civil servant has already been seconded to the Irish Permanent Representation in Brussels to assist in the presidency. This is a rare and important opportunity for our officials to gain first-hand experience at a time when decisions will be made that will impact on us all for many years to come.

We met our MEPs Jim Nicholson and Diane Dodds, as well as staff from Bairbre de Brún's office, and we briefed them on the recent work of the task force. Since the Lisbon treaty came into force, the European Parliament has become a co-legislator in important policy areas such as agriculture and fisheries and our cohesion policy. That reinforces the need for us to work proactively with our MEPs in promoting our regional agenda.

As Ministers, we are keen to further our contribution to the EU's efforts to increase its role in peace-building and conflict resolution throughout the world. The European Commission, in the Barroso task force report, committed to working with us to examine how that might be done. The European External Action Service, as the European Union's foreign policy arm, is currently considering how the European Union can develop its role in that area. It is, therefore, an opportune time for us to join the discussions. This is particularly so in light of the EU's recent decision to award £12 million towards the construction of a peace-building and reconciliation centre at Maze/Long Kesh. This was of particular interest to members of the cabinet of Vice President Catherine Ashton, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and to officials in the European External Action Service, with whom we had very positive meetings.

We also discussed these developments with Jane Morrice, one of our members on the Economic and Social Committee. Jane was rapporteur for her Committee's formal opinion on the role of the EU in helping to resolve international conflicts. Her report lays particular emphasis on the relevance of our peace process to conflict resolution in other parts of the world. It was adopted by the Committee on 19 January this year and further underlines the potential for the centre at Maze/Long Kesh to play a major role in international conflict prevention and resolution.

We took the opportunity of our meeting with the director general of DG Regio, Walter Deffaa, to discuss the future direction of European cohesion policy, including the possibility of a further Peace programme. In his role, Mr Deffaa will have an important influence in the current structural funds negotiations. We also discussed Commissioner Hahn's proposal to host an event in Brussels to showcase projects funded by the Peace programme to a wider international audience, which is scheduled for early 2013.

With regard to departmental engagement in Brussels, just as structural funds are important to our future economic growth, so are the many competitive EU programmes that are available to us now and in the future. Those opportunities were explored in some depth through a series of meetings with the Commission and our officials in each of the Executive's policy priority groups. Those in the innovation and technology group covered topics such as the future funding programmes for 2014-2020, with particular emphasis on supporting and growing our small to medium enterprises. They explored the COSME programme, the competitiveness programme for small to medium enterprises, which aims to provide support for entrepreneurship through better access to financial and enhanced support services, the regional smart specialisation strategies and Horizon 2020, which is the European Union's future framework programme for research and innovation. Possible funding applications under the European innovation partnership were also explored, with a focus on agricultural productivity and sustainability.

Officials in the competitiveness and employment policy group discussed opportunities to address the EU-wide issue — an issue close to many Members' hearts, including mine — of youth unemployment. They discussed also the current proposals to use uncommitted funding from existing programmes to address the problem. Their discussions also covered Erasmus for All, the new future programme for education, training, youth and sport. It will replace the existing Lifelong Learning Programme. Other issues covered included the European social fund and vocational excellence.

1.45 pm

Problems posed by an ageing population — we should celebrate having an ageing population — provided a particular focus for the social cohesion group's policy discussions. Specifically, officials were interested in exploring funding for innovative approaches to the problem. They also looked for opportunities to share examples of local best practice in this area, such as the success with the creation of a Commissioner for Older People and our combined health and social care system. Other members of the social cohesion theme focused on funding opportunities relating to young people who are disenfranchised, justice,

culture and community-led regeneration. The meetings explored existing and future funding opportunities.

During meetings with the Commission, the climate and energy group members impressed with examples of how our experience could provide insight into a regional approach for the EU adaptation strategy and how our approach to low-carbon technology and renewables could drive ambitious targets. Officials highlighted the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute's successful research into agricultural carbon sequestration and held constructive meetings on transport policy, including electric vehicles and the transnational funding of projects under the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T). For Members interested in finding out more, we will provide a more detailed report on the Brussels engagement programme, which will be laid in the Assembly Library shortly.

I now turn to our European priorities for 2012-13 and our next steps. As we move forward, it is important that we maintain the significant momentum that has been built up as a result of the Brussels engagement programme. Follow-up actions are being pursued, and bilateral contacts between Departments and the Commission services have been strengthened. Early reciprocal programmes by Commission officials are expected, and one has already taken place, dealing with health and the digital agenda.

Today, we published our 'European Priorities 2011-12 Implementation Report' and our 'European Priorities 2012-13'. Both documents can be found in the Assembly Library. Hard copies are available from the Business Office, and Members will be able to download them from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) website following this debate. Their publication represents another tangible step forward and a restatement of the Executive's commitment to this work.

Given our success to date, we will continue to focus on the four broad themes — competitiveness and employment; innovation and technology; climate change and energy; and social cohesion — that we adopted last year. Our aims and objectives have, however, been updated and aligned with European Union objectives for the current year, with the details we currently have on the 2014-2020 EU funding period and with our Programme for Government. As was the case last year, an implementation plan setting targets for each of the objectives identified under each theme is being developed. The Barroso task force working group will monitor progress quarterly and provide the Executive with a formal six-month progress report in the autumn.

Now that we have a reinforced infrastructure in place to support the drawdown of EU moneys, our intention is to build on last year's success by broadening the range of competitive EU funding streams that Departments target and by working to influence the ongoing negotiations on key funding sources, such as the Connecting Europe Facility and Horizon 2020, which will be worth around €50 billion and €80 billion respectively. During this year, we expect to consolidate our preparations for the new EU funding period so that, by the end of 2013, each Department will have a well-developed project pipeline in place, allowing them to tap in to the new EU funding programmes as soon as they are launched.

We also believe that our performance needs to be seen in context, if our success is to be honestly and fairly measured. Our performance in year 1 has been good, but, on a relative basis, compared with other regions, the picture is still unclear. For the year ahead – year 2 – we will place greater emphasis on comparing our relative drawdown with the best performing regions in Europe. Engaging positively by extending partnerships and collaboration across all key policies and programmes will do much to make that possible and to advance our learning and knowledge. We will also work closely with our MEPs and other representatives to the EU to exert maximum influence on decisions in Brussels that are important to us.

The Barroso task force represents a significant political and resource investment by the European Commission in the region as part of its contribution to helping us maintain a momentum towards a peaceful and shared society and towards economic recovery. The Executive, in turn, recognise the need to match the Commission's continued prioritisation of the region with an appropriate level of resource and effort. In so doing, we will realise the greatest benefits from our EU membership for our businesses and our people. As junior Ministers with responsibility for this work, we will continue to encourage and support Departments in their efforts, helping them to implement their individual priorities and deliver even greater collective success, strengthening our economy and building a shared and better future for us all.

Mr Nesbitt (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I thank the Minister for his update. Members will be aware that the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister was one of a number of Committees to respond to Ministers on the Executive's draft European priorities. An implementation plan was referenced on a number of occasions during that process and again by the Minister in the House today. Given that it is nearly June, can the Minister tell us when we can expect to see the implementation plan for 2012-13, and will he confirm that it will contain SMART targets?

Mr Bell: I cannot give the exact date, because it is being developed by our officials. I welcome the constructive contribution that the Committee has made, and I hope that it will continue to help us to influence the budgets and the policy for the 2014-2020 period.

We are meeting the first of the SMART targets by being strategic. We are taking what President Barroso has committed and the interest that the EU is giving to assisting Northern Ireland, and we want to respond positively. As I regard it, we can either use the expertise of the European Union that President Barroso has offered us and all of that energy and talent, or, effectively, we can lose it.

In terms of the SMART target being achievable, the Executive have already responded positively. The Committee has seen where we have committed significant extra resources. They are measured against our own European priorities, and they are time framed, in that we are operating in 2011, 2012 and 2013. We are also proactively looking towards the future, which is the 2014-2020 period. That is the time frame that we will operate against, and we will build on the good contacts that we have already made. We will follow through on every policy and every programme that we think has even

a modicum of success in bringing development and growth back to Northern Ireland from Brussels.

Mr Speaker: Quite a number of Members want to make a contribution to the statement, so I ask Members to please be brief in coming to their question. I call William Humphrey. That is no reflection on the Member.

Mr Humphrey: I have picked up the hint, Mr Speaker. I thank the junior Minister for his statement. I welcome his comments about tackling youth unemployment in north Belfast. It is a huge issue, and I welcome that being included in the statement. What is the junior Minister's view on the outcome of European engagement?

Mr Bell: The outcome will be, in a number of ways, what we have managed to draw down in additional funding, how that has stimulated growth and how that has affected areas with youth unemployment. I know that is of particular interest to him in north Belfast as he has invited me to visit projects aimed at tackling it. I welcome the energy that there is in north Belfast for tackling that critical issue.

When we look down at our programme of engagement, we are looking, as an Executive, at lifting and improving our European engagement. As I outlined, the success will be in the priorities that we lay down for 2012-13. In addition to the plenary session at the Brussels office, each of our four thematic groups — I will not go over them — had its own programme of meetings. There were 54 meetings across three days with Commission officials and 14 directorates general. I think that that will draw down success in and of itself.

The reason junior Minister Anderson and I were in Brussels was to support all Departments' efforts in European engagement. The responsibility of the four thematic groups and the associated individual Departments is to ensure that the objectives identified during the programme of engagement are met. We will follow each of those programmes closely. We must not lose the momentum of the programme of engagement, and we are confident that all of our Departments will work to meet their objectives that were set out in the Executive's priorities of 2012-13. As I said, a report of the entire programme is being prepared by officials, and we will place a copy in the Library as soon as possible for you to peruse.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat. I congratulate the junior Ministers on the drive they have put into the Barroso task force. Will the junior Minister tell us what the position is on Peace IV? Last term, I was at a meeting of OFMDFM with Lord Trimble, who was saying at that time that he would not support the future programme. We all know how important Peace funding has been to this programme and this Assembly: has that had any influence on unionism and the Conservative Government in their representation to Europe? What future do we have for Peace IV?

Mr Bell: We are pressing very hard at every opportunity and in every meeting for Peace IV. I do not think anyone could point to one opportunity that we have missed to put that forward. Thank you for the warm remarks on the engagement in Europe. I know that the Member works hard, as will a future colleague of mine, Trevor Cummings, in the Committee of the Regions, and we look forward to that constant engagement of regional support for the work that we are doing.

We would welcome a further round of EU Peace funding very much. The work of peace-building is not complete. The recession has created future and further challenges, particularly among young people such as we heard from earlier, for whom unemployment is increasing and there may be fewer opportunities for education and training. I fear that some evil groups in our society will seek to prey on those vulnerable young people. The particular content of any future Peace programme will be established through research and public consultation, and a further round of Peace funding could focus on the needs of marginalised and disaffected youth.

Junior Minister Anderson and I recently had the privilege of handing out awards to a group from the Craigavon/Lurgan area, where a specific two-year programme was put in through Co-operation Ireland to help young people who were at risk and to give them a two-year development plan. Those young people were entrusted with something like half a million pounds of communications equipment. Not only did they complete their programmes; some of them have gone on to achieve full-time jobs.

We need to potentially focus on the needs of our marginalised and disaffected young people. Through the task force and direct engagement with the Commissioner for Regional Policy, Johannes Hahn, and in our dealings with Westminster and Dublin, we have pressed at every stage for a Peace IV programme. We are encouraged by the provision to fund peace-building actions in the draft territorial co-operation regulations that are published by the European Commission and by the United Kingdom and Irish Governments' declared support for Peace IV.

In pursuing that, we will seek to ensure that Peace IV provides additional funding to the region and does not merely displace other European Union funding sources. Junior Minister Anderson and I will continue to closely monitor the negotiations and will always lobby the United Kingdom Government through the Joint Ministerial Committee in Europe.

2.00 pm

Mr Eastwood: I thank the junior Minister for his statement. I welcome the fact that he stated that he intends to learn from the good example of the Irish Government in drawing down funding from the EU. How many officials do we have based in Brussels compared with the Irish Government?

Mr Bell: I have a responsibility in Northern Ireland but I do not have responsibility for the number of officials the Irish Government have in Brussels. I thank Mr Eastwood for his positive comments about the engagement in Europe. I have shown conclusively where the Executive have put in additional resources. Even against the backdrop of a recession, we have put in four desk officers to cover the key areas. We will ensure, and have been ensuring, that those desk officers are fully and adequately resourced for the task that they are doing. We have already seen in year 1 that we are well on our way not only to meeting an ambitious target but, potentially, to exceeding it. I will get you information on the precise number of officials that we have; I presume that you would have to ask the Irish Government to get the precise number of officials that they have. President Barroso has given us energy; we will match that with energy and commitment. We will leave no stone unturned in bringing back to Northern Ireland from Brussels the maximum

amount that we can. I have put out the figures honestly and squarely; we are already exceeding the targets that we have set ourselves.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome his positive endorsement of the potential benefit to our citizens and businesses as a result of engagement with Europe. I agree with the Chair of the OFMDFM Committee, however: in the absence of an action plan and targets, it is difficult to assess the full ambition of the plan. What existing and future European funding opportunities are available to assist our small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)?

Mr Bell: Sometimes, strategies and action plans are important — I will get that to you as soon as I possibly can — but the reality is also important; that was the “R” in the SMART targets that were set. The reality is that, under the first year of our watch, we have drawn down more than we wanted to. We will always take more than we want at every stage, and in a situation that is very difficult — you see the situation in Greece and everything else — and constantly changing, we will seek to maximise and go beyond the 20% that we have set ourselves. We have done it in year 1 and we look to do it in future.

Mr Lyttle raised a vital question about the important issue of other European funding opportunities and securing greater EU financial support for Northern Ireland. The House will be aware that EU structural funds are allocated at national level and that we receive a fixed percentage of that amount. Scope to increase that funding is very limited, which is why we, as the Northern Ireland Executive, set a target for increasing our drawdown from competitive EU funding streams. The success in competitive European funding programmes takes time and sustained effort and requires us to network with other European Union regions to demonstrate our regional strengths and expertise and build on our experience as junior partners before we can seek credibly to lead in larger projects.

As far as small and medium-sized enterprises are concerned, we are developing our future research and development strategy. You have seen the Horizon 2020 proposals. Under those, we will allocate around 17% to small and medium-sized enterprises.

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

Moving on to the work that is being undertaken, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) has looked at matching labour market supply with demands in Estonia. That has allowed it to explore potential project ideas and possible future partnerships. Where SMEs are concerned, in February 2012, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) appointed a SMART specialisation co-ordinator to lead the SMART specialisation strategy for the region. DEL has established an EU framework support fund of £80,000 per annum to encourage our universities to apply for funding from framework programme 7 for research and innovation. In the area of SMEs, each Department has been actively targeting the current programmes in framework programme 7, including the Trans-European Transport Network, the Progress programme and the European Union culture fund, and we are also preparing for the arrival of the next funding programmes. It is vital that the Northern Ireland Executive are proactive and seek, in the next round of

funding programmes, including through Horizon 2020, to look at how we can maximise our drawdown from 2014.

I should also say in conclusion, Mr Lyttle, that junior Minister Anderson and I have been active in meeting European Commission officials in Brussels to discuss how we can contribute to and benefit from the 2012 European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations. That is vital. For example, I was with the chief executive of the South Eastern Trust recently to discuss my constituency of Strangford, and I thought that we should celebrate and thank God for the fact that our elderly people are getting older. They have contributed a lot to society, and as we have been seeing in the Pensioners Parliament, they have a huge amount more to contribute. However, because of the people who are living longer, we in Strangford have to prepare for a town that is equivalent to the size of a new Ballynahinch. We want to be proactive, and we have discussed with the European External Action Service how we might contribute and share our experience in Northern Ireland through supporting an enhanced European Union role in peace building.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that Question Time starts at 2.30 pm. I want to try to get through all the questions and answers before then.

Mr G Robinson: Will the junior Minister enlarge on what impact he believes our European priorities have had in 2011-12? What potential is there for Northern Ireland to benefit from developments in health, technology and innovation?

Mr Bell: I am happy to do that, and as I am conscious of the time frame, I will briefly report. There has been considerable success over the past year in engaging policy development, strengthening networks and increasing the number of officials on secondment in Europe, as well as in a range of EU funding streams. We also hope that we have laid the groundwork for what we hope will be future success. We have nine more staff in Brussels than we did a year ago, and as I said to Mr Eastwood, the four desk officers who took up post in March are providing dedicated support to deliver on the European priorities of 2012-13. A finance subgroup was established to deliver progress against the Executive's Programme for Government target of a 20% increase in drawdown from EU competitive funding sources. It is important to note that, in comparison with the previous year, we have drawn down an additional £4.9 million in 2011-12. That is a fact. Northern Ireland applicants secured a total of €36.4 million from framework programme 7 for research and development between the start of the programme in 2007 and the end of October 2011. We will be active in shaping and preparing for its successor programme, Horizon 2020, so that we can take it forward from 2014. I will pull back there because I know that there are a number of questions.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement and for some of the very positive things that he said in response to other people's questions, particularly on small and medium-sized businesses. Now that we have a better support mechanism over there, he will be aware that the Irish Government have taken 100 SMEs over to Europe to encourage them to build the capacity to drawdown moneys. Would the Minister be of a mind to do something similar with small and medium-sized businesses from the North?

Mr Bell: It is a very well-made point. That is obviously a priority for DETI, but we have been keen, whether from a culture, arts or business perspective, to bring our businesses to the Northern Ireland Executive office and allow them to use the facilities to showcase their products. DETI has led a programme to maximise framework programme drawdown and has produced 18 recommendations designed to increase Northern Ireland's success.

Part of that success has been in bringing over some of those local businesses as part of DETI's international trade missions, and I welcome that. I know, particularly from the work of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates and India, that the feedback from Northern Ireland's businesses is that they got unprecedented access because of the opportunities that were afforded to them by the OFMDFM visits to the United Arab Emirates and India. Among its recommendations, DETI has included the appointment of a Horizon 2020 manager, hopefully in place by September 2012, and thematic leads based in our two universities.

The Member may also want to know that Commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn will visit Belfast on 7 June to speak at the Collaborate to Innovate conference on FP7, the focus of which will be on encouraging greater small and medium-sized enterprise involvement in FP7 and Horizon 2020. Commissioner Geoghegan-Quinn will also meet the Executive subcommittee on the economy and separately with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. In addition, she will visit the Agri-food and Biosciences Institute and the Northern Ireland advanced composites and engineering centre at Bombardier.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the junior Minister for his statement. Will Northern Ireland seek to secure funding through the European innovation partnership on active and healthy ageing?

Mr Bell: We will seek to secure not only that funding, but funding through every opportunity that we have. We have built up some expertise in Northern Ireland, which is regarded at a European level as a success. I do not say that lightly; I say because I sit in Brussels and I listen to what the commissioners are telling me. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister put in place a comprehensive role for the Commissioner for Older People. In many places across Europe, that legislation has been regarded as a success.

The relevant commissioners are looking to where we in Northern Ireland have already been successful in our work on active ageing and solidarity between the generations. We hope to have a number of events and have Northern Ireland's good progress profiled. Take it from here that no stone will be left unturned in any of the funding streams. We have proven that already by the significant success that we have had in year 1.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the junior Minister for his statement. I am very impressed by the number of meetings and discussions and the amount of research, but until we get actions and timelines, we have really just got seven pages of waffle here.

I want to focus on ERASMUS and the 50 officials who met to discuss the economic context and strategy. When are we going to hear, either in actions or summaries, what sort of skills and training we need to put in place in Northern

Ireland so that there are jobs for our young people, whether in Northern Ireland, Europe or even globally?

Mr Bell: I thank the Member for his positive remarks at the start, which I understand. He talked about waffle, but we have increased the amount of funding for young people in our area and increased the amount of growth opportunities for economic development in our area. You know, Mr Kinahan, I used to sing a hymn when I was at primary school and receiving free school meals. *[Interruption.]* I promise that I will not sing it now, but it spoke of the rich man in his castle and the poor man at his gate. Until I met you, Mr Kinahan, I did not realise that people in Northern Ireland still lived in castles.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind all Members to make their remarks through the Chair.

Mr Bell: We have drawn down more money from Europe and increased the amount of opportunities for our young people in Europe. Both of our universities, which are collaborating on the programmes that I have already outlined, are stepping up to the plate and will be disappointed with the Member's description of their work as waffle.

Look at the Department for Employment and Learning and its work in the trans-European consortium, under the PROGRESS programme and in the New Skills for New Jobs project in July 2011. That project aims to contribute to the European Union's effort to meet its ambitious employment rate target of 75% for women and men in the 20 to 64 years age group by 2020. I have outlined the success in terms of additional drawdown.

2.15 pm

In the area of youth unemployment, European funding has provided significant support for our Executive's efforts to tackle directly youth unemployment and the issues of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs). That is addressed under the thematic group's key aim, which is basically equipping our young people with the skills and the ambition that they need to contribute to the economy. European social fund assistance has been given to 82 voluntary and community sector organisations — there is an action — to support the employability of individuals who face barriers to participation in the workforce. Mr Kinahan, if you think for one second that supporting 82 voluntary and community sector organisations to help young people get employment and face and overcome the barriers to employment is waffle, you are very much mistaken. There are also a number of projects with a value of £10 million that are aimed specifically at re-engaging young people who are NEETs. Priority one of the programme is to support 4,500 of our young people who are not in education, employment or training between 2007 and 2013. If you think that a target of supporting 4,500 of our young people is waffle, you are very much out of date in your castle.

The European social fund programme is supporting the Apprenticeships Northern Ireland programme, which offers the opportunity — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Bell: It offers individuals the opportunity to train in their chosen occupation. For an Ulster Unionist to say that 82

voluntary and community sector groups and £10 million is waffle, you are so much out of date in your castle.

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

"The Executive have strengthened their European support infrastructure"

and:

"It is an important time to make our voice heard in Brussels."

Is it the intention of the Executive to further strengthen our infrastructure in Europe, particularly in relation to accessing the Connecting Europe facility and Horizon 2020 funding sources?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that Question Time is coming up and that we will have to come back to this after Question Time if we do not get through it all. Can we have precise answers?

Mr Bell: Yes. We will do all that we can. The Department for Regional Development (DRD) received £2.9 million —

Mr B McCrea: More waffle.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Bell: I appreciate that the Ulster Unionists want to shout down £2.9 million, but that amount was delivered during 2011-12 for the TEN-T programme. The new draft TEN-T regulations are going through the ordinary legislative procedure in Europe, and DRD is doing all that it can to influence the negotiations in Europe to ensure the best possible outcome for Northern Ireland. For example — the Ulster Unionists should listen to this instead of trying to shout down their own Minister — DRD has been instrumental in securing amendments —

Mr B McCrea: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Bell: They are shouting down their own Minister.

Mr B McCrea: No, you are —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. If the Minister is to reply and we are to hear that reply, we have to give him the space to do so. The Minister has the Floor.

Mr Bell: DRD has been instrumental in securing amendments in the Danish presidency's general approach to the regulations, including an exemption from certain rail standards for isolated rail networks such as our own. If those amendments are adopted in the final regulations, they could save the Executive — I will finish with this — up to £1.5 billion in unnecessary expenditure. That is not to be shouted down.

Mr B McCrea: I wonder whether the Minister will deal with my question precisely or whether he will waffle. His statement referred to the world and European economic context and all sorts of financial interests. Did his colleague and he differ in their advice on the EU fiscal treaty? Will he care to tell us what the position was of the two Ministers on that important matter?

Mr Bell: I hate to enlighten the Member, but that is not something that we have ministerial responsibility for.

Mr Allister: The aspect of the Minister's Europhile statement that I wish to focus on is its trumpeting of the Provo project at the Maze. That was never troubled to be announced in the House —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question.

Mr Allister: Of course, it was once eschewed by the Minister's party when his deputy leader said:

"However it is dressed up, whatever spin is deployed, the preservation of a section of the H-Blocks ... would become a shrine to the terrorists ... That would be obnoxious".

If wasting EU money —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member for a question.

Mr Allister: If wasting EU money on this Provo project is now a DUP success, was Nigel Dodds wrong?

Mr Bell: The only person who is wrong, Mr Allister, is you. There will be no shrine, and there will be no "Provo project". We need to be very careful. I met a number of victims yesterday when I was with the Royal Ulster Constabulary on its ninetieth anniversary and its 10-year celebration of the awarding of the George Cross. I know that it is politics, but we need to try to be sensitive and try not to take meaningless advantage when someone of your intelligence knows the difference. To try to play party politics with the needs of victims and survivors is very wrong indeed. There will be no shrine and no "Provo project".

What Europe is looking towards and what we are looking towards is the success story that is Northern Ireland. It is a success story about how young people are today, Mr Allister, living with the lowest levels of violence in Northern Ireland than has been the case in the lifetime of anyone in this House. Should we not celebrate that success and the fact that our people and young people have the opportunity to live at a time when we have the lowest level of violence ever?

Contrary to what you are telling us, Europe is telling us that Northern Ireland is a real success story and that Northern Ireland can contribute to the building of peace, showing not only what we have done here but what we can do internationally. Our universities are telling us that they have an academic base and an academic infrastructure that can show to the world the success of peace in Northern Ireland. It can show not only what it has achieved but what it is currently achieving.

You said that my statement is "Europhile". If bringing additional millions of euros to Northern Ireland —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: You are getting close to the end of your time.

Mr Bell: — qualifies me as Europhile, I stand guilty.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I pay tribute to the two junior Ministers, and I wish my colleague Martina all the best in Europe. I have no doubt that we will all continue to work with our MEPs.

In March, the junior Ministers led a delegation of officials to engage with officials in the Commission in Brussels. Will you outline how the recent focus on this will ensure more funding for us in the North of Ireland?

Mr Bell: There are four key areas, including competitiveness, employment and social cohesion. I will not go through them all in detail because of what Mr Principal Deputy Speaker said about time. We have ensured that we have nine extra bodies and brains working on the project to ensure that we influence the budget, not only today but for 2014-2020. It is interesting that some of those with critical voices, having made their party political statement, have run from the Chamber. They are not interested in what we will do for 2014-2020, yet President Barroso, probably the most key figure in the European Union, said that he will significantly assist Northern Ireland. He has told us to use the resources and not lose them. We will engage directly with the Commission in Brussels. We will build on every good contact that we have achieved.

We will push every policy and programme area. We are exceeding our 20% targets. That is OK; we are happy to exceed them but we will leave no stone unturned in maximising to Northern Ireland the benefits that we currently get from Europe.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time. The next item of business will be Question Time. After Question Time, there will be a debate on the legislative consent motion on the Finance Bill.

2.30 pm

Assembly Business

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Point of order, Mr McCartney.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. In previous mandates, the Speaker made rulings in relation to the heat and the wearing of jackets. I wonder whether the Principal Deputy Speaker will make a ruling on that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Yes, if anyone feels that they want to take off their coat because of the heat in the Chamber, we will allow that to happen today under the circumstances.

Oral Answers to Questions

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Questions 2 and 10 have been withdrawn and require written answers.

Cricket: Funding

1. **Mr Wells** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much funding has been allocated to cricket over the past five years. (AQO 2046/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Sport NI is responsible for the distribution of funding for sport here. In the past five financial years, Sport NI has provided almost £4 million of Exchequer and lottery funding to Cricket Ireland to assist with the development of cricket. As part of that funding, Sport NI is supporting the employment of a club development manager by the governing body of cricket, Cricket Ireland. That manager is based in Belfast and is responsible for providing advice and guidance to cricket at all levels on development and funding opportunities.

Mr Wells: As the Minister is aware, several players from this part of the United Kingdom have played for the Ireland cricket team. Indeed, that team had historic wins over Test-playing nations such as Zimbabwe, England and Pakistan. Cricket is clearly a growing sport, yet would she agree with me that the amount of funding that has been allocated to this international sport is tiny in comparison with that allocated to, for instance, rugby, GAA and soccer?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I share with the Member his concerns about perhaps the feeling that cricket receives smaller amounts of funding compared with other sports. However, it is only in recent times, with the success of the cricket team, that we are all enjoying and, indeed, supporting that team. I would imagine in future comprehensive spending review (CSR) bids that perhaps the amount of money to cricket will increase.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister assure us that the opportunities for funding for all sports, including cricket, will be made known to the grass roots groupings and clubs?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will. I do share some of the concerns that have been repeated throughout Question Time on this. Cricket, like other sports, is receiving quite a lot of interest, and it is important that people who want to get involved in sport have the opportunity to do so. We will be focusing, particularly with grass roots clubs and within communities, to try to provide support that will result in a bigger uptake in sport. It is important that I keep that under review.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Entertainment Venues: Closing Time

3. **Mr Agnew** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the impact of a 2.00 am closing time on night-time culture and musical art in Northern Ireland. (AQO 2048/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The closing time of pubs and clubs, as I am sure the Member is aware, is not a matter for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL). I understand that the 2.00 am closing time was introduced under a voluntary arrangement between Pubs of Ulster, which represents pubs and nightclubs, the PSNI and licensees. The arrangement has resulted in a number of establishments closing at 2.00 am since April even though they hold a 3.00 am entertainments licence. My Department, through the Arts Council, supports a wide range of musical art activities. The vast majority of those activities, if not all, would be finished long before 2.00 am, and, therefore, they have not said to me that they are affected by those new arrangements.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, I appreciate what you said, but if we talk about culture such as night-time music culture and things along those lines, and given how we are quite out of step with the rest of Europe, does the Minister not believe that greater liberalisation of our entertainment laws would help our night-time culture and economy?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have spoken, through my constituency office, to licensees who have expressed concern, particularly at the need for better support from the Executive for the night-time economy through pubs and clubs. At the minute, we are looking at the disparity between the entertainments and the licences, but, at the end of the day, the sector itself has been very good at lobbying. It had an opportunity last year but, unfortunately, it did not get passed through the House. I will receive requests from that sector, if it is appropriate, but it is not within my gift to influence any changes in licensing laws or entertainment licences.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Has DCAL been involved in any discussions with Pubs of Ulster regarding the potential impact on art and culture events?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have not been involved in such discussions as a Minister. As I said to Mr Agnew, I was in discussions with regard to lobbying through my constituency, as, I am sure, were other MLAs, but the voluntary arrangement was then reached. That is the last that I have heard. DCAL has not been approached officially in relation to the matter.

Mr Copeland: Given the fact that one prominent nightclub in Belfast has already left the voluntary arrangement to close at 2.00 am, can you detail the degree of engagement, if any, that you have had with the various entertainment sectors to facilitate a future agreement that strikes an appropriate balance and is acceptable to all?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will repeat what I said to Mickey Brady. It is not within the remit of DCAL to do that. The issues around licences are for the Department of the Environment and the Department for Social Development.

Musical Instruments for Bands Programme

4. **Mrs Hale** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she has any plans to increase the £200,000 provision to the Arts Council for musical instruments grants, given the impact that the marching band sector has in terms of social impact, cultural promotion and tourism.

(AQO 2049/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The musical instruments for bands scheme is a highly successful programme, and I am pleased that it has provided over £800,000 to bands across the North over the past five years. Marching bands are an important element of our culture and musical heritage, and I am keen to support the development of organisations that encourage young people to learn to play an instrument. However, due to budgetary constraints, I have no plans to increase the £200,000 that my Department provides annually to the Arts Council for the scheme.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that the current £5,000 limit placed on funding applications is excessively restrictive on pipe bands, accordion bands, brass bands and silver bands, given that the average price of bagpipes and accordions is £1,000 and £600 respectively?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I hear what the Member has to say. I met the Confederation of Bands, which raised the issue as well, and we passed that on to the Arts Council. It is one of the practical arrangements that we need to look at in the future. Given the cost of some of the musical instruments, they need to be factored into the award. You cannot apply for two sets of funding for the same thing, and the money is not available in the communities to make up the difference. It will, therefore, have an impact. We need to work out whether we can and how we can make a difference in this. I hear what the Member has to say.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. What funding is available for bands in the North?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I said to Mrs Hale, over £800,000 has been made available. That was £200,000 a year. Grants for equipment are up to £10,000, and the equipment programme for funds for over £10,000 is available. As I said, bands can apply for that funding through the Arts Council.

Mrs McKeivitt: Following the Department's study into marching bands in the North of Ireland, several opportunities for development were identified. Given the importance of marching bands in preserving cultural and musical traditions, what has the Minister done to actively build on the areas for development?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The areas for development of some bands are financially based, and they need additional resources that I do not have, but the areas for development of others are around governance and getting the band constituted. At this stage, that is what is happening through NICVA. There is a toolkit available on the website to help bands reach the criteria they need in order to put them in a better place, if they ever decide to apply for funding in future years.

Mr Elliott: I understand that the Minister's predecessor commissioned some research into marching bands? How is the current Minister taking that forward?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am taking the research forward, and I am going back to have a look at it again to make sure that it is still relevant. I am supportive of the initiative. I have met the marching bands, and I intend to meet them again throughout this year. My officials are working very closely to look at possible recommendations and any review or revision of those recommendations to try to put this on a better footing for the next period. We are looking at this in a very positive way.

Fishing Licences

5. **Mr Doherty** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the potential benefits of an all-Ireland fishing licence. (AQO 2050/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Three bodies across the island of Ireland provide fishing licences for their jurisdictions. Those bodies are DCAL, the Loughs Agency and Inland Fisheries Ireland. The licensing regimes are all different, reflecting the different legislation and priorities in each jurisdiction. However, I can see the merit of rationalising licensing regimes across the island of Ireland. In particular, it would simplify the purchase of licences for tourist anglers.

The current licensing regime recognises that there are distinct types of angling, and it allows anglers to pay only for that which they practise. It will be important that any rationalisation protects that principle. I have, therefore, asked my officials to contact colleagues in the other licensing bodies and their sponsor Departments to initiate discussions on considering the case of making angling licences available across the island.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that the system for issuing licences is too complex? Will she consider, along with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, the potential for an all-Ireland fishing licence?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I said, I have asked officials to initiate discussions. I have listened to anglers from different clubs, and they said that the system of licences being issued from different Departments is too complex and cumbersome. Our own anglers said that, so we need to accept that it will be really confusing for tourists who come here to fish and angle. So, I will initiate discussions with DCAL and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr Campbell: Most tourists who come for fishing breaks come for a short-stay break. Does the Minister agree that it would be a much more sensible arrangement to look at short-stay applications for two, three or four days for tourists from whatever country they come, whether it is the Irish Republic, France, Germany or anywhere else?

Ms Ní Chuilín: All the conditions of licensing, and even the different types of licences that are purchased, will be examined. There are only two types of licence in the Loughs Agency, from where you can get a junior permit, whereas DCAL issues up to 17 different types. It is about simplifying that system and making it easier for people who want to angle. We are looking at this in a very practical and pragmatic way. I think that all Members would agree that we need to simplify the system rather than further complicate it.

Mr Rogers: Have there been any discussions with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) about the promotion of angling as a tourist opportunity across Ireland?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have not had any discussions about this with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, but we will be looking at talking to DETI officials. It makes sense to make sure that all our Departments are involved in this process, that we get agreement and that we get a system and regime that simplifies the process and makes it easier

for people, particularly for our towns and villages that rely on angling as part of their tourism product.

Regional Stadium Development Programme

6. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the development of Windsor Park, Casement Park and Ravenhill. (AQO 2051/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As the Member will know, the stadium programme is complex. As regards rugby, planning permission for Ravenhill was received earlier this year. The design has been developed, and they will go to tender for a contractor in mid-June. The contractor should be on site in September.

The GAA is out to tender for a design team, which will be appointed by the end of July. It is working with the planners on Casement Park's requirements and has commenced various surveys and agreed the overall programme with my Department. In addition, it will shortly commence a consultation process with residents.

The Irish Football Association (IFA) has also agreed its overall programme with my Department. It has appointed a design team and is working on the design of Windsor Park. It is working with the planners and will submit for planning by the end of the year. It will also commence a consultation process shortly.

That progress means that it is anticipated that rugby will have its stadium by September 2014, soccer will have its stadium by June 2015, and the GAA will have its stadium by September 2015.

2.45 pm

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for her reply. Can she tell the House what work DCAL is doing with the three sporting bodies to ensure that, in the medium to long term, the stadiums will be sustainable?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I am sure the Member is aware and can appreciate, the whole process is very detailed. However, sustainability is absolutely key for the three sporting bodies. As well as being about the sustainability of the infrastructure of the three stadia, it is about achieving sustainability in the communities. Right from the start of the project, which is the biggest capital programme in this CSR period, we want to ensure that communities are considered. They will certainly be considered right at the end, and by that I mean employment opportunities, training and apprenticeships, as well as the provision of goods and services.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister tell us whether there will be strong social clauses that affect the neighbourhoods around the stadia?

Ms Ní Chuilín: There absolutely will be strong social clauses. Casement Park is in West Belfast, Windsor Park is in South Belfast, and Ravenhill is beside the Cregagh estate. All three are distinct areas with distinct needs. Those constituencies need opportunities, but so do surrounding areas. Therefore, our social clauses will be as strong as they can possibly be to make sure that everybody, where possible, has some opportunity for training, employment, retraining or an apprenticeship and, indeed, will

have a presence in the three stadia well after they are built and delivered.

DCAL: Arm's-length Bodies

7. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on her Department's review of its arm's-length bodies. (AQO 2052/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My review of the Department's arm's-length bodies started with reviews of Sport NI and Museums NI. The reviews are being taken forward in two stages. The first stage considers the continuing need for the functions of each body. It also examines the governance and accountability arrangements in place, and the effectiveness and value for money of each body in its current form. The second stage will consider future delivery options for the functions of each body.

The stage one review for both bodies is nearing completion and has highlighted some issues. I am considering how those issues will be addressed before the review team finalises stage one and completes stage two.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, agus tá an-áthas orm go bhfuil an tAire ag caint liom arís. I am delighted that the Minister is speaking to me again after the last day. Can she confirm that she has withdrawn her edict to arm's-length bodies to channel all announcements through her?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am not really sure what the Member is referring to. I think that he may be referring to the media communications protocol that we are trying to finalise with some arm's-length bodies. Rather than withdraw it, we are progressing with it. Most of the bodies have signed up, and we are still completing the protocol with the rest.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister confirm whether the movement of responsibility for delivery of stadia development from Sport NI to the Department has anything to do with the findings of the review of Sport NI that is being undertaken?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can confirm that that is not the case. It was quite obvious, and I said this at the time, that the stadia programme was quite big for a body such as Sport NI to take on on its own. There were delays, so I made a decision to make the Department responsible for it to ensure not only that we reached the targets set by the Executive but that the money was spent, that nothing was returned and that the three sporting bodies got what they needed. It has absolutely nothing to do with the review that we are undertaking of Sport NI.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for her answers. Will she detail her work with her Executive colleague the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on reviewing the excellent work of NI Screen, given that it is funded by both Departments?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Needless to say, the work that we are to do is still not finalised. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I are not only involved in the work and funding of NI Screen but are responsible for creative industries and taking forward a robust music strategy. So, work in those three areas is under way. I think that the Member is trying to say that, through NI Screen, a lot of Executive resources have been spent, particularly on film and television. We want to continue to make sure that that

is still value for money, and we are making those areas competitive so that we can attract other productions, which will help our economy.

Sport: Reconciliation

8. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the role that sport plays in reconciliation in Northern Ireland. (AQO 2053/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I recognise that the development of sport in the North has in the past been affected and hindered by community tensions and has, on occasion, reflected segregation. However, I also believe that well-managed sport has played and can play an important role in reconciliation here. That is recognised in my Department's 10-year strategy for sport and physical recreation, Sport Matters. Sport Matters commits the Government to the promotion of sport in the context of a shared and better future, and it encourages sport to embrace and facilitate the process of reconciliation. To achieve that, the strategy contains a number of targets and actions to help to promote community cohesion through sport, including improving participation rates among under-represented groups of people and the provision of shared spaces for sport that promote community integration.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she tell the House how far down the road we are with the 10-year strategy? Are we on target, and what is the level of achievement? In other words, is the strategy working to schedule, behind schedule or ahead of schedule?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will take the last question first. The strategy is not only working to schedule but is working better than we had anticipated. Can we do more? Absolutely. We can always do more to provide better opportunities for reconciliation, integration and cohesion. I honestly believe that the community and voluntary groups that are involved in participation in sport are the best example for all of us. For many years, they have led by example, and Sport Matters complements that. If the Member, or anyone else for that matter, has suggestions about anything that we have not thought about or that is not included in the strategy that would promote better reconciliation and inclusion, I would be really happy to hear about it.

Mr Humphrey: I very much agree with the broad thrust of Dr McDonnell's question. I am proud to be a member of the green-and-white army, and growing up in north Belfast, my idol was Pat Jennings. Does the Minister agree that any player born in Northern Ireland, or who has represented Northern Ireland at youth level, should play for Northern Ireland and that failure to do so actually damages community relations?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not agree with the Member. I think that it is a choice for the players, and it is down to the sporting bodies. It would be irresponsible for someone in my position to try to corral people. I am on the record as saying that I would much prefer an all-Ireland team, as did George Best. I honestly believe that there would be great support for such a team and everything that goes with it. Regardless of what team people prefer to play for, they have my support.

Intercultural Arts Strategy

9. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline any discussions she has had with the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the recently launched intercultural arts strategy. (AQO 2054/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have not had any direct discussions with the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the Arts Council's recently launched intercultural arts strategy. However, I understand that the Arts Council consulted Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) officials during the development of the strategy and that an OFMDFM official sits on the implementation group.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her response. Will the Minister join me in congratulating a young swimmer from my constituency who has just received a silver medal and wish her all success for the upcoming Olympic Games? We are very proud of her.

Given the vital role that the ethnic minority development fund will have for all groups availing themselves of the intercultural arts strategy, has the Minister discussed with OFMDFM the inordinate delays in the administration of that fund? If not, will she engage with the office to distribute those funds as soon as possible?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Taking the last matter first, I have not had discussions with OFMDFM about this fund or about any details surrounding it in terms of delays or anything else. As I said in my answer to a previous question, OFMDFM officials sit on this body and so will be aware of this. I will certainly pass the Member's comments on.

Along with others, I congratulate Sycerika McMahon on her achievement. I think that everyone in this House, and even outside it, is extremely proud of her, her coaches, her family and her community.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answers to date. Does she agree that, as a medium, the arts have the potential to improve mutual respect and understanding across and within communities?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I absolutely do agree. Even this morning, in the Long Gallery, there was a Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union — SIPTU — event, and a group representing north and west Belfast called Artability. Through the promotion and facilitation of the arts, they offer facilities for people with disabilities who come from what has been known as both sides of the community, and have done so for a long time.

I have also seen the work of Draw Down the Walls in my North Belfast constituency, where people have used the arts at interfaces to talk about some of the very challenging issues that adults sometimes cannot bring themselves to discuss. I have also seen the role of the arts, through the media of drama and play at St Mary's recently around the Ulster covenant, and I have seen the power that that medium has in fostering and developing better relations. I am looking forward to supporting the work that we have done thus far in developing and supporting further work to meet those aims.

Mr Dallat: Will she outline what steps she has taken to action the different points raised in relation to the intercultural arts strategy?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am due to meet my arts branch in three weeks to look at the actions from that strategy and, indeed, other outstanding actions in relation to the arts. I think that that is important. I do not think that anyone is doing this from a mischievous point of view. If there are delays, the rationale for them needs to be explained to me. We also need to look at resolution of delays or perceived delays. I will certainly be doing that. The meeting will be in mid-June, and I am sure that this will come up again in future Question Times. I am happy to write to the Member on the issue he has raised and provide the answer that he needs.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 10 has been withdrawn.

Sport: Health Benefits

11. **Mr McGimpsey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the work she is undertaking, in conjunction with other relevant Departments, to encourage participation in sport as a contributor to improving health.

(AQO 2056/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is, alongside other Departments, supporting the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in developing a new Investing for Health framework. As part of that process, DCAL has submitted a number of proposals to the Health Department, setting out where sport might contribute to the implementation of the framework. In addition, my Department's sports strategy, Sport Matters, contains targets designed to increase participation in sport across the population. To ensure that these are delivered, DCAL led a Sport Matters monitoring group, chaired by me, and established to oversee the implementation of Sport Matters. The group comprises representatives from a number of key stakeholder Departments, including Health, Education, Social Development, Agriculture and Rural Development and Employment and Learning.

Mr McGimpsey: I ask the Minister, particularly in relation to health and the issues that are the responsibility of the Public Health Agency, bearing in mind prevention, promotion and protection, what steps she believes could usefully be taken with that agency to further the aims and objectives of her Department?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have met the Health Minister on at least two occasions. We are due to have another meeting. I have met the Agriculture Minister, and I am meeting the Education Minister. As regards the Health Minister and the Public Health Agency, we are looking to use sport and physical activity as ways of promoting better health awareness, including mental health awareness. We have also met groups that are working on the prevention of suicide and groups that are trying to reduce obesity and diabetes. I have to say that the relationship with the Health Department and the Health Minister is very proactive. It is very "can do". We are looking in our own Departments and agencies for gaps and to make sure that we do everything in a joined-up way, which I understand was not done previously.

3.00 pm

Mr I McCrea: For most Members, childhoods were spent outside kicking football or playing whatever type of sport and getting involved in many different sporting activities at school. Can the Minister outline what discussions she has had with the Education Minister to encourage more people to take part in sport, not only while they are at school but while they are at home?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I have said, I have had no discussions with the Minister of Education solely on the Sport Matters strategy, but officials have been meeting and working together. I want to personally meet all the Ministers, where possible, to look at a joined-up way on this.

I agree with the Member that it is necessary to ensure that children and young people have every opportunity to participate in sport. Recently, I met women who work in the area of sport who asked me to do that, particularly for young women who do not feel comfortable participating in sport, in schools and outside, perhaps because of changing facilities. We must make it easier for women and not take our eye off the ball. It is important that, throughout school and afterwards, we provide opportunities and a better way to get children and young people involved in more physical activity.

Regional Development

Housing: Amenities

1. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps are being taken to ensure that residents purchasing homes with the benefit of surety bonds under the Private Streets (NI) Order 1980, the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 and preceding legislation have those services adopted within a reasonable time.

(AQO 2061/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development):

Roads Service and NI Water have advised that they continue to work closely with developers during the construction of roads and sewers in new housing developments. Officials inspect the work at key stages and process requests for bond reductions and preliminary certificates promptly, in order to facilitate progress towards final adoption of a development.

In normal circumstances, the pace of the process is generally driven by the developer's progress on site. However, in cases where the developer does not complete the street works or sewers as agreed or if the works are not proceeding at an appropriate pace, officials will initially seek to negotiate with the developer or other responsible party to get the necessary work completed. If that is not successful, enforcement action is initiated, and, if the developer fails to act, Roads Service and NI Water make arrangements to access the bond moneys and instruct their own contractors to carry out the necessary works. As soon as the works are complete, the road and sewers become adopted and are then maintained as part of the public road and sewerage network.

The Member will also be aware of the inquiry into unadopted roads that is being taken forward by the Committee for Regional Development. My Department has provided written and verbal evidence to the inquiry, awaits receipt of the

report with interest and will give careful consideration to its recommendations.

I should say that my Department is broadly content with the current private streets legislation. It provides a good balance, reconciling the responsibilities of the Department with those of developers and house buyers, and those arrangements work well in the majority of cases. For example, in the last five years, some 260 miles of road have been adopted. However, officials also acknowledge that it would be possible to give added protection to homebuyers through other measures, albeit that there would be practical and financial implications for developers and homebuyers that would need to be carefully considered, especially in the current economic circumstances.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his response. Given that, in some cases, surety bonds are outstanding for between 10 and 20 years on numerous developments in my constituency, what guarantees can the Minister give that enforcement action will be prioritised in such cases and that the value of the surety meets the value of the work that remains outstanding?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary question. She has taken particular interest in the matter. I recall the Assembly debate that we recently had on it. I am pleased to inform the Member that substantial progress continues to be made, particularly in her area, Strangford. There are recently adopted developments and those which are to be adopted shortly in the near future. There are always contentious sites, and my Department and NI Water will continue to work at them. Clearly, those that stretch into a period of years are unacceptable, and we need to see a resolution of those matters as quickly as possible. I assure the Member that I am as keen to see that as any Member of the House.

Mr Nesbitt: The Minister mentioned an "appropriate pace" of activity by developers. Is the Minister content that "appropriate pace" can be easily defined?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. There is an issue there. We hope and expect that the works will be completed within one year of the houses being occupied. If there is ongoing work further along a development or street, it may be deemed reasonable for a developer to take more than a year to complete the final surfacing. As usual, in all these matters, there is a balance to be found. By working with developers, we seek to complete those developments as quickly as possible, so that the householders can enjoy proper access and proper water and sewerage facilities.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister increase the number of staff involved in enforcement in the southern division in order to ensure that action is speedy and efficient?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. It is not simply a matter of employing more people. By working more smartly and more closely with developers and all the agencies involved, significant progress is possible without adding significantly to the expense of the service. It is my belief that improvements can and perhaps will be made to the service that we offer. I am hoping for ideas and looking forward to the recommendations that the Regional Development

Committee will bring forward as part of its inquiry. I will listen closely to those, but I also have ideas of my own.

We also have to bear it in mind that simply increasing the costs to developers will likely lead to the costs being put back onto potential homebuyers. With the housing market in its current state, I am not sure that that would be logical or very sensible. All in all, there are a number of factors that need to be given careful consideration.

Ms Lo: I have received complaints from constituents in Brooke Hall about problems with sewage and unfinished pavements and roads. The residents have been there for five years now. Can the Minister please do something to enable the adoption process to go ahead, so that the facilities and homes can be enjoyed by the residents?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary question. I agree that five years is unacceptable. If she furnishes me with the details, I will be happy to investigate to see if we can make progress.

Northern Ireland Water

2. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his preferred governance model for Northern Ireland Water.
(AQO 2062/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Currently, NI Water has dual governance arrangements. Legally, it is a regulated utility, and, financially, it is treated as part of the public expenditure regime. That has arisen because NI Water did not become self-funding as anticipated when it was established. In the Programme for Government, which was published on 12 March 2012, the Executive made a continued commitment not to introduce household charges during this Budget period. Given that commitment, I will bring forward legislation later in the year to extend current temporary subsidy arrangements.

In the longer term, the preferred form of governance will depend on how the Executive decide NI Water should be funded. If the Executive continue majority public funding indefinitely, it might be consistent to make legislative changes to reflect that; if they intend that water should become more self-funding, a model along the regulated utility lines would be logical. It is my intention to put a paper to the Executive in the near future on the implications of the Programme for Government commitment.

Mr Dickson: Minister, there was a large degree of consensus at the recent Institute of Water conference that some form of mutualised model was the way forward. Do you agree with that, or do you have some other model in mind?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. All of us are aware of the Alliance Party's position on these matters — the introduction of water charges and, indeed, advocating the mutualisation of NI Water. That is plainly on the record. What is equally plainly on the record is that the current Programme for Government, agreed not only by the Executive but by the Assembly, made it clear that there will be no additional charges in this mandate. The purpose of my paper to Executive colleagues will be to explore — helpfully, I hope — how we can begin a mature debate on the best options that

are available for the future of NI Water and how it is funded and governed.

Mr Spratt: Minister, with regard to governance models, will you ensure that your officials take a serious look at the Scottish model for any changes that may happen in the future, when possible water charges might come in?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the Member's supplementary question. I welcome him back to the House and to his role as Chairman of the Regional Development Committee.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Kennedy: I have been actively looking and consulting already on models available in Scotland, Wales, other parts of the United Kingdom and, indeed, the Republic of Ireland. All of that has given me a very useful insight on a potential way forward for the Northern Ireland Executive. It is an important matter that the Executive should reflect on and, I hope, come to consensus on. That is what I will seek to do, and, obviously, the Regional Development Committee will have a role in that too.

Mr Dallat: I congratulate the Minister on the calming effect that he has had on NI Water. Can we be assured that, in future, whatever the governance, there will be less of the turbulence of the past and the tsunamis that robbed people of their water supply and caused so much grief to people who either worked for the company or were part of it?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his carefully phrased supplementary question; I will equally carefully attempt to phrase my answer. Stability is in everybody's interest, and there has been a high degree of stability with NI Water over recent months. The current chief executive, Trevor Haslett, has, in no small measure, contributed to that. I am very much looking to the future to see how we can put NI Water on a proper footing as it faces the challenges of the future. We enjoy record levels of quality drinking water and sewerage, and those are positives. However, there are issues of governance and funding that need to be addressed, and, with good will on all sides, we can attempt to do that.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister spoke about bringing forward a model of governance for NIW. How does he see that model being accountable to the Assembly?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. Amongst the issues that the Executive need to decide on is how NI Water will operate. Will it be a privatised company? Will it be part-privatised and mutualised in some way? Could it be brought back into public ownership through nationalisation, which is, I think, more complex and more difficult? Those are the issues. However, ultimately, there has to be a degree of political accountability. I am conscious of those issues, and, with Executive colleagues and members of the Regional Development Committee, including Mr Lynch, I will seek to explore avenues for how best to achieve that.

3.15 pm

Railways: All-island Network

3. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions have been held with the Dublin Government about sourcing EU funding for an all-island rail network.

(AQO 2063/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have not yet had any formal discussions with the Irish Government about a joint bid for EU funding to improve cross-border rail services. I did discuss potential service improvements to the Belfast to Dublin Enterprise service with the Irish Transport Minister in the margins of the European transport council meeting in Brussels in December. I am keen to see what can be done on the line north of Dublin to ensure that the Enterprise can arrive in Dublin before 9.00 am on weekdays.

At the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in transport sectoral format on 20 April 2012, Minister Varadkar and I noted that the reliability and punctuality of the Enterprise service had improved significantly in recent months. I welcome the new station that has been constructed at Newry and the work that has started on the redevelopment of Portadown station. I look forward to measures that will be completed this year to improve locomotive reliability on the Enterprise service and to equip the trains with Wi-Fi. As regards longer-term improvements, Minister Varadkar and I agreed that investment possibilities to upgrade the Belfast to Dublin railway line could be considered within the context of forthcoming EU decisions on the next Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) programme. We await the outcome of those decisions.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for a comprehensive answer. I hope that we can have a commitment from him to push ahead with a submission to the EU for funding on an all-island basis in order to improve rail services on the Belfast to Dublin line and, indeed, the Belfast to Derry line. I think that, on his recent visit to Brussels, the Minister was somewhat encouraged by the fact that there might be opportunities to follow up on that. Can he confirm that there will be improvements in the town of Lurgan in particular?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question.

Mrs D Kelly: I am asking whether the Minister will look at the needs of Lurgan in respect of the Belfast to Dublin line.

Mr Kennedy: I am very grateful for the Member's supplementary question. We seemed to travel from Brussels to Lurgan very quickly. For factual accuracy, I was not in Brussels but Strasbourg. Nonetheless, there was useful engagement in Strasbourg with, amongst others, Commissioner Kallas and members of the European subcommittee on TEN-T issues. I understand the Member's point. I am very keen to see improvements generally to the rail network. One of the difficulties we face in Europe is that it has a sense that freight in Northern Ireland and, indeed, in the Republic of Ireland is moved by rail, which is not the case. Unfortunately, it does not appear to be immediately economically viable either. However, we are making close representations to Europe on all these issues.

On the issue of Lurgan, the Member will be aware that Translink has identified a signalling upgrade that will, when implemented, reduce crossing closure times for southbound trains stopping at Lurgan railway station. The upgrade will be installed and commissioned in this financial year. However, it will work only for trains stopping at the station before passing over the level crossing. I explained that in detail at Craigavon council at the end of March. Translink has invested around £827,000 in the upkeep and refurbishment of facilities at Lurgan rail station. However, there are no plans or available funding at this time for any major works

to Lurgan railway station. The need for investment in the station will be reviewed by Translink as it updates and prioritises its plans for capital expenditure.

Mr Campbell: I do not know whether the Minister has had any assessment done of international rail travel between Northern Ireland and the Republic and whatever hundreds of millions it would cost to develop that, but would he set that beside the need to develop internal rail links within Northern Ireland — we have seen the need for that — equating those two to ensure that we get the productivity there internally, before we talk about internationally?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member. I think that he was being slightly mischievous, but I accept the point that he makes. I think that I have shown strong commitment to improving the rail infrastructure in Northern Ireland with the upgrade of the Coleraine to Londonderry line. I know that the Member and, indeed, all Members of the House will support that. Where it is possible and subject to the necessary funding being available, yes, of course, I see rail infrastructure as an important tool. There is good evidence of that, with the new trains that are continuing to be brought online and the 20 new trains purchased recently. That is improving the service and the experience of travelling by rail, and that is reflected in the record number of people who use trains to travel either for leisure or for work.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Príomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I wonder whether the Minister agrees with Mr Campbell's colleague junior Minister Bell, who earlier expressed the importance of the TEN-T funding for rail development on this island. I wonder, in particular, what thoughts he would have on the development, somewhere down the line, of a potential western corridor for rail on the island of Ireland.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. As I have outlined, we had very constructive meetings in Strasbourg last week on the TEN-T regulations. That will be ongoing work. The Member will know that I am due to come before the Regional Development Committee on Wednesday to update it with a report from my recent visit. These are issues that we will want to carry forward constructively together.

The potential cost of what would be, in European terms, a high-speed rail network, either North/South or, indeed, extending to other parts of the neighbouring jurisdiction, is likely to be prohibitive. Some £1 billion is talked about. We want to ensure that Northern Ireland can avail itself of any possible opportunity for grant assistance from Europe in terms of the TEN-T regulations, and that is what I am working to achieve.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for his answers so far, and, indeed, the work that is being done to improve our existing rail services. He has pointed out the increased take-up of rail, which is, no doubt, a consequence of the rising cost of petrol. What is being done to introduce new services in the short or medium term?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. What I have attempted to do by, for instance, the upgrade of the Coleraine to Londonderry line, which we spoke about earlier, is not simply to maintain services but to enhance them. These things cost money, and I am mindful of the overall financial position that

Translink finds itself in. The intention is that we do not simply stand still with our rail services but continue to improve the services to the general public.

A26 Dual Carriageway: Farms

4. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister for Regional Development how he intends to minimise the disturbance to farm businesses as a result of the proposed dualling of the A26 road. (AQO 2064/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Roads Service has advised that, during construction of the A26 dualling between Glarryford and the A44 Drones Road junction, the contractor will be required to ensure that, where possible, access is maintained to all land adjacent to the works. Roads Service officials further advise that the scheme will provide an all-purpose dual carriageway, with landowners and farmers accessing it either from left in/left out junctions or from one of the adjacent full-movement, side road junctions. My officials and contracted staff will engage fully with affected landowners and their agents in relation to the provision of appropriate accommodation works, including fencing, hedging, gates and laneways. Where land is required for the scheme, landowners will be compensated in accordance with the Land Compensation (Northern Ireland) Order 1982. Compensation matters are dealt with directly by the Department of Finance and Personnel's Land and Property Services on behalf of my Department.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his reply. However, we continue to be disappointed that, while statutory works have been carried out to continue progress on the project, there still remains an issue that his Department has not been able to resolve to the satisfaction of one local farmer, if not two local farmers: the issue of an underpass. When the climbing lane was introduced at Dunloy some years ago, an underpass was supplied to a particular farmer on that particular section of the A26. Can the Minister tell the House why an underpass is not being made available to the farms that are particularly affected in this case? Northern Ireland has seen one of those farms on a recent UTV programme displaying, week by week, the best of our farming in Northern Ireland.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary. These are issues that the Member continues to raise on behalf of his constituents, along with other representatives of the area. The scheme has been assessed by Roads Service officials, and, at this point, it is not deemed to be cost-effective to create the underpasses at the locations he has indicated. One of the next stages of the statutory process will be to move to a public inquiry. Those arguments, strong as they will be, will be made at that stage, and the inspector will, I am sure, give full account to those views. At present, however, the view of Roads Service is that it would not be a cost-effective use of public money or serve the roads network to provide those underpasses. If evidence can be produced to the contrary and a compelling argument can be made, we will listen very closely.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that the upgrading of the A26 is needed not only for road safety but because it would benefit the local economy and tourism and decrease travel times for people from Ballymoney and Ballycastle? When, in the outworking of the scheme, does he foresee

that this will be done, and where does it lie with regard to his funding priorities?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I am a very clear supporter and advocate of the improvement and upgrade to the A26, not least because my party colleague Robin Swann raises it with me every time he sees me. I need no convincing of its merits and the economic benefit that it would have for that region. As I indicated, the next stage of the statutory process is likely to be the referral to public inquiry sometime towards the end of this year; we estimate that it will be November or December.

The Member will know that, as part of the overall Budget that his party and others have supported, we have invested heavily in schemes such as the A5, A8 and A2.

It remains to be seen whether the investment strategy, which has yet to be published, confirmed and adopted by the Executive and the Assembly, will yield the opportunity to carry forward a scheme such as the A26, which is competing with other schemes for bypasses or through-passes all over Northern Ireland. I, as roads Minister, simply say that I am up for doing all those roads, including upgrading the A26.

3.30 pm

Mr Allister: Will the Minister explain to my farming constituents how the Department can find hundreds of millions to pour into vanity projects like the A5 and tens of millions to pay consultants, but when it comes to farmers and facilitating their business on routes like the A26, it penny-pinches and refuses to recognise the absolute functioning necessity of an underpass? Is it not time that the Department got the balance right and provided for those whom it is affecting the most?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question, and I accept the force and passion that he put it with. The difficulty is that Roads Service and its consultants have to assess from an engineering point of view whether the underpasses represent value for money and a wise choice of carrying forward a road scheme. I indicated that individual landowners and public representatives will have the opportunity at some stage — probably at the late end of this year — to make representations at a public inquiry, and based on the strength of those, to carry those forward. If compelling and accepted arguments are made, I, as Minister, or whoever is Minister, will bring those forward. I appreciate the strength and conviction with which the Member spoke. Ultimately, however, he will know that the wise use of public money has to be a key factor in all these things, and so it is with underpasses and accommodation works that are associated with any scheme, not least the A26.

Executive Committee Business

Finance Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That this Assembly agrees that the provisions in clause 189 of and schedule 23 to the Finance Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons on 10 May 2012, dealing with the devolution of Northern Ireland long-haul rates of air passenger duty should be considered by the UK Parliament.

Before turning to the detail of the legislative consent motion, I want to touch on a number of issues; namely, the scope of the powers granted to us and the cost of expanding them. Let me be clear from the outset: I have serious concerns about the impact of air passenger duty (APD) for Northern Ireland as one of the more remote regions of the UK. I consider that, as a tax, it no longer meets the basic requirements of being fair to everyone, having a simple structure and not unduly impeding consumers and business. More generally, unlike the rest of the United Kingdom, our access to other regions is not as easy; it is heavily reliant on air transport. We have no rail or car options for wider travel within the UK.

We made our position on the duty clear in our response last June to the Government's consultation. The Government said that they will return to the rebalancing issue, which is a wider issue that has implications not only for Northern Ireland but, potentially, for Wales and Scotland. We will continue to make our views on APD known. What we are dealing with today is more limited and relates only to the devolution of rate-setting powers for direct long-haul flights.

At the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011, we were faced with significant concerns about the viability of our direct link between Belfast International Airport and New York. That was a direct result of the difference in the rate of APD here and in the Republic. It was very clear that without urgent action, that route would have been lost to Northern Ireland. It was an urgent matter, because airline schedules were being reviewed in a ruthless way following the takeover of Continental Airlines by United, and timing was crucial. The fact that the Government launched a wider consultation of APD as a whole became a problem for a time. That was launched in the Budget in March and responded to with the autumn statement in November. In the interim, the Government were reluctant to adapt the duty in any way.

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

The First Minister and the deputy First Minister, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I pressed them hard, with the support of Northern Ireland Office Ministers, and I am pleased to say that the Prime Minister and Her Majesty's Treasury Ministers, particularly the Chancellor — without whose help, it would not have happened — responded positively. Our request was that the Government take whatever action necessary to avoid the loss of that important air link. Our first preference was to find a way to do that within the national air passenger duty framework. Our request indicated that if the Government could not do that, we wanted the powers devolved so that we could take the necessary action ourselves. We wanted a similar

exemption to that which applies for Scotland's islands, which is on the basis of a very low population density. We cannot begin to match that but we hoped that an exemption would be made available on some other basis. If that could have been achieved, we would not have needed to devolve the powers and would not have needed the block grant reduction that comes with that.

The Government explored that fully with the European Commission, but no such solution could be found within the state aid rules. The most legally sound long-term solution was to devolve the powers in line with the EU Azores criteria. It was, I believe, the Chancellor who took the decision to reduce the air passenger duty rate for direct long-haul flights from Northern Ireland to the same as that for short-haul flights with effect from last November and to begin the process of devolving the necessary powers to us. I thank him and the Secretary of State for that.

The legislative consent motion before us today is intended to give effect to the first stage of the process prior to an Assembly Bill being brought forward. Before turning to the detail of the legislative consent motion, let me be quite clear: what was under consideration by the Government and on which our consent is being sought is provision to devolve air passenger duty rate-setting for direct long-haul flights only.

Many have argued that that provision should be made to extend devolved powers to band A short-haul flights. Indeed, that issue was raised by the Finance and Personnel Committee, and the Chairman will probably say something about that later. However, put simply, the policy framework to provide for that is simply not in place. The Executive have not agreed such an approach, and at no time have the powers been requested from the Government by the Executive. Indeed, even if we did ask for greater powers, it is not clear that they would have been agreed to. Given the timetable for the Finance Bill 2012, it would be near impossible to do that in that Bill. It is likely that Royal Assent will be granted before Parliament's summer recess.

Although agreeing the policy on short-haul APD rates may be relatively straightforward, gaining consent to the financial implications would not be. Although it could be argued that the powers could be granted to use and exercise at a later date, that would be a somewhat unusual approach from a legislative perspective. The devolution of short-haul rates of APD would be an expensive measure. For direct long-haul flights, devolution will cost in the region of £5 million a year with a zero rate.

A similar approach for short-haul flights would be considerably higher, costing in the region of £60 million per annum at present and, perhaps, rising to £90 million per annum. That is not an inconsiderable sum by any stretch of the imagination. Also, as we contemplate other block adjustments, it is a significant sum that would have to be dealt with.

Although phasing may help in the early years, it would not detract from the long-term annual cost. Even halving the rate of duty on short-haul flights would initially cost around £30 million a year. That would have considerable recurring annual consequences for the resources at the Executive's disposal at a time of already considerable budgetary constraint. Furthermore, to devolve greater powers than are

contained in the current Finance Bill may also require an amendment to the Northern Ireland Act 1998, as opposed to being able to deliver the reductions solely through the Finance Bill amendment. The time needed for this would be simply too long for the action that we want to take on direct long-haul flights.

For these reasons, the legislation before Parliament at this time, rightly I believe, deals with the devolution of air passenger duty rate-setting for direct long-haul flights from Northern Ireland. There is a need for restraint and careful consideration for calls for the devolution of wider powers where these have considerable financial consequences for Northern Ireland. That is not to say that the wider concerns have been rejected by the Government or that this is an issue that should not be further considered. Rather, it needs to be considered in the wider context of other regions in the UK and the Government's response to this more generally.

I will now turn briefly to the detail of the legislation that is going through Parliament and which would give effect to the devolution of air passenger duty rate-setting for direct long-haul flights from Northern Ireland. Members will wish to note that the Assembly has no powers in relation to APD, as this is an excepted matter. An Assembly Bill cannot be used to implement the proposal to give the Assembly powers to set the APD rate for direct long-haul flights starting in Northern Ireland. Once the relevant powers are devolved to the Assembly, an Assembly Bill will be required to set the direct long-haul air passenger duty rate for Northern Ireland.

The provisions of the Westminster Finance Bill that deal with Northern Ireland and air passenger duty contain retrospective, current and future aspects. Part 1 of schedule 23 to the Bill gives effect to the cut in air passenger duty for direct long-haul flights departing from Northern Ireland with effect from 1 November 2011. The provision gives legal effect to the rate of duty for direct long-haul flights from Northern Ireland being reduced to £12 for standard class and £24 for any other class for the period from 1 November 2011 to 31 March 2012. This means that the short-haul rate of duty is applied where a direct long-haul flight is undertaken from Northern Ireland or, if there is more than one flight involved, the first connection is made in a long-haul destination. Part 2 of the schedule provides for an increase in the rate of APD from 1 April 2012, with the short-haul rate for band A increased from £13 to £26. Provision is also made for those new rates to apply to all direct long-haul flights from Northern Ireland. The Assembly does not have to give consent to these two Parts of the schedule, as no powers are devolved in relation to this.

Part 3 of the schedule devolves the rate-setting for direct long-haul flights to Northern Ireland. This change will apply to flights that take off from Northern Ireland on or before an appointed day. The date is likely to be in late 2012 or 1 April 2013. The date will be appointed following the Finance Bill receiving Royal Assent and the necessary primary legislation being passed in the Assembly. The Programme for Government indicates that the Executive wish to set the rate to zero for direct long-haul flights.

Part 3 of the schedule also makes administrative provision in relation to the setting-up and maintenance of a register of aircraft operators with routes from Northern Ireland.

In addition, it provides for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) to disclose information to the Secretary of State, the Treasury and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) for the purpose of setting the new rates of duty, along with the restrictions on the further disclosure of that information and associated penalties. The legislative consent of the Assembly is required for Part 3 as it gives autonomy over the rates to be set for direct long-haul flights from Northern Ireland.

3.45 pm

Part 4 of the schedule provides for the extension of APD to passengers in smaller aircraft and reduces the de minimis weight limit from 10 tons to 5.7 tons. It also extends the exceptions to APD for aircraft used for certain purposes and provides for new rates for certain aircraft. A new rate will apply to those aircraft that have a take-off weight of more than 20 tons and that seat fewer than 19 passengers. Essentially, the provisions extend APD to private jets and set a new rate for luxury private jets.

Part 4 also includes changes to reflect the devolution of APD rates for direct long-haul flights from Northern Ireland. For luxury private jets, the legislation provides that the APD rate would be twice that which otherwise applies, and once powers are devolved, it will be twice the standard prevailing rate set by the Assembly. Members will wish to note that although the default rate for luxury private aircraft will be twice the standard prevailing rate, my Department has asked HMRC to provide so that the Assembly could determine different rates for that category of aircraft. If agreed by the Government, an amendment will be tabled at Report Stage, which is scheduled for early July. More generally, the changes in Part 4 will take effect from 1 April 2013.

It is anticipated that the Finance Bill will secure Royal Assent in mid-July. Following that, I will bring a Bill to the Assembly for approval, which will give effect to the second stage of the devolution process: the setting of the direct long-haul rates at zero. I hope that that Bill will be passed before the end of the year, subject to the Assembly's agreement to the use of accelerated passage.

Before we move into the debate, I want to take the opportunity to thank the Committee for its consideration of the APD rates and the publication of its report on the matter. As always, I welcome the views of the Committee and look forward to its continued assistance as the necessary Bill is brought forward to this place.

In conclusion, having got the support of the Executive Committee, I would welcome the support of Members on this motion.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On 5 March 2012, the Minister of Finance and Personnel wrote to seek the views of the Finance and Personnel Committee on the provisions of the proposed UK Finance Bill that would devolve direct long-haul rates of air passenger duty to the Assembly. Given that that involves the devolution of tax-setting powers, the Assembly's consent is required in the form of the legislative consent motion that is before us today.

The Committee was briefed by departmental officials on the implications of the proposed provisions in the Finance

Bill on 14 March. The Committee noted that, in addition to DFP, the provisions could be of interest to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). Therefore, a response was sought from the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, which confirmed that it supported the proposed legislative consent motion.

To inform its work, the Committee received evidence from a range of stakeholders. On 18 April and 25 April, oral evidence was taken from panels of witnesses that included representatives from Belfast International Airport, George Best Belfast City Airport, ABTA: The Travel Association, the Hotels Federation, the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau, the Consumer Council, the Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses. Written submissions were also received from Ballymena Borough Council, Aer Lingus, Flybe and York Aviation. On 2 May, Members received a briefing from the Assembly's Research and Information Service together with a final oral submission from DFP officials.

Air passenger duty has been criticised as a form of unfair and economically damaging taxation, and Britain is often cited as having the highest APD in the world. The Committee noted that a number of Governments in other European countries either have not implemented aviation duties or have reduced or withdrawn them because of the potential damage to the air transport industry. Members also noted evidence that supports the argument that the British Government should reconsider their policy position and abolish APD, given that it is also damaging to the economy in Britain.

Many of the stakeholders who provided evidence to the Committee emphasised the importance of air travel to business and tourism here. Various statistics were cited, including that the air transport sector contributed a gross value added of around £127million to the regional economy in 2009 and directly supported 704 jobs and an additional 914 jobs in the production line.

The Committee was informed that the anticipated cost of devolving APD on direct long-haul flights, an estimated £5 million per annum, is lower than the direct and indirect revenue that is generated here by the North American route on which the Executive originally campaigned for a reduction in APD and which has been worth in excess of £100 million over seven years.

The Committee recognises that APD is a regressive tax that is particularly disadvantageous to businesses, consumers and the wider economy in the North. This is due to the peripheral location of the region, which results in greater dependence on air travel, and to the proximity to airports in the South, particularly Dublin Airport, which hold a competitive advantage, given that a nominal €3 rate of APD applies. The negative consequences for the North will be exacerbated by the further increases in APD rates levied by the British Government from 1 April 2012. Members, therefore, welcome the proposed devolution of APD rates on direct long-haul flights as an important step towards redressing the disproportionate burden of APD locally.

The Committee agrees that the Executive and the Treasury are to be commended for the responsive action that has been taken to safeguard the vital Belfast-New York connection. The Committee has recommended that the

Minister of Finance and Personnel, together with the other applicable Ministers, should now develop a co-ordinated action plan in conjunction with all the key stakeholders to maximise the economic opportunities arising from the devolution of direct long-haul rates of APD. This should include the aim of establishing new direct long-haul flight connections to key business and tourism hubs.

The Finance Bill also includes provisions that extend APD to small business jets, which are currently exempt due to restrictions on weight and size. This will result in most business jet passengers being subject to the same rate of duty as commercial aircraft passengers. Furthermore, luxury private airlines will pay double the higher rate of APD. The Committee research pointed out to DFP that if the Assembly were to set the direct long-haul standard rate of APD to zero, it would create an anomaly where luxury private aircraft flying from the North would be liable for a zero rate of APD. The Department subsequently informed the Committee and the Minister confirmed in his remarks that discussions are ongoing with Revenue and Customs to determine whether the Assembly could be given the power to set the private luxury aircraft APD rate at something other than twice the standard prevailing rate, should the Assembly wish to do so at a future date. This would give the Assembly the power to set a different rate should it so wish. According to the Department, it is hoped that an amendment will be approved at Report Stage of the Westminster Bill on 2 July 2012 to give effect to this. The Committee would welcome this amendment to the Finance Bill. Indeed, as I said, the Finance Minister confirmed that that is his expectation also.

Although the Committee invited evidence specifically on the detail of the relevant provisions in the Finance Bill, it also received a substantial body of evidence on wider policy issues in respect of APD, including its impact on the regional economy and on provisions that are absent from the Finance Bill but which might have been included. In evidence collected by the Committee, there was general support for the proposal to devolve direct long-haul rates of duty, including optimism that this will open up long-haul route development opportunities for the North. However, many stakeholders argued in favour of fuller devolution of powers than that contained in schedule 23 to the Finance Bill, in particular to cover domestic and short-haul rates, which comprise the vast majority of flights from the region. This was reflected in the comments of the chief executive of Belfast City Airport:

"The moves that have been made to date on air passenger duty have left 98% of that problem untouched."

Although this issue is wider than the terms of the legislative consent motion before us, it is relevant to the debate in that it concerns provisions that are absent from the Finance Bill but which might have been included.

The Committee concluded that it had been presented with a strong case for reducing or abolishing APD rates on the 98-5% of flights from the North that fall into the domestic and short-haul band A as a measure to improve the region's connectivity with Britain and other European states, with a view to boosting business and tourism and helping to rebalance the regional economy. While recognising that this will require rigorous cost-benefit analysis, the Committee also concluded that, given the Treasury's insistence on the devolution of, rather than exemption from, APD and the

determination of the British Government to retain APD as a revenue-raising measure, any future reduction in APD on band A flights from the North is likely to be achieved only through the further devolution of powers to also cover band A rates. The Department has advised the Committee that devolving APD rates for all flights from the North and setting a zero rate across all bands could cost the Executive around £60 million per annum. This is a figure that the Treasury has provided as an estimate of the duty that would be applicable from 2010-11. The Minister, however, has quoted a figure of up to £90 million, although DFP officials clarified, as did the Minister today, that that is based on estimated projections up to 2016-17.

I emphasise the Committee's recommendation that a cost-benefit decision on the devolution of powers over band A rates should take account of the fact that the Executive will only incur a substantive cost if and when the devolved powers are used to reduce the band A rates. The estimated £60 million total cost would only apply if the Executive opted to set a zero rate across all the APD bands. Importantly, the Committee has also recommended that the Executive take an evidence-based approach to reducing rates for particular bands, with the decisions taken on the basis of forecast return on investment.

The Committee has called on the Minister to propose that the Executive commission independent expert research into the business case for reducing or abolishing APD on band A flights departing from the North, which would inform the Executive's consideration of whether or how wider devolved powers over APD should be exercised. That research should include an assessment of the opportunity costs of non action, rigorous economic modelling and forecasting of options and lessons from other EU states that have reduced or abolished APD, including examples where Governments have attached conditions to APD reductions to ensure resultant benefits for consumers and the wider economy. As part of that initiative, the Committee recommends that the Executive proceed with making a strategic decision on whether to press the British Government for the devolution of the wider APD powers at the earliest opportunity.

Given the time constraints that now arise, the Committee acknowledges that seeking to include the devolution of band A rates of APD in the provisions of the Finance Bill could risk losing the immediate opportunity for devolving direct long-haul rates of duty. Therefore, the Committee agreed to support the Minister in seeking the Assembly's agreement that the provisions in clause 189 of and schedule 23 to the Finance Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons on 10 May 2012, dealing with the devolution of long-haul rates of air passenger duty, should be considered by the Westminster Parliament.

I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Girvan: I stand to speak in favour of the motion. This motion came about on the back of a crisis situation that occurred due to the potential loss of the Continental flight, which is our only north American route. Therefore, it was important that we moved quickly to get that forward. To get thus far, a lot of lobbying went on. I praise the Minister of Finance and Personnel, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for the efforts that they put in to ensuring that we could get the opportunity to devolve APD on our long-haul flights.

The case for how much it would cost the Northern Ireland economy has been well made. Let us be honest: if we were willing to take the hit and accept the major cost to the Northern Ireland block grant — the £60 million, £90 million or whatever figure it might be — the Exchequer would not have an issue with saying, "Go ahead. We'll take that money off you." We have to be sensible and make a judgement on the benefits.

The north American route is beneficial to the Northern Ireland economy. A lot of the other routes are, necessarily, outgoing and more geared towards people who are leaving Northern Ireland to go elsewhere as tourists and are, therefore, making their spend outside Northern Ireland, whereas the north American route has major business benefits to us, and it is important that we protect that.

In line with going through the process of debating the issue, the Committee has heard extensive evidence from those who are involved in the industry and those who feel that they can benefit from a reduction in APD on our long-haul routes. We can and we will achieve a great benefit by making a decision on that matter with minimal cost. The figure of £5 million has been alluded to in relation to this matter. We can far outweigh that with the benefits that can be levered in from the businesses attracted by that route. However, we can use this as another opportunity to attract additional routes into Northern Ireland and use it as a launch pad to the rest of GB. We should be attempting to attract other long-haul routes on that basis.

We are unique on the basis that other parts of the United Kingdom do not have to compete with an airport 100 miles down the road that is offering a reduced APD. On the basis of that, we have to ensure that our long-haul flights are competitive.

I congratulate the Minister on bringing this to the House. It is one of the good news stories. It is the Assembly reacting to what was a crisis situation, where we could have lost one of our major links and, therefore, put a nail into the coffin of our connection with North America. We now have the opportunity to attract additional routes for Northern Ireland to benefit from, so I support the motion.

4.00 pm

Mr Cree: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in support of the legislative consent motion on air passenger duty. The Chairman referred to the amount of work undertaken by the Committee and evidence taken from a wide range of sources. I thank the Committee staff for their hard work.

The decision to protect our sole long-haul flight to the US was the right one, and it is right to complete this exercise by approving the motion. During the Committee's work, however, much was learned that necessitates further discussion and action. Air passenger duty is, as several Members said, a regressive tax, which started out as an environmental tax but is now clearly a finance-raising choice for the Government in Westminster. The tax is harmful to business, consumers and the wider economy in Northern Ireland. Its application actually hinders the development of the economy, which is the Executive's first priority. The EU emissions trading system, which was introduced in the UK last January, is a further environmental tax on airlines and

is, arguably, a more practical method to tax aviation pollution costs. We do not need both.

The fact that the UK imposes higher duty than other parts of Europe is another major concern. Indeed, many countries have abolished APD-type duty. The rate of duty in the Irish Republic is €3 and may be abolished. Because we have a shared boundary with the Republic and it is a relatively short distance to Dublin Airport, that is sure to have a significant economic impact on air services in Northern Ireland. We need to address that important issue.

The Scottish Highlands and Islands are exempt from air passenger duty on flights departing from their airports. We are told that that was based on their low population density. We have the same peripherality problem, which is exacerbated by our greater density and the need for access to mainland Britain. Civil Aviation Authority statistics show that, on average, 17% of UK-departing flights are domestic services within the UK. In comparison, 75% of Northern Ireland passenger movements are on UK domestic services, demonstrating a much higher dependence on air travel.

The Consumer Council pointed out that England is to benefit from a £32.2 billion investment in a high-speed rail network that will further reduce dependence on domestic air transport. It will also have wider economic benefits for those regions, but Northern Ireland will not share in those benefits. Indeed, it will be at a greater disadvantage because of its dependence on the air routes. That situation presents a strong case for exempting Northern Ireland from all air passenger duty on flights to and from Northern Ireland.

Tourism is an important part of our economy. The Federation of Small Businesses provided evidence that the current structures of APD are damaging to the UK's tourism industry. That was supported by several other groups. The Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau pointed out that Germany is the biggest source market in Europe for city breaks, yet we have no direct access to it. Canada is our largest VFR — I think that stands for “visiting friends and relations” — market after America, and, again, we have no direct access there. As the Member who has just spoken said, there is scope for cuts to air passenger duty on condition that airlines open up new routes.

The Committee has provided several conclusions and recommendations with the report. I am sure that the Minister will have read those. I recognise that our first objective is the devolution to Northern Ireland of air passenger duty on long-haul flights. I am pleased to support the Minister, and I ask the House to agree the motion.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the legislative consent motion on the devolution of air passenger duty that is before the House. The specific measure, which is part of the Finance Bill, will devolve to the Northern Ireland Assembly the power to set the rate of APD to be applied to direct long-haul flights that take off from Northern Ireland. I believe that those flights are designated as bands B, C and D. This was spurred by the need to ensure that the transatlantic flight from Belfast International Airport to Newark continued. That route was thought vital in maintaining the links between Northern Ireland and North America, especially in relation to the continued development of business and tourism.

As we have heard, powers over other aspects of APD will be retained by the Treasury. Under the Azores judgement, the devolution of any revenue-raising powers to the Assembly inevitably brings with it a cost to the block grant that must be borne by the Executive. In this case, it is estimated that the cost is around £5 million, but we must set that against an estimated benefit in the region of £100 million from the United Continental service over seven years. Witnesses told the Committee that three new carriers with similar levels of passenger carriage would create £300 million to £400 million in extra revenue and generate thousands of jobs. So the measure creates potential that is well worth exploiting.

Unfortunately, we have missed the boat or, should I say, the plane in relation to the Emirates airline, which was looking at a flight from Belfast to Dubai but chose Dublin instead. No doubt, APD was a major consideration in that decision. Hopefully, it is not too late. There is a market out there, and this measure will help us to exploit that market to our fullest advantage. The further someone is from this island, the more irrelevant the point of entry becomes. If we can encourage people to fly to Belfast, the likelihood is greater that they will stay in this region and we will get the economic benefit from their stay in many ways. We need to get out there and begin the work of attracting more long-haul flights from more countries. We can look at the experiences of continental countries such as the Netherlands, Denmark and Belgium. They introduced APD schemes similar to what we have here, only to abandon them or to drastically reduce them, due to the impact that they had on inbound visitor numbers. So the lesson is clear.

The debate on the motion leads us to an examination of APD on shorter flights — the band A flights — which make up 98.5% of flights from Northern Ireland, compared with 17% in the UK. As other Members have mentioned, that clearly demonstrates our dependence on air travel. It was said earlier that the Highlands and Islands in Scotland have gained exemption from APD on the grounds of being a peripheral location with low population density. We do not qualify under the revised European rules in that respect, although Mr Cree has mentioned the fact that we still have a strong argument.

We are, of course, in direct competition with Dublin, and that has been mentioned on several occasions today. Dublin Airport is only an hour and a half down the road from both airports. The domestic APD rate here is around £13, compared with €3 in Dublin. Witnesses from the two airports told us that a family of four from Newry, for instance, would pay £100 in taxes to fly from Belfast, compared with €12 to fly from Dublin, so it is clear where the advantage lies. If you add to that the prediction that rates will eventually double, it is clear that we may be at even greater disadvantage in the future. Although the rate at the moment may not be such as to encourage someone to drive to Dublin to fly to Birmingham, for example, that may not be the case in the future if increases happen at the proposed rate. Our main market for connections, by a huge margin, is the UK and Europe. We must remember that our main tourism and business markets are there.

As was said earlier, the cost to the block grant of removing APD on the shorter flights — the band A flights — would be much higher: around £60 million. Nonetheless, we believe that a proper cost-benefit analysis should be carried out to inform a business case on the transfer of the powers.

Surely we should try to establish the financial facts rather than simply dismiss the idea out of hand. If we are to be as competitive as we can be, we need to have every implement in the economic tool chest at our disposal. It should be remembered that the transfer of powers gives us the opportunity to vary APD and that the £60 million per annum total cost would only apply if the Executive set the rate at zero across all bands.

There seems to be no definitive position on whether the transfer of the powers would need to be done through a change to the Northern Ireland Act or through a Finance Bill amendment, and we need clarity on that issue too. However, I believe that there is a legislative window towards the end of 2013 when, we hope, corporation tax powers will be transferred.

My party welcomes the measures contained in the legislative consent motion in relation to long-haul flights. We support the motion. We also believe that we should use this change to our fullest possible economic advantage, as outlined at page 21, paragraph 3 of the Committee's report. We fully support the other key conclusions and recommendations in the Committee's report. I join other Committee members and the Chair in thanking the Committee staff for the hard work that they have done in the preparation of the report and in assisting the Committee in its work on the issue. I urge Members to support the motion.

Mrs Cochrane: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak to this legislative consent motion regarding provisions in the Finance Bill for the devolution of air passenger duty rates. I do not wish to simply restate what has already been said by the Members who spoke before me, so I will focus on a few key issues that have arisen during our Committee work.

Among the stakeholders with whom we engaged and met, there was palpable support for proposals to devolve direct long-haul rates of flight duty to Northern Ireland. There was a sustained sense of optimism that that could open up future long-haul route development opportunities in Northern Ireland.

Another issue that was raised was the fact that, due to our unique geographical position, we face stiff competition in aviation provision from our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland. Northern Ireland sits on a platform that is different from that of any other country of the United Kingdom due to its physical separation by sea from the rest of GB and its sharing a land border with another EU member state. With the rate of APD in the South already substantially lower than ours and further proposals to abolish it entirely, there is a very strong case for some form of mitigation of APD for Northern Ireland. That view is shared by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in Westminster.

Many representatives were keen to stress the significance of air travel to business and tourism in Northern Ireland. We have already seen an increase in tourism here this year as part of our landmark ni2012 celebrations. More than £300 million was invested in our tourism sector in anticipation of this year. If we wish to be serious about developing our long-term prospects and building on our successes, we must be proactive in adapting our air travel infrastructure to accommodate our goals. Our air travel sector has a proven track record of making sizeable contributions to our economy and employment market. The feeling on the ground is very much that a devolved decision to lower APD rates

would undoubtedly attract new business and have an even greater impact on our economy.

The proposed devolution of APD rates for direct long-haul flights signifies a progressive step in addressing the uneven strain of APD currently levied on Northern Ireland. Although there remains work to be done by the Minister of Finance and Personnel together with the Executive on developing a co-ordinated action plan to maximise the economic opportunities that may arise from such a change, in real terms, the foundation of any transformation is intrinsically reliant on our support for the measures proposed. It is on those grounds that I support the motion.

4.15 pm

Mr D McIlveen: I also support the legislative consent motion. I do so not so much in a financial capacity, but I do chair the all-party group on tourism, and I thought it worth making a contribution on that basis.

First, we commend the Finance Minister on the work that has gone into this. I know that he worked very hard with his colleagues the First Minister and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I know that a considerable change of mindset from the Secretary of State was required and that that required a fair bit of negotiation and convincing. We have to pay tribute to the work that the Executive have done. What they have achieved and, by supporting the motion, what the Assembly will achieve is the saving of a critical air route between here and New York city in North America. A number of businesses have invested in Northern Ireland very much on the basis of that air route being in place. Therefore, it is to be greatly welcomed that the Assembly is taking clear and concise action to ensure that the route is preserved. Hopefully there will be opportunities for a widening of the network to include other long-haul destinations.

Like corporation tax, this gives us something that we can now sell to airlines. I see that Mr Bradley is no longer in the Chamber, but I would not take as pessimistic a view as he did when he said that we had lost out and there was little that we could do about it. The opportunities now are immense. It is only now that we should try to speak to airlines such as Etihad Airways and Emirates. We should make it very clear that Northern Ireland has a unique product to sell and try to encourage airlines — hopefully with the incentive of a reviewed air passenger duty rate — that this is a place that they should give very serious consideration to coming to. It would mean that we could compete much better with Dublin and the routes that it has to offer, and I certainly look forward to that challenge. I think that all Departments will step up to the mark and ensure that we do not miss any opportunities when it comes to competing with our neighbour in the Republic of Ireland.

Another thing worth mentioning is that there is a certain uniqueness in having this in Northern Ireland. To the best of my knowledge, when passengers come into the United Kingdom from a number of destinations outside the European Union, they have to get a visa to do so. However, some indications are being given that, if flights were to come directly into Northern Ireland, a visa would not be required for inward travel in the rest of the UK. If passengers then wanted to go to the Republic of Ireland, they could do

so as well. Therefore, there is a convenience issue that we can sell as a result of this matter being devolved to us.

I agree with my colleague Mr Girvan that we have to exercise a degree of caution over how far we take this. I know that the figure of £60 million to £90 million has been floated in relation to the cost if we were to extend this to short-haul routes. As an Assembly, we have to be careful about the message that we send out, because we have to accept that there are families who are struggling financially at the moment. There have been many debates on the cost of fuel and various essential household items. I do not begrudge people their flights to Ibiza, Majorca or wherever, but, if we were effectively to give a carte blanche ruling and extend the air passenger duty rate to short-haul flights, that sort of investment might send out a damaging message in the current financial climate, so I think that we have to exercise some caution.

This is a good news story, and we have to welcome it. However, we also have to treat it with a degree of caution. Our view is that air passenger duty as a whole is regressive, and, in a utopian financial world, we would like to see it completely dismissed, especially in Northern Ireland. That is because the costliness of travelling by sea, which is our alternative, particularly for getting to the United Kingdom, means that we need air routes much more.

I just wanted to add those few thoughts. I commend the motion to the House, and I hope that every party will unite around it as they did with corporation tax.

Mr A Maginness (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment considered papers from the Finance and Personnel Committee on the motion and is convinced that there is an overwhelming case for the transfer of the duty to Stormont.

The Committee was also impressed by the various arguments that have been rehearsed here today, including the argument that we have the highest rate in Europe and that there is heavy reliance on air links to access Britain and other markets for business and tourism travellers and so on. However, the Committee focused on the need to stimulate foreign direct investment, and the link between here and Newark is, of course, very important. That North American linkage is vital in having a direct long-haul route to attract investors from North America to Northern Ireland. So, on that basis, the Committee was supportive of this move.

The Committee also heard evidence from Almac Ltd informing it that the company had expanded its business to the United States, resulting in company representatives travelling back and forth on a weekly basis. That highlights the need to retain a strong link both for foreign direct investment companies maintaining a direct linkage with their home base and for indigenous companies expanding their business links to particular export markets in the United States and further afield in North America. That, together with the recent visit by the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to Asia, underpins the need to be able to attract flights from the growing markets in Asia if foreign direct investment (FDI) is to be drawn from those regions. They are important areas for potential future investment. I deeply regret that we missed out on Emirates. That is and

should be a sore point for all of us. I think that the duty was a significant factor in the decision to go to Dublin.

I would like to conclude on that note. I congratulate the Minister for his application to the issue and for successfully winning the Treasury's support. It is a very difficult thing to do, and I do not know how he worked it. Perhaps the extreme situation that we were in worked wonders with the Treasury.

Mr Wilson: I am pleased that we had an informed debate and that we had such unanimity around the Chamber on this matter. We did not have the dissenting voice of the Green Party, which was obviously outside enjoying the benefits of global warming.

I was just thinking during the debate what would have been said had we had a discussion on air passenger duty four or five years ago, when I was in another post and was being criticised for holding certain views. This duty — Mr Cree mentioned this in his speech; he was the only one to do so — started as an environmental tax, designed to deal with an urgent environmental issue and to stop people travelling in aeroplanes because of the emissions. It was welcomed, not just on the fringes by the Green Party but even within mainstream parties. Indeed, I remember that, at times in the Assembly, Members spoke about the need to change economic behaviour and the way we behaved and how we had to have those burdens imposed on us.

All these things have serious economic consequences. Air passenger duty — Members from all parties have recognised this today — was designed and specifically mentioned as a way of cutting down on air miles and the number of air journeys being taken. Ministers at one time boasted that cheap holidays to Spain, France and elsewhere in the world would have to stop if we were going to save the world and that this was a way of doing it. All Members have acknowledged today that it has had a detrimental impact on our economy. Indeed, the United Kingdom is losing out because of the decision not to increase capacity at the hub airport, Heathrow, which is an equally important issue for people from Northern Ireland and one that makes air transport more expensive.

A number of Members have congratulated the Executive on the action that was taken. We grasped at a very early stage the impact that the duty would have, especially on the direct-haul flight to North America. That direct long-haul flight had important business consequences, and, indeed, a number of Members mentioned the importance of direct-haul flights. The Chairman of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee spelt out the detailed work that the Committee has done. There is absolutely no doubt that direct long-haul flights open up markets, and, wherever flights are opened up, trade with that region increases dramatically, both in and out, and opens up immense opportunities.

It was identified at an early stage that the duty would have severe impacts on the work that Arlene Foster was doing. She was looking to North America for investment and seeking to grow the current batch of firms operating in Northern Ireland that appreciated the fact that their managing directors and technicians and whatnot could fly in directly to Northern Ireland. This duty was going to have a severely limiting impact on the investment strategy. No one Minister can take credit for this; let me say that. The First

and deputy First Minister, the Enterprise Minister and I all pressed the issue, and there was tireless work by officials in my Department and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

I have got to say that, when it came close to the time when panic buttons were being pressed all over the place, work was being done by Hugo Swire. I was just reflecting on it before I came to the Chamber. It was a day like this, this time last year. We met Hugo Swire in the middle of the holidays, down at Stormont House. We sat out on the patio and had a nice cup of tea, and we emphasised to him that we needed this message to get through. We told him that we could not emphasise enough the message that had to go to the Treasury. The First Minister has referred to this on a number of occasions. Despite opposition from Treasury officials, who still seemed to think that there was plenty of time on this, the Chancellor himself intervened and took this decision. That was after numerous calls to him emphasising the importance of the issue.

It shows that, sometimes, in these matters you need to have built up a political rapport so that you can get decisions made. People say that the Westminster Government are not responsive to the needs of the regions. I have to say that, at times, it is frustrating, but I can think of a number of occasions when there have been positive responses at Treasury level, and those responses have been for the good of Northern Ireland. This is one such occasion. No individual Minister or Department can take credit for this. A concerted effort was made, and it is a good example of the energy of Ministers in this local Assembly and of officials in Departments and the contacts that they have made actually paying off.

4.30 pm

Mr Bradley made the point that, unfortunately, it came too late for the Emirates decision. However, I do not think that is the end of that story. Airlines will always look for opportunities, and Arlene Foster will tirelessly search those out. The north American connection is important, as are connections to other parts of the world, especially where there are growing economies. We probably have to look beyond Europe to the growing economies that are further away and try to get direct long-haul flights to those places so that we can build up a base in areas where there is greater economic potential. Therefore, I am not totally downhearted, but it would have been very beneficial if we had had that power available or if we had had the decision to reduce the rate before that decision was made by Emirates.

Other Members, including the Committee Chairman, made the point about the wider devolution of air passenger duty, and I know the Committee's view on the matter. Mr Girvan and Mr McIlveen outlined very well some of the dangers in simply saying that we should devolve air passenger duty totally to Northern Ireland and cut the rate for all flights to zero. First, it is costly; secondly, it cannot be done quickly, and we needed a quick decision on the issue. However, even if we said now that we should build on the current devolution and look for wider devolution, we would have to bear in mind that although it would benefit the pockets of individual families, many flights that we would cut air passenger duty on would not have any direct benefit to the Northern Ireland economy. It would benefit individuals by making it cheaper for them to go on holiday or to fly out to their apartments in other parts of Europe at Easter, summer and Christmas

time. However, we would be taking money from public services in Northern Ireland to reduce air passenger duty for economically non-productive flights, and I am not sure that that would be a good use of the resources that are available to us.

As I said, the Executive have taken the position that air passenger duty is a bad tax, but it would be wrong for us to ask for that power to be devolved to us so that we could ameliorate the impact of a bad tax. It is an issue that the United Kingdom Government should be dealing with in the longer run. Having listened to debates on this issue in the House of Commons, I can tell you that there is a growing awareness that this level of taxation for a spurious environmental reason is not finding acceptance with an increasing number of Members in the House of Commons.

In conclusion, as far as the process is concerned now, we will await Royal Assent of the Finance Bill. Then, I will present a Bill to the Assembly to bring the air passenger duty rate down to zero. That should become effective by the end of the year or the beginning of the next financial year. Hopefully, on that basis, we will have yet another weapon in our armoury when it comes to seeking investment into Northern Ireland and increasing flights to Northern Ireland.

I welcome the fact that there has been unanimous support. I thank the members on the two Committees — Enterprise, Trade and Investment and Finance and Personnel — for their work. I look forward to the next stage when the Bill will be brought forward in September, as that will enable us to give effect to the changes that are contained in the Finance Bill at Westminster.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly agrees that the provisions in clause 189 of and schedule 23 to the Finance Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons on 10 May 2012, dealing with the devolution of Northern Ireland long-haul rates of air passenger duty should be considered by the UK Parliament.

Committee Business

Fuel Poverty

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 15 minutes to propose the motion and 15 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak shall have five minutes.

Mr A Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Social Development on fuel poverty; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to implement its recommendations to ensure a strategic, cross-departmental and cross-sectoral approach is adopted to reduce and prevent fuel poverty.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Today's motion fits, coincidentally, with a Fuel Poverty Coalition event that is under way in the Long Gallery. Therefore, I propose to introduce and speak to the motion and then Mickey Brady, the Deputy Chair, will make the winding-up speech on behalf of the Committee. I thank him for doing that.

I thank all the Committee members for the work that they engaged in to arrive at this report. I have a very special word of gratitude for the officials, Kevin Pelan and others, who worked very hard to have the report prepared; the Department; the Minister; the other Departments; the stakeholders and all those who contributed to the work involved, particularly the fuel poverty event that we held in the Long Gallery some time ago, which enabled us to produce this comprehensive report. Those Members who have had a chance to look at it, or will do so after the debate, will understand that it is an accurate reflection of the discussions that were held between the Department and the stakeholders. We are trying to move it forward to the next stage, which will, obviously, be action-driven and -orientated.

Simply put, the definition of fuel poverty is any household that spends more than 10% of its income on fuel to maintain an adequate level of warmth in the home. In 2011, the Department for Social Development (DSD) brought out the report, 'Defining Fuel Poverty in Northern Ireland', which produced a different method for considering fuel poverty rates based on households spending roughly twice the median — in other words, 20% of their household income — on fuel as opposed to 10%. However, the report also concluded that the 10% threshold would continue to be used and that the 20% threshold could be used to identify those in severe fuel poverty. Therefore, for the purposes of this report and the work of the Committee, we will retain the use of the original definition of fuel poverty at the rate of 10% of a household's income.

Members will be aware that the Committee's report is based on a fuel poverty event hosted by the Social Development Committee and supported, I am glad to say, by the Chairs of all the other relevant Committees. Eight Committees in the Assembly have some scrutiny role in respect of their governing Departments. All the Departments represented on the then interdepartmental group on fuel poverty also attended, as did over 30 stakeholders from the public

and private sectors. We all recognised that it was a truly collaborative event, with a focus on identifying solutions to fuel poverty.

I hope that Members and the Minister will recognise that that spirit of collaboration is maintained in the report and the recommendations therein. Indeed, with the support of the Committee, I met the permanent secretary of the Department several months ago to discuss some of the key recommendations of the report and to consider a positive and co-operative way forward.

The report is not about confronting the Department for Social Development or any other Department about the shortcomings, perceived or real, in the approach to fuel poverty; the issue is too big to attempt any point scoring. Rather, it is about making recommendations to complement the Department's approach. I will deal with some of the detail of that in due course.

I think that it would be worthwhile to set the problem in context. The Department of Energy and Climate Change's (DECC) 'Annual report on Fuel Poverty Statistics 2011' states that in the year of estimate, which was 2009, England, Wales, Scotland and the North had fuel poverty rates of 18%, 26%, 33% and 44% respectively. Although a different methodology is used to calculate the rate in the rest of Ireland, the figure there is around 19%. Thirteen per cent of households in the North are also in severe fuel poverty. That equates to some 75,000 households that are spending at least 20% of their income on energy bills. So, regrettably, we are at the top of the fuel poverty league on these islands. That is not something we can tolerate or be proud of.

We asked why the problem is so bad here. As the Committee report notes, fuel poverty is caused by the interaction of high fuel prices, low income and poor energy efficiency in homes. The Office of Fair Trading (OFT) report 'Off-Grid Energy', which was published some time ago, noted that the markets in England, Scotland and Wales are very similar, with between 12% and 25% of households off-grid — in other words, not connected to the mains gas grid — and with heating oil and electricity being the main fuels used. However, here in the North, 80% of people are off-grid and around 80% of them are using home heating oil. Over the past number of years, all of us have seen the price of gas, oil and electricity increase quite dramatically. Indeed, around 90% of the variation in the price of heating oil over time is explained by movements in the price of crude oil. At the same time, we all know that there has been no comparable increase in wages or benefits. So, it is inevitable that fuel costs will increasingly put a considerable strain on household budgets.

The cost of heating a home accounts for a far bigger proportion of total income for those on benefits or low wages. In an era of wage cuts or freezes, and with benefits likely to come under pressure as a result of welfare reform, together with increasing fuel prices, it is self-evident that affordability will increasingly become a greater issue for those affected. As we have often heard before, that can often leave people having to decide between eating and heating. The Department's plans for tackling poverty, in association with other Departments, are extremely important in that regard. Ultimately, providing opportunities

for employment is key to lifting people out of poverty as a whole.

The final element is poor energy efficiency in homes. That is largely due to an older housing stock in the North. I recognise the work that the Housing Executive and the Department are doing to address that through the warm homes scheme, the insulation of 9,000 homes a year for the next three years and the target of providing double glazing for all Housing Executive homes, all of which is very welcome. The recently announced £12 million allocation to the boiler replacement scheme to improve energy efficiency in 16,000 homes is also very welcome. Although the causes of fuel poverty are, at one level, simple to understand, I think that we all realise that there are no simple or quick-fix solutions. Technical solutions are, of course, one — but only one — part of the answer. That is also at the heart of the Committee's report: recognition that the interaction of those three key causes results in a complex problem requiring a strategic, cross-sectoral and cross-departmental approach.

The nature of the report may come as a bit of a surprise to some people because it does not demand that the Minister set any specific targets to reduce fuel poverty. The reliance on oil, coupled with the vagaries of global oil prices, may make such targets meaningless or at least difficult to achieve. Nor does the report call on the Minister to implement specific actions in order to implement the solutions that were proposed by stakeholders at the event we held and that are listed in our report. In many respects, it would have been easy for the Committee to produce a report that did precisely that: a populist report that is warmly welcomed — no pun intended — easily understood and, of course, just as easily forgotten. The Committee agrees that because of the nature of the problem, that type of report would add little to the argument and certainly would not provide many solutions.

Furthermore, there was a considerable debate at the event over the solutions that needed to be implemented and how they should be implemented. Calling on the Minister to implement certain proposed solutions was, to our thinking, not necessarily an appropriate next step.

4.45 pm

We feel that there was much more work to be done to analyse what was a priority, what was achievable and what would eventually be value for money. The Committee focused on the mechanisms by which stakeholders could further engage formally with the relevant Departments to objectively consider which of the solutions that have been identified are practicable, cost-effective and, indeed, a priority. In many ways, the report, therefore, lays down as big a challenge to stakeholders as to the Departments. It does not let anyone off the hook on the issue.

The main purpose of the report is to do two things. First, it is to continue to highlight the need for radical action to tackle fuel poverty as it affects those who we represent, but it also provides a mechanism for doing that, and I want to deal with that in a moment or two. Although the report is not prescriptive about what it wants the Department to do, we are very conscious in the first instance that the Department and the Minister for Social Development have a lead responsibility within the Executive.

The mandate from 2007 states:

“DSD has the lead responsibility for tackling fuel poverty, a role which involves the coordination of information, engagement with departments and other organisations that influence the factors which contribute to fuel poverty and more directly, through the provision of funding for and oversight of the Warm Homes Scheme.”

That has recently been updated with the fuel poverty strategy:

“other departments also have a significant role to play in the eradication of fuel poverty. There are clear links to other government strategies including the Northern Ireland Strategic Energy Framework, the Green New Deal, the Sustainable Energy Initiative, and the forthcoming new Child Poverty Strategy. Closer working, not only between government departments, but between government and the private and voluntary sectors is vital. There is a strong body of evidence that partnership working is the best way to tackle fuel poverty. We will work with other government departments, the voluntary sector, the energy sector and others who are committed to alleviating fuel poverty.”

That is the mandate that our Department works under, and our role as a Committee is to ensure that we are holding the Department to account for that, but also working collaboratively with the Department to develop those policies within the Department's bailiwick, but also, crucially, with all the other relevant Departments. As I said earlier, eight Departments here have some contributory role to play in tackling fuel poverty. What we are trying to do is to work with the Department for Social Development and the Minister, building on their commitment and their responsibilities in the Programme for Government, but also, crucially, to work with all the other Departments to make sure that we get it right in a timely fashion.

A central idea in our report is the establishment of what we call thematic action groups, or TAGS, as they have been referred to. Those groups would be based on the themes identified as a result of the discussion at the fuel poverty event and would be convened under the umbrella of the relevant Departments. Those groups would discuss or tease out specific proposed solutions, as outlined in the report. They would determine which solutions are achievable based on evidence and make recommendations to the recently established cross-sectoral fuel poverty partnership on initiatives that they recommend for implementation. The work of those thematic groups would be time-bound and would not exceed six months.

I acknowledge that the cross-sectoral fuel poverty partnership has only recently been established and has met on only a few occasions. In recognition of that, the report recommends that the Department revisit the partnership to bring senior decision-makers into its membership, to include the chairs of the proposed thematic action groups, and perhaps to be chaired by the Minister for Social Development himself.

A number of the stakeholders favoured the establishment of a ministerial task force, as they had concerns that the then interdepartmental group on fuel poverty, despite the best intentions, had perhaps been ineffective. That is what was said by others who were involved in that work previously. There are lingering concerns among stakeholders that the

current partnership is perhaps a rebranding of that previous group. To address that, the Committee's proposals add to that mechanism by being more inclusive, favouring the bottom-up approach that puts the onus on stakeholders and officials to work together, and which challenges their own views on the way forward. Importantly, the work of the thematic action groups is also time-bound.

I would also like to allay any fears that the work of the thematic groups or the cross-sectoral fuel poverty partnership will be a duplication of some sort. Rather, the Committee sees the work of the partnership as co-ordinating a strategic approach to the implementation of initiatives arising from the work of the thematic groups and monitoring progress on that implementation. As I said earlier, the work of those groups also lays a challenge to the potential production of a wish list.

We cannot waste any more time talking. We need to take strong action to determine practical solutions to the problems that we all face as a result of fuel poverty. I say that not to criticise the wide range of solutions that were proposed to the Committee but to acknowledge that it is clear that further scrutiny is required on the basis of evidence to distil these proposals into what can be achieved. That will also challenge preconceived ideas and even prejudices, but, ultimately, I believe that it will help to bring clarity and objectivity to the way forward and will underpin the work of those whose aim is to end fuel poverty.

I would like to say a few words about the importance of a cross-sectoral, cross-departmental approach. Numerous times in this Chamber and, I am sure, in each of the Statutory Committees, we have heard calls for more joined-up government. We have also heard questions asking why there is not more cross-departmental working and whether the left hand knows what the right hand is doing. We have made those sorts of comments ourselves, and, to a large extent, they are justified. However, we in the Statutory Committees run the risk of being the pot that calls the kettle black.

The Committee's fuel poverty event in some ways highlighted that Committees can work more directly together. Eight Statutory Committees were represented on the evening, and the Chairs of all those Committees took an active part by hosting a table of stakeholders and by chairing discussions. That sent out a very important message about building political momentum to address fuel poverty across all parties and Departments. It also sent a more general message about being open to new ways of cross-Committee working to harness that political weight to address other issues of concern.

In other words, the Assembly has to take its responsibility firmly. It is not enough for us to say that Departments need to work together; the Assembly also has that responsibility. Each scrutiny Committee has the very important role of scrutinising its Department, but Committees also have a responsibility to work together co-operatively. I think that that will prove beneficial to all of us in the end. It is easy to say that given that DSD takes the lead, fuel poverty is its problem. I am sure that the Minister will agree that pressure must be put on each of the other relevant Departments via our respective Committees to ensure that strategic and co-ordinated action is taken on fuel poverty.

The Committee's report is not an end point —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will you bring your remarks to a close, please?

Mr A Maskey: I will, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This report is not an end point in the debate on fuel poverty; quite the opposite. It marks the beginning of a different approach in the Assembly, one that I believe will ultimately converge with the Department's.

Ms P Bradley: I also praise all those who are responsible for producing the report. Fuel poverty is not just a case of people being a little bit cold in the depths of winter. Certainly, the recent warm weather means that it can be difficult to think just how the many people in Northern Ireland who live in fuel poverty might feel, but fuel poverty is a reality in this country.

Fuel poverty means that some of the most vulnerable members of our community, such as those on a fixed or low income, the very old and the very young, are living in cold, damp environments. We know that those are the conditions that encourage certain bacteria to grow and multiply. The Surgeon General has already indicated the scale of the problem by highlighting that, in the past decade, over 1,000 deaths have occurred as a direct consequence of people living in fuel poverty. For me, one death caused by fuel poverty is one too many. Therefore, not addressing this issue, as highlighted in the report, is not an option. It is important to identify why cross-departmental working is vital in the development of an effective strategy for addressing fuel poverty.

At a basic level, we cannot afford to have people living in conditions that can have many outcomes. At a higher level, we know that fuel poverty impacts on many areas of people's lives, from health to education to the ability to work. For example, living in such conditions is known to cause illness, which in turn means that financial resources in our National Health Service are utilised to treat such conditions in the community and in our hospitals. If we tackled fuel poverty effectively, that money could be diverted to other areas of the National Health Service (NHS).

We ask people daily to take responsibility for their health. Therefore, we have a duty to ensure that we are maximising every opportunity that we have to reduce the impact of fuel poverty on the most vulnerable. Fuel poverty can also impact on educational outcomes. At a basic level, children may be unable to attend school because of ill health caused by living in cold, damp conditions. It may be difficult to wash and dry uniforms. The money that a family needs to spend on heat, light and fuel will impact on the money that is available for a child to access a good diet, as well as extra-curricular activities. Finally, fuel poverty has most impact in the dark, cold winter months, when there might not be money in households to have light and heat. That could, of course, lead to low educational attainment.

As the Chair said, no one Department can address the many complex issues that contribute to 44% of our households experiencing some form of fuel poverty. Indeed, some issues may be outside the scope and remit of any Department. I welcome the work that the Minister has already done in ensuring maximum benefit uptake through the use of publicity in local media and the availability of services, such as the benefit checker, which people can access and which can go some way to addressing fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.

Working together, we can, hopefully, ensure that no person should have to choose between heat and food and that we protect the most vulnerable in our society. I support the motion.

Mr Copeland: I, too, support the motion. Looking at the weather outside and thinking back to the cold of last winter, it is almost impossible to conceive that we are living in the same climate. It is not easy, in the glow of summer, to remember those who are, in many cases, less fortunate and for whom the winter brings a complex and different set of difficulties.

I believe, and am justified in believing, that the Social Development Committee displayed a good deal of courage in seeking opinions from those who know about this particular difficulty in the format in which it did in the Great Hall. Bringing people with an agenda, which many of them had, to a room and asking them what they think and how their thoughts can be applied to the solution of a problem sometimes does not lead to anything that could be described as a good outcome. I was present at the event; I have been present at, I think, all the Social Development Committee meetings at which this has been discussed. It has been a worthwhile exercise. The result of that exercise has been what can only be described as a well-researched, well-conducted report. I join the Chair of the Committee in paying tribute to, initially, the members of the Committee and, in particular, the Assembly staff who service the Committee. This represents something that I am personally very keen on: an outcome. Outcomes are something that processes do not always result in, but this particular process has.

We are all in agreement about the effects of fuel poverty. We all concur that they can be devastating, and disproportionately devastating to those on low incomes, particularly the old. Last Wednesday, with junior Minister Bell and Mickey Brady — I got it right on this occasion — I attended the Pensioners Parliament. I have been in some bear pits and some cockpits in my life, but let me tell you this: the pensioners of this Province are not to be trifled with. They have opinions; their opinions are well founded and based on life experiences. Woe betide anybody who thinks they are going to bluff them. One of their repeated concerns was the inordinately high cost and very serious difficulties of matching, on a fixed income, energy prices that are accelerating at the speed at which they are. A study from Age UK revealed that two million elderly people in the United Kingdom are so desperately cold in the depths of winter that they are going to bed when they are not tired. I can only assume that Northern Ireland will have a disproportionately large share of those two million people. A similar number, another two million people, have moved into one room in an attempt to keep their energy bills down.

It is clear to the Committee that to deal with this complex issue, a gap must be bridged between the solution and the formulation and implementation of a long-term strategy.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for giving way. I will just take the Member back to the point he raised about the Pensioners Parliament. I note with some interest that, in comments he made following that, he said that what we need is more regulation of the home heating oil industry. Will the Member clarify whether his party position has changed once again and he now supports some regulation of the home heating oil industry?

5.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Copeland: Thank you very much, sir. I rather suspect that, on this occasion, I will not need the extra minute, but we will see.

Elements of the home heating oil industry require a degree of examination. I have run out of oil on a number of occasions and I have gone to my local garage and purchased the blue barrels, which seem to be inordinately expensive. Trying to regulate an industry that has so many distributors is tantamount to impossible. I have never been one for taking on the impossible; the difficult I do practically every day, but the impossible takes a little bit longer. I imagine that we would have difficulty in doing it, but I take the Member's point and thank him for the 26 seconds that I gained through the venture.

I struggle sometimes with what we say in here and what happens outside. It could be the fact that I was not here for four years. On occasions, we dedicate ourselves to a debate or topic and we speak on it and think that we do a good job. Then you go back to your constituency, and somebody who really knows something pokes you in the chest and says, "Aye, that's all right, but what are you going to do about it?" There are so many times when we can do nothing. Northern Ireland cannot control the world price of oil. We cannot reduce overnight the number of households that are dependent on fuel oil as a method of heating. We cannot tackle the cartels that control the price of energy, because they are bigger than most Governments. On this occasion, we have at least taken a step in conjunction with one another. I believe —

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

Mr Copeland: I was wrong about the minute, then. I support the motion. Thank you for your time and attention.

Mr Durkan: I, too, support the motion. I welcome the publication of the report on fuel poverty and thank the officials who have worked diligently on its compilation. A lot of the detail in the report would already be known to many of us as public representatives. Fuel poverty is one of the single biggest issues affecting our constituents. However, it is positive that the information has been compiled and crystallised in the report that we see today. It provides us with a good springboard from which to move forward and try to bring about real, tangible benefits to the people of Northern Ireland.

The strength of the document lies in its cross-departmental and cross-cutting nature. I have said before in the Chamber that the depressingly high rate of fuel poverty here — 44% of households was the figure that the Chair used earlier — is compounded by the fact that our approach to tackling it has, to date, been quite fragmented. Steps are being taken to address that, and that is to be commended. I am quite heartened by the fact that there are targets set around the timelines for the establishment of the thematic action groups and their work. The key word in that regard is "action". We will be judged on our actions, so it is imperative that the guidelines are adhered to and that various Departments are held to their commitments in the report.

I fear that, with continued cuts to benefits and limited employment opportunities, fuel poverty will affect more people this year than ever before. Last week, we debated underoccupancy, which will lead to social housing tenants losing, on average, £690 a year. The impact of that is certain to be felt come the winter. We need to look at fuel poverty in the context of welfare reform, and I speculate that we should provide for bigger numbers as a result.

I acknowledge that maximising benefit uptake is an issue for consideration by the thematic action groups. That should be encouraged and supported. Another area for consideration is whether winter fuel payments could be credited to household bills rather than paid in cash. We would certainly be supportive of such an initiative. We should also support oil saving-stamps and innovative credit union initiatives as well as encouraging energy brokerage schemes.

Those are simple measures that are well within our gift to implement and we can get quick wins here, to the benefit of our citizens. Improving the energy efficiency of our homes is the most sustainable means of reducing and tackling fuel poverty, and we want the social investment fund to be targeted towards that.

I support the motion and look forward to the outworking of the report.

Mrs Cochrane: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion today. As a member of the Social Development Committee, I am pleased that our report on fuel poverty has now been published, and I believe that the recommendations should be implemented.

Northern Ireland has the highest rate of fuel poverty in northern Europe. Therefore, DSD really needs to take the lead and work in collaboration with other Departments to tackle fuel poverty here once and for all. Fuel poverty has been on the increase in Northern Ireland since 2006, with 61% of older people and 83% of lone older people living in fuel poverty here. The sub-zero temperatures in 2010 brought the issue to the forefront, when we saw how the health of our most vulnerable was at risk when many had to choose between heating and eating. With welfare reform on the way, we must seriously consider the likely changes to household incomes that could push more people into fuel poverty.

Members have already mentioned many of the recommendations in the report, and I will highlight some in particular. Recommendation 35 states that a discussion needs to take place as to whether the winter fuel payment should be paid as a credit to a household's electricity, gas or oil supplier as opposed to being paid as a cash sum. Like my colleague Mr Durkan, I recommend that that be considered, as pressure can often be felt, particularly by older people, around Christmas time when they may instead use the payment for gifts when, really, they need to take care of themselves and keep their house warm.

The report also recognises that the eradication of fuel poverty is unlikely to be achieved without the adoption of a long-term strategy. Given the likelihood that fuel prices will continue to rise, we must seek to protect those with the lowest incomes by promoting benefit checks, encouraging energy efficiency in the home and helping people to budget for their fuel payments. Recommendation 36 relates to those issues and states that the advice sector has a significant role to play, not only to educate and encourage

people to make their homes more energy efficient or to have their boiler serviced regularly but to work with the various energy suppliers to ensure that the advice given to consumers is accurate and consistent and is not just marketing for a particular supplier.

Of the half a million homes using oil, around 400,000 have old, inefficient boilers, and while I am glad that money has been awarded to the Housing Executive to improve energy efficiency through the boiler replacement scheme, I am disappointed that it appears that that money has been taken from funds that were earmarked for the green new deal. That decision locks us into a reliance on fossil fuels, and that needs to be addressed. With global energy prices continuing to rise, we need to enable people to use less energy through energy efficiency measures as well as moving to sustainable energy sources such as those proposed in the green new deal.

How can we help people to pay for their fuel? It is clear that many households using oil have no option but to buy it in small amounts, resulting in them paying substantially more per litre than those who can afford to fill their tank in one go. I recently went to see Carillion's pilot pay-as-you-go oil scheme in action, and I encourage the Minister to establish a procurement process for a contract to deliver a similar pay-as-you-go oil scheme to assist those who simply cannot afford to pay large lump sums for oil in one go.

In conclusion, although I believe that DSD has the main role, all other Departments have a supportive role, as demonstrated in the departmental responses in the report. I support the establishment of the thematic action groups, which can take forward the various themes and focus on how other Departments can take practical steps to reduce and remove fuel poverty. I support the motion and look forward to the implementation of the fuel poverty report's recommendations.

Mr Easton: Fuel poverty is an issue that has long been known about in our society. It occurs when a household needs to spend more than 10% of its disposable income to gain adequate warmth. That warmth is not just important for the inhabitants but to ensure that other conditions, such as damp, are not allowed to take hold.

It is noted that 44% of households are experiencing fuel poverty, which is almost half of households in Northern Ireland. A core group of about 13% of households are in extreme fuel poverty, and that is approximately 75,000 households.

Fuel poverty is not just a matter of heating. Not having enough heat can impact negatively on health outcomes, especially for already vulnerable groups of people who have underlying health problems. The Surgeon General's report indicates that 1,890 winter deaths over the past decade are directly attributed to people living in damp and cold conditions. In particular, our older generations are at risk. They often have static income sources with low interest rates that do not give them high enough returns on their savings, which means that as fuel prices rise, they have to spend more of their disposable income on it. It is important to remember as well that we are not just talking about heating a home but about fuel for cooking. This can restrict diets, which, again, can have negative impacts on health outcomes. The importance of diet has long been known in relation to positive educational outcomes for younger generations.

Tackling fuel poverty is an extremely complex issue that cannot be addressed by sticking plasters or quick fixes. Those who are directly involved in working to reduce fuel poverty long lamented the lack of a joined-up approach. There are three broad areas that can be seen to be at the root of fuel poverty, the first being the cost of fuel to the household. We are extremely constrained in what we can do about this issue, as prices are set on global markets. However, we have the potential to explore ways in which we can help people to manage their resources and budget for the cost of heating.

Secondly, low income contributes to fuel poverty. This has the potential to become a more influencing factor as the welfare reforms come into place. I welcome the measures that the Minister has already introduced to ensure that everyone is getting the correct benefits at the correct rate and the availability of a simple-to-use online benefit checker that everyone can access and use to ensure that they get their full entitlement.

Finally, energy efficiency is vital. We should encourage households to ensure that their heat remains in their homes. The benefits of house insulation programmes are best seen through the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's (DARD) rural antipoverty and social inclusion programme, which, over a three-year period, provided insulation or the installation of central heating systems in rural communities. Indeed, the Minister for Social Development recently announced the boiler replacement scheme, which is to be welcomed.

We have to be conscious that certain groups of people are more at risk of fuel poverty, and we must strive, through the strategy, to use innovative ways to reach these people. Rural dwellers, for example, have their own unique vulnerabilities when it comes to the rising cost of fuel, and they are often extremely limited in their choice of fuel and do not have access to cheaper alternatives. They also tend to be very reliant on their vehicles, in which they may put fuel rather than heat their home. DARD's programme has gone some way to address this, but we need a cross-departmental and cross-sectoral approach so that we can effectively address issues around fuel poverty and help to prevent households from entering the fuel poverty trap.

In conclusion, I thank the Clerk of the Committee for Social Development and his staff for their hard work on the report. Hopefully, it will go a long way towards helping the most vulnerable in society to get away from the fuel poverty trap.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I pay tribute to the members of the Committee for Social Development for the work that they have done to bring the report forward. I am not a member of the Committee, but as my party's energy spokesperson, I take a keen interest in it.

The long-term solution to fuel poverty, and one that fulfils the aims of reducing carbon emissions, is to increase significantly the energy efficiency of fuel-poor households. We need to take a three-pronged approach to this issue. First, we need to improve the energy performance of domestic properties. Secondly, we need to encourage behavioural change that requires education on issues of consumption patterns and transparent building formats.

Thirdly, we need to provide the most vulnerable households with energy-related benefits.

Fuel poverty in the North of Ireland is at record levels, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable people in our society. Any energy policy that we introduce must seek to make provision and place protections for consumers in such a situation. It is clear that the Department for Social Development needs to play a key role in the fight against fuel poverty. However, with energy policy currently sitting with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, which also has a role in growing the economy and in supporting our business community, it is hard to merely accept that fuel poverty is given the urgent priority that it requires if we are to eliminate it from our society.

Fuel-poor households must be given the resources to reduce their energy demand through increased energy efficiency measures. Home heating must be achievable at an affordable cost. It is, therefore, very difficult to understand how the scrapping of the green new deal scheme and moving ahead with a boiler replacement scheme fits in with that aim. Although the boiler replacement scheme will improve the efficiency of many boilers and can be used as a method of moving people from oil to gas, the potential success of the green new deal has been set aside, primarily because it appeared to be too radical for the Minister and some of his civil servants.

5.15 pm

The eradication of fuel poverty can be achieved if the key stakeholders involved engage effectively together. This is not an either/or situation, and it is within the ability of the energy regulator, government, consumer advocacy groups and the energy companies to deliver on that aim together.

Delivering affordable warmth through investment in heating and insulation programmes meets environmental and social objectives. As energy prices continue to rise, fuel poverty can only be tackled by increasing our focus on the energy efficiency and the energy costs of those in fuel poverty, especially low-income, vulnerable householders. The long-term solution to fuel poverty and one that supports the objective of reducing carbon emissions is to increase dramatically the energy efficiency of fuel poor households.

Although the current sustainable energy interdepartmental working group is a good start, progress to date has been slow. What we need is closer working between the Department of the Environment, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department for Regional Development to deliver the needed energy infrastructure that will protect domestic and commercial consumers. Furthermore, departmental working needs to be evident in the delivery of zero-carbon public housing and government buildings. The Department of Finance and Personnel, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department for Social Development need to work together to deliver that. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is heavily affected by the decisions taken on energy policy, so it is critical that its voice is heard. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) is responsible for tackling poverty, and the link between energy prices and levels of poverty is easily made.

The current arrangements are not working. Inefficient and delayed decision-making has resulted in higher prices for consumers and businesses and higher operating costs. It has also led to increased proportions of people living in fuel poverty.

Dealing with our energy challenge cannot be done with different Departments acting in isolation. All Departments need to work together with the ultimate objective of one Department taking responsibility for all energy-related matters. *Tacaím leis an rún.* I support the motion.

Ms Brown: I will speak on the report as a member of the Social Development Committee. First and foremost, I very much welcome the report and want to put on record my thanks to the Committee Clerk and staff, who assisted the Committee in its drafting and completion of the report.

Fuel poverty is even more pressing today than it was five years ago. The price of energy, such as oil, gas, coal and electricity, is the highest it has been for some time. Therefore, that means that more and more people are at risk of falling into fuel poverty, where they cut back and suffer in the cold because they just cannot afford to heat their homes and keep warm. Although fuel poverty is more likely to affect older people, it is affecting far too many families across Northern Ireland.

The fuel poverty strategy, which was launched in March 2011, identified that 44% of people in Northern Ireland live in fuel poverty. That figure is truly stark and most concerning. To date, the Department for Social Development has taken a lead role in tackling fuel poverty. However, as identified in the report, there is a need for a more collaborative, cross-departmental and cross-sectoral approach to address fuel poverty.

Despite fuel poverty having been talked about for some time, the situation is not being resolved, and more and more people are being affected by it. Any solution will not eradicate fuel poverty in a short time, and eradication is the ultimate objective. Therefore, the report calls for a long-term strategic policy approach.

It was for those reasons that the Committee proposed the establishment of thematic action groups, based on themes identified in the evidence-gathering exercise undertaken for the report. Each thematic action group will have a particular theme attached to its brief and will seek to find realistic rather than idealistic solutions to reduce and prevent fuel poverty. Each group will be responsible for developing a work plan, which will contain various actions. That will avoid any danger of the groups turning into talking shops. Those plans should also be published regularly. Each thematic action group will report to the Social Development Committee on its progress and an overarching cross-departmental group will be established to monitor progress of the implementation of the agreed initiatives. That overarching group has already been established, which demonstrates the commitment of the Committee, the Minister and the Department to see fuel poverty tackled and prevented. The group, which is called the cross-sectoral fuel poverty partnership, will be made up of the chairs of each thematic action group and permanent secretaries of each relevant Department, with the Minister for Social Development acting as chair.

The report's proposals provide a joined-up way forward to tackle and prevent fuel poverty. I know of many people in my constituency of South Antrim who are struggling. Lone

parents, pensioners, the sick and even working families are all faced with soaring heating costs on top of the other pressures of life. Heating your home and keeping your family warm is surely a basic human need. Heat is not a luxury but a requirement and not having it has major implications for one's health and leads to avoidable healthcare demands and the costs associated with that. Therefore, we need to do more for those who are in need, and the report's proposals offer a means of making things better. I support the motion.

Mr Agnew: I welcome the Committee report and the focus that it gives to fuel poverty. Many before me outlined the severity of the issue. I welcome the overall recommendation to ensure a strategic cross-departmental and cross-sectoral approach to reducing and preventing fuel poverty. If I am honest, I would have welcomed more specific recommendations from the Committee on the three key areas that have been highlighted: low incomes; rising energy costs; and tackling the energy inefficiency of our housing stock. However, I appreciate the outcomes that have been mentioned around the working groups that are to be established, hopefully, as a result of the report.

On low incomes, we need to ensure that we speak with one voice from the Chamber. Often, when debating the rebalancing of the Northern Ireland economy, we bemoan the high public sector wages and benefits that, apparently, are strangling our private sector. However, I do note and agree with the Finance Minister's recent comments on regional pay, when he stated that we should not seek to drive down pay in the public sector but should seek to drive up pay in the private sector. We should remember this debate when we talk about the economy.

Government can do very little about the spiralling price rises in oil and gas. As fossil fuels diminish, demand for them increases and, inevitably, costs go up. What we can do is drive towards renewables and to alternatives to fossil fuels. Indeed, as the report mentions, in the shorter term, brokering initiatives can be developed. As chair of the all-party group on co-operatives and mutuals, I welcome the fact that, on the back of a meeting that we held on energy, we could see Northern Ireland's first energy co-operative. That could help to tackle some of our immediate energy issues.

Energy efficiency is, perhaps, the area where the Assembly can do most. There are more deaths from winter-related illnesses in Northern Ireland than in Finland, which is a much colder country. We have to ask why that is and what it is that we are getting wrong. I have no doubt that the inefficiency of the housing stock is a big factor. In Finland, the figures show that levels of cavity wall insulation, roof insulation, floor insulation and double glazing are at 100% in every case. I do not have the figures for Northern Ireland, but, in the UK, cavity wall insulation is at 25% and floor insulation is at 4%. It is clear to see why we, as part of the UK, are falling down substantially in how we tackle fuel poverty.

We need an area-based approach to improving the energy efficiency of our housing stock, such as that which is proposed by the green new deal group. The motion talks about a cross-sectoral approach. That is a cross-body group in that it contains groups such as Friends of the Earth, the Ulster Farmers' Union, the Confederation of British Industry and the Institute of Directors, amongst others. Such an approach has also been recommended by Lord Whitty in his recent report for the Consumer Council, 'Energising Northern

Ireland'. Indeed, numerous groups that provided submissions to inform the Committee's report, such as the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations and Save the Children, have called for an area-based approach. So, there have been many calls, not just from the Green Party but from various sectors and various stakeholders with an interest in fuel poverty.

The green new deal group's proposals offered the Minister the opportunity to move to a co-ordinated and coherent approach to fuel poverty; an approach that would have created genuine efficiencies, that is, the opportunity to provide more effective help to more households with the same amount of money. That differs from the usual government definition of efficiency, which usually just translates as cuts. The green new deal proposals provided the opportunity to unlock up to £80 million worth of efficiencies from a £12 million government spend.

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

Mr Agnew: Lord Whitty categorised our current approach. He stated:

"There are a range of schemes, therefore, all of which have relatively small resources and little overall coherence. The range of schemes and the different methods of delivery cause both sub optimal efficiency and confusion."

The green new deal could have tackled that. The Minister's decision on that issue was a disgrace.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call on the Minister for Social Development, Mr Nelson McCausland, to respond to the debate.

Mr Kennedy: Time. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I thank Mr Kennedy for his helpful advice. *[Laughter.]*

I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the debate and thank the Members who have contributed to it. I also welcome the Social Development Committee's report on fuel poverty. I have listened carefully to the comments expressed by Members. If my response fails to address any specific points, I will, of course, write to Members separately.

The motion calls on me to implement the Committee's recommendations to ensure that a strategic, cross-departmental and cross-sectoral approach is adopted to reduce and prevent fuel poverty. I welcome this opportunity to update Members on the range of activities my Department is undertaking to tackle fuel poverty, in particular the amalgamation of the interdepartmental group on fuel poverty and the fuel poverty advisory group into the new cross-sectoral fuel poverty partnership.

The report from the Social Development Committee was the product of an event held in November last year, at which representatives from Statutory Committees, Departments, the private sector and non-governmental organisations discussed practical solutions to fuel poverty. I have spoken many times of my commitment to tackling fuel poverty, and it continues to be one of my top priorities. However, we are all

too aware of the extent of the problem in Northern Ireland and of the fact that just talking about it will not resolve it.

The definition of fuel poverty has been explored in depth by Professor Christine Liddell from the University of Ulster and John Hills in Great Britain. That work is very welcome and emphasises that fuel poverty is a real problem in Northern Ireland. The time has come to concentrate on practical solutions that will make a real difference to the thousands of householders in Northern Ireland who are struggling to pay their energy bills. I want to take a few minutes to remind Members of what we are doing to tackle fuel poverty.

My Department's fuel poverty strategy document, 'Warmer Healthier Homes', was published in April 2011 and set out 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."

I remain committed to that vision, and I want to back it up with practical measures that help people in fuel poverty. In addition to continuing to deliver mainstream schemes such as the Warm Homes Scheme, the Housing Executive's heating replacement scheme, a benefits uptake campaign and winter fuel and cold weather payments, my Department is working on a number of new and exciting pilots.

The recent boiler replacement scheme entitled eligible householders to a grant of £1,500 towards the cost of installing a new boiler. That pilot was hugely successful, and almost 1,700 inefficient boilers have been replaced, helping many low-income households that had not previously been eligible for government assistance. In addition, over 640 local installers got work from the scheme, providing a much-needed boost to the local construction industry. Last week, I announced a new boiler replacement scheme, which will build on the success of the pilot.

An amount of £12 million has been set aside for the scheme over the next three years. In the period between the pilot ending and the announcement being made last week, many letters came into the Department calling for the scheme to be continued. It is an immensely popular scheme and has been extremely successful. In the coming weeks, I hope to announce additional funding for the scheme, which will be part-financed by the European regional development fund under the European Sustainable Competitiveness Programme for Northern Ireland. That could see an additional 16,000 people benefit from the grant available. In regard to the boiler replacement scheme, I visited the home of senior citizens who were saving on an entire oil fill in the year by the installation of the new boiler. That is very significant. The installation of the boiler enabled them to reduce the cost of heating oil over the course of the year by one third. That is significant, important and a good example of real delivery.

5.30 pm

In addition, my colleague Minister Foster last week announced the renewable heat incentive, offering grants to householders to install renewable technology to improve their energy efficiency. This represents a significant investment in the improvement of domestic energy efficiency and is an important step in preventing fuel poverty. It will also sustain jobs, create investment and improve health.

I will announce further details of the boiler replacement scheme in the coming days.

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

Members will be aware of the pay-as-you-go oil pilot, which my officials have been working on with representatives from Kingspan Renewables and Carillion Energy Services to deliver. This innovative approach is aimed at discouraging people from purchasing emergency oil drums. The pilot was to run for three months and will come to an end in the next few weeks. It will be subject to a full evaluation to see whether this is something we can bring into future domestic energy efficiency improvement schemes. Early feedback is that the pilot has worked really well, so I look forward to that evaluation. An example brought to my attention was of a low-income family with a disabled child who are now able to use their oil heating system to heat their home properly. They were not able to do that previously. Those are the sorts of difference that the schemes that we are introducing really make — differences to the family with the disabled child and to the senior citizens.

In addition, officials from my Department are working with the University of Ulster and district councils to pilot an area-based approach to tackling fuel poverty. Working in partnership with the University of Ulster, Departments such as OFMDFM and DARD and local councils, we will target areas most affected by fuel poverty and provide appropriate solutions to improve the energy efficiency of homes in the area. The pilot will start later this year, and the outcome will inform our approach to tackling fuel poverty.

The fuel poverty 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. This is very relevant to the motion, which calls for:

“a strategic, cross-departmental and cross-sectoral approach ... to reduce and prevent fuel poverty.”

That is what we are delivering. The report by the Social Development Committee recommends the establishment of thematic action groups whose key role will be to identify and prioritise agreed, workable and realistic solutions to fuel poverty and not simply develop wish lists. I am a firm believer in collaborative working to provide realistic solutions to difficult issues, so I welcome the report in that respect.

We said in our fuel poverty strategy that we would review the support structures for the strategy, namely the interdepartmental group on fuel poverty and the fuel poverty advisory group. This review resulted in the amalgamation of those groups to form the cross-sectoral fuel poverty partnership. The key recommendations from the report are, therefore, very much in line with the thematic approach that my Department is developing.

The cross-sectoral fuel poverty partnership has agreed terms of reference:

“to identify measures to reduce fuel poverty and propose implementation mechanisms within the wider strategic policy context”.

I chaired the first meeting of the partnership. At that meeting, it was agreed that the members would nominate themselves on to thematic subgroups. Those thematic

subgroups are as follows: achieving affordable warmth; prevention, targeting and opportunities; synergies; and risks. Members can sit on one or a number of groups.

I will chair the next meeting of the cross-sectoral fuel poverty partnership on 7 June. At that meeting, Professor Christine Liddell from the University of Ulster will present her findings, which are about informing my Department's area-based approach pilot. I am pleased that that arrangement reflects the Committee's recommendations, and I expect that the thematic subgroups will examine in detail all the recommendations in the report.

I will touch on some of the issues that we heard about from Members. Mr Durkan, who is not with us now, said that something needed to be done on energy brokering schemes. In fact, I have recently approved an energy brokering scheme, which the Housing Executive is now working on to implement for its tenants. So, we are moving ahead on that already.

I noticed a number of comments from Mr Flanagan, who has also moved on to other things. He said that the green new deal was the key to all this. Indeed, Mr Agnew took up that point. The green new deal was subject to a full economic appraisal. The proposal was fundamentally flawed. A significant slice of the available funding for the green new deal proposal went on administration costs. Administration does not heat a home. I want as much of the available money as possible to go directly to the people who are in need. The Department of Finance and Personnel raised significant concerns about the proposals, including a concern about the lack of private funding security. It is all very well to talk about how much money you will bring in from other sources, but, if there is no security with that, it is very dangerous ground on which to move forward. I suggest that Members reflect on those points when they espouse the cause of the green new deal as much as they do.

We are putting the £12 million into a scheme that is tried, tested and proven to deliver, and that is the boiler replacement scheme. That was the right decision to take, and, in spite of Mr Agnew's comments, it is one that will stand the test of time. Mr Agnew also said that thematic action groups would “hopefully” be formed. I have already said that people were asked to nominate to them at our meeting in January, so that work is under way.

I will turn now to another couple of things that Mr Flanagan said. He said that progress has been slow, that there was inefficiency and delayed decision-making across Departments and that Departments were working in isolation. From this and from the approach that we have adopted, it is clear that we have all the relevant Departments working on this together. All the key stakeholders are there as well. In other words, we agree entirely with what is in the report in that regard. It is absolutely right, and that is the way that we are moving forward.

I have to disagree with what he said about delayed decision-making. The pilot scheme and the other measures that we brought forward, on which we are working at the moment, have not been delayed. This issue has been around for many years. In the past year, since I have been in the Department, we have moved forward very quickly on the issues. That is why we have the pilot for the pay-as-you-go scheme and the vast improvement in the energy efficiency of homes. That has been achieved through not only the boiler replacement scheme but the focus on double glazing

in Housing Executive properties. When I arrived in the Department, we were told that that would take a decade; now, we are delivering it in the term of this Executive. We are keen to move forward with improving the energy efficiency of homes.

We also have our ongoing work, through our benefit uptake campaigns and so forth, on raising the amount of money that people have to spend on heating their home and on fuel.

I thank Members for their contributions today, and I reaffirm my total commitment to finding practical solutions to fuel poverty. When I came to the Department, I believed that the time had come to move away from talking about tackling fuel poverty to implementing practical solutions that would make a real difference to householders across Northern Ireland. I thank the Committee for its work, and I look forward to working with it as we take this forward.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, thank all those who participated in today's debate, all the members of the Committee and, indeed, the Committee staff, who have put so much work into the preparation of the report.

It is clear from the debate that there is consensus on the need to work together to effectively address fuel poverty. Political commitment and momentum is key to driving the agenda forward. That, in essence, is the key message of the report. It has a focus on cross-sectoral and cross-departmental collaboration, and almost all the Members who spoke referred to the need for that. The report suggests an approach that, in my opinion, could underpin the Department's current approach.

I will deal now with the comments of Members who contributed to the debate. Paula Bradley talked about the most vulnerable members of society being affected by fuel poverty. She said that it was important to identify cross-departmental working and stressed its importance. She also talked about the health implications that put pressure on other services and said that no one Department is responsible for solving the problem.

Michael Copeland talked about the Committee having shown courage in holding the event that produced the report. He talked about all of us being in agreement on the effects of fuel poverty, particularly on the old. He talked about pensioners having real concerns about fuel prices and taking drastic actions to keep warm. He said that some elements of the oil industry needed to be considered for regulation, but he was not specific on that.

Mark Durkan talked about the report providing a good springboard to move forward. He said that the approach to date had been fragmented but acknowledged that some work had been done to redress that. He is concerned about the impact of welfare reform on fuel poverty rates, as we all are. He said that innovative approaches needed to be implemented and current ones expanded. He mentioned oil saving stamps. The Minister also mentioned some of the issues that Mark Durkan alluded to.

Judith Cochrane highlighted the impact on the most vulnerable in society and said that we must seek to protect them. She referred to the key role of the advice sector, one example being the maximising of benefit uptake and energy efficiency. She feared the role of pay-as-you-go oil schemes.

Alex Easton referred to the impact on health and the number of deaths connected to fuel poverty. He also talked about the impact on educational opportunities. He highlighted the causes of fuel poverty, including low income, energy efficiency and high fuel costs. He acknowledged that departmental initiatives are helping to address fuel poverty and noted the impact on rural fuel poverty in particular.

Phil Flanagan focused on energy-efficient programmes and action to maximise benefits. He is concerned about scrapping the green new deal proposal in favour of boiler replacement. Environmental and social objectives can be met by increasing the efficiency of fuel-poor households. He said that zero-carbon public buildings must be part of the solution and that current arrangements are not working.

Pam Brown said that fuel poverty is likely to get worse and that the report calls for a long-term strategic approach. Thematic action groups will be time-bound to avoid them becoming talking shops; the proposals represent a joined-up approach that is strategic. There is a need to do more for those in need, and the report can help to achieve that.

Steven Agnew welcomed the report but would like to have seen more specific recommendations. He recognised, however, that the TAGs would make those recommendations. He said that there is little that government can do about fossil fuel prices but there should be greater focus on renewables. He talked about energy efficiency being an area in which we can do most. He noted that we have more fuel poverty-related deaths than Finland, which is a colder country. He said that an area-based approach is required, such as the green new deal.

The Minister welcomed the report and provided an update on the action that he and his Department have taken. He talked about fuel poverty being one of the top priorities and a real problem here in the North. He talked about the fuel poverty strategy being published in 2011 and is committed to that strategy. He referred to new and exciting initiatives to address fuel poverty, such as the new boiler replacement scheme, and said that the European regional development fund may provide an additional source of funding to support boiler replacement. He talked about how renewable heat incentives can help with domestic fuel efficiency and said that the oil pay-as-you-go pilot was coming to an end in the next few weeks. He said that a full evaluation would follow in due course and the indications were that it has proved successful.

5.45 pm

The Minister also talked about how the Department is now working on an area-based approach to fuel poverty. He stated that he is a firm believer in collaboration. He talked about key recommendations of the thematic action groups being similar to the Department's approach and was happy that their approach converges with that of the Department. He said that the proposed green new deal is fundamentally flawed. Had it been a different colour, such as blue, orange or pink, I wonder whether he might have had a different view of it, but that is merely a personal observation. On that note, I will move on.

Some Members referred to the fact that fuel poverty is about poverty in general and that the requirement to increase incomes is easier said than done in the best of times but is even more difficult in the current economic

climate. Providing employment opportunities will not be easy, but Departments must work together to ensure that they maximise what opportunities they can.

As I said when commenting on some of the contributions, Members spoke of the need to maximise benefit uptake. To that end, I am sure that the Minister will give close consideration to the recent Public Accounts Committee report on the uptake of benefits by pensioners, as well as to the forthcoming report from Bryson Energy on its approach to providing benefit checks to maximise benefit uptake.

The Committee's report is not an end point on fuel poverty; in fact, it is quite the opposite. It marks the beginning of a different approach but one that I believe ultimately converges with the Department's. A Fuel Poverty Coalition event is currently taking place in the Long Gallery. Events focusing on solutions and collaborative ways forward can contribute to positive impacts on fuel poverty. The Committee does not want to contribute to a talking-shop approach to fuel poverty. We know that we run the risk of having those accusations levelled at us, but the approach outlined in the report is practical, pragmatic and has inbuilt flexibility. The Committee also acknowledges that the report is not the final article. The expertise to address the detail lies with stakeholders and departmental officials, and the report will require further discussion. The report challenges all stakeholders, including the relevant Departments, to produce outcomes within a set time frame. It is necessary to talk further, but there must be an end point at which strategic action must be taken. I commend the report to the House and ask Members to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Social Development on fuel poverty; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to implement its recommendations to ensure a strategic, cross-departmental and cross-sectoral approach is adopted to reduce and prevent fuel poverty.

Private Members' Business

Autism: You Need to Know Campaign

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

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly views with concern the findings of the Northern Ireland-based research carried out by the National Autistic Society into the mental health of children with autism for the You Need to Know campaign; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take on board the main findings of the research as his Department prepares to implement the Autism Act (NI) 2011.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím leis an rún a mholadh. I propose the motion on behalf of the Assembly all-party group on autism. I thank the Business Committee for affording us the time to debate this important report, 'You Need to Know', published by the National Autistic Society (NAS).

It is important to make it absolutely clear at the outset that autism is not a mental health problem. The Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which amends the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, clarifies that autism is a social communication disability and not a mental health condition or learning disability. It is perfectly possible for someone with autism to have good mental health, just as it is for any other child. Unfortunately, far too many children go on to develop mental health problems.

The 2011 Act, when enacted, will address the acknowledged gap in knowledge and expertise across the public sector. The Act includes the requirement for an autism awareness campaign and the development of a regularly monitored and reviewed Northern Ireland Government autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) strategy that crosses all life stages and a number of Departments. As the 'You Need to Know' report points out, there is limited data collection in Northern Ireland regarding ASD and, therefore, there is no Northern Ireland-specific research into the prevalence of mental health problems in children with autism here. The need for the correlation of ASD data across Departments is addressed specifically in the 2011 Act and consequently in the planning of the Northern Ireland Government ASD strategy, which includes a subgroup to progress this particular issue.

Children with autism can be more susceptible to mental health problems because they can be socially isolated. They can struggle to make friends and can be bullied in school. They will often find it difficult to communicate their feelings when they have problems or feel low. This can escalate into mental health problems. However, with the right support at the right time, children with autism can have the same emotional well-being as any other children and live a happy and fulfilled life. When the right support is not provided at the right time, the impact on children with autism and their families can be devastating.

The 'You Need to Know' report, which, as I said, was commissioned and written by the National Autistic Society, provides a snapshot of mental health problems that children with autism in Northern Ireland experience and seeks to make their voices heard. The parents surveyed reported that their children's mental health problems developed at a very early age. Almost nine out of 10 parents stated that their children first experienced these issues before the age of 10, and over half before the age of five. When parents were asked about what things negatively affected their children's mental health, the most common answers related to not getting the right support for the child's autism — 58% — the lack of social support — 55% — and non-mental health professionals, including GPs, social workers and schools, not having adequate understanding of autism, which was at 48%, as was a lack of appropriate educational provision. Nine out of 10 parents said that the mental health problems that their children faced had a negative impact on the whole family. The report also revealed that there can be a financial impact, with a significant portion of parents having to reduce their working hours to deal with these issues.

Unfortunately, when children with autism and their families have to access specialist child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), they encounter many problems. Of the parents surveyed, over half — around 57% — found it difficult to get a first referral to CAMHS for their child, and around 55% waited three months for a first appointment following referral. Some waited up to a year. Two thirds said that there had been times of crisis with their child's mental health when they needed support, but half of those parents were unable to access that support. In respect of these issues, the National Autistic Society's report 'You Need to Know' recommends that health and social care (HSC) trusts develop specific pathways for mental health support for children with autism.

As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, autism is a complex disability. When mental health problems arise in children with autism, they are more difficult to recognise, harder to evaluate and even harder to treat. Professionals need a good working knowledge of autism in order to do these things, or the interventions they provide can fail to help and, in some cases, can even be harmful. Communicating with a child with autism requires flexibility, patience and skill. Children with autism are more likely to take longer than others to trust a professional and to communicate openly. Of the parents surveyed by the NAS, over half of them felt that the CAMHS staff had a good understanding of autism, but fewer than half thought that CAMHS staff knew how to communicate with their child. On that issue, the NAS report recommends that all staff working within CAMHS at tiers 2, 3 and 4 must have basic training in autism and access to a specialist's report. All CAMHS staff need to have a broad understanding of autism to ensure that children receive appropriate support.

Providing mental health support to children with autism is indeed a very specialist skill. Without that specialist knowledge, it can be difficult to treat these children. It is, therefore, vital to have autism specialists in CAMHS who can help other professionals develop their skills. The report recommends that the key autism specialists are identified in each CAMHS service, play a lead role in developing staff training and act as a source of specialist advice. As outlined, there is limited research into the prevalence of mental health problems in children with autism in Northern

Ireland, but, as I stated, I believe that that will be addressed through the Minister's work on the Autism Act.

In conclusion, I thank all the members of the all-party group on autism and the other Members of the House who have stayed behind on this hot day to participate in the debate. I welcome the Minister and look forward to hearing his response to the recommendations and hearing how, through the autism strategy, many of those issues will be dealt with.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the important issue of autism. Unfortunately, autism is an ever-increasing problem across Northern Ireland, and it affects a growing number of children and young people in our communities. I welcome the progress made to date in dealing with autism, and I pay tribute to the National Autistic Society Northern Ireland, Autism Northern Ireland and other important groups and organisations for their ongoing work on autism. I also commend the Health Minister for taking a hands-on, proactive approach to improving and developing autism services in Northern Ireland.

I feel that the public do not know enough about autism. It is a lifelong development disability that affects the way in which a person communicates with and relates to other people. As autism is a spectrum disorder that can affect people in different ways, we need to have a different system in place that can deal with specific, individual needs. Increasing public awareness of autism could be a valuable tool in promoting the needs of those with autism and helping to encourage understanding.

As with many areas of healthcare, early intervention and detection is vital to be able to support, minimise and treat autism. Despite the good work done to date, there is still room for improvement. That was re-emphasised to me recently when I was contacted by parents of children with autism from across my constituency who still have concerns about the current system and feel that much has yet to be done to make adequate support available.

Given that 17,000 people are affected by autism in Northern Ireland and 200 people are diagnosed with the condition each year, it is important that we continue to do all that we can to develop autism support. If the right infrastructure and support is in place for young autistic children, it helps reduce long-term mental health problems.

6.00 pm

I welcome the work to date on the autism strategy. The project board has been established, and the voluntary sector is involved. I welcome the Minister's assurance that he will continue to work with the voluntary sector in bringing forward the strategy. The voluntary sector is often at the front line and has a significant role to play in the development of an autism strategy. The strategy must provide a clear pathway to set about addressing the needs of people with an autistic spectrum disorder as well as the needs of parents and carers and to identify what steps can be taken to promote awareness of autism.

Education has a vital role to play in helping to tackle autism. Many parents who contacted me recently expressed specific concern about the lack of a support infrastructure in schools. Parents feel that there is no adequate support mechanism in place to support autistic children. More should be done to promote specific training for teachers and

classroom assistants in schools. An ethos of understanding would help to reassure children who suffer from autism while helping those who have to look after, teach and support children and young people with autism.

This is a cross-departmental issue. All Departments and key stakeholders must be fully involved in the way forward. The voices of those with autism must be heard as we try to tackle the ever-growing problem of autism among our young people. I support the motion.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and welcome the opportunity to speak on it. At the launch of the You Need to Know campaign, Mark Lever, who is the chief executive officer of the National Autistic Society, said:

"Too many children with autism are developing preventable mental health problems and find themselves up against a broken system that doesn't understand them or their needs. All too often they receive inappropriate, ineffectual and sometimes harmful treatments."

That was in 2010. The 'You Need to Know' report, which examined the issues of children with autism and mental health problems, also highlights that those young people are let down by the very services that are supposed to be in place to help them.

As Dominic Bradley highlighted, autism is a lifelong developmental disability. Over 70% of children with autism also develop mental health problems, such as anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorders. Coupled with autism, those disorders are harder to recognise and diagnose. Often those mental health problems are dismissed as a side effect of autism. The 'You Need to Know' report states that more needs to be done to stop those problems from occurring, and there needs to be better support when they do occur.

Over the weekend, I met a friend who has a son with autism. Only last week, she had to take three days off work to care for him, as he had developed acute anxiety after spending the first period of his life away from his parents. Talking to that parent brought it to my attention that when the right support is not available, the impact on children with autism and their families can be devastating.

As part of the 'You Need to Know' report, parents reported that their children were developing mental health problems, as Dominic Bradley has already said. Some 90% develop problems before the age of 10, and 50% develop problems before the age of four. When parents were asked what things negatively affected their child's mental health, their answers were revealing. Some 60% were not getting the right support, as my friend confirmed; almost 50% of professionals lack understanding of autism; and 50% of parents stated that there was a lack of appropriate educational provision.

I understand that the last point is not the responsibility of the Minister in the House, but he and the Minister of Education should have a much more joined-up approach on the issue. In January, John O'Dowd said that his Department had a long way to go and he gave strong indications of the major changes that he had in mind. It is my hope that his plans of reform are nearing conclusion. However, the motion calls on the Health Minister, who is with us today, to take on

board the main findings of the research as his Department prepares to implement the Autism Act.

The Minister cannot ignore those findings. The Health and Social Care Trust needs to develop integrated care strategies for mental health support for children with autism. All CAMHS staff need to have an understanding of autism to ensure that children receive early intervention and appropriate support. That demands the development of staff training, so that they can help other professionals to develop their skills.

As my friend said, her son can achieve his full potential by reducing the impact of mental health and emotional problems through the improved provision of care services. Those children deserve an equal and fair opportunity in life, along with all children in our society.

Mr Hussey: My first knowledge of autism was gained by my membership of the Western Health and Social Services Council, to which I was appointed on my election to Omagh District Council in 2005. I had absolutely no knowledge of autism, and it was a presentation to the health council by a group of parents that pricked my conscience and made me want to know a little bit more. For that reason, I sat on the health council's autism group, and it is for that reason that I sit on the all-party Assembly group on autism.

While preparing for today, I mentioned on Facebook that I would speak during the debate. I also learned that my cousin, who works in a special school, is a specialist in working with children with autism. She said that she had read about the You Need to Know campaign and that it is very worthy of support, as society needs to be aware of the needs of people with autism and how to deal with those needs. She said that the findings are typical nationwide, and that, of course, change needs to come from the top down. Government need to recognise those needs and the financial and practical implications that arise with the development of relevant resources. That, in turn, will highlight the needs in Departments and organisations, which will, in turn, implement the legislation that can only benefit the families involved. She said that, as she has been out of teaching, she has missed out on recent developments, but the topic is still close to her heart.

Other comments indicate that the public fully supports the delivery of a service that recognises those with special needs and takes every step it can to support parents, grandparents, teachers and, most importantly, the children who are affected on a daily basis with autism.

I have a report sitting on my desk in Omagh that was given to me by a grandparent in relation to his granddaughter. I have met the child on several occasions. In fact, before I was elected to the House, they were visiting the Building when I was with a group lobbying for support, and the wee girl shouted out, "Granda, there's your friend". She is a lovely child who is much loved by her parents, grandparents and siblings, but she suffers from autism. Her parents and grandparents have fought hard to ensure that she receives all the support that she should from the state.

I received a comment from a friend called Shane, who said:

"It's often up to parents of ASD kids to push education boards, schools, and youth organisations to identify the

needs and resource the management so that kids can develop fully."

However, what if the parents themselves are ASD? Adults are often not aware that they may have the syndrome. In this, the early and initial stages of changing the way that we all treat and manage ASD, I feel that it is very important that schools take a special interest to ensure that the kids identified get every advantage. Why should it only be the kids with the pushy parents?

The motion is quite specific and calls on the Assembly to note:

"with concern the findings of the Northern Ireland-based research carried out by the National Autism Society into the mental health of children with autism for the You Need to Know campaign".

The conclusions in the report are damning to say the least. The report clearly states that child and adolescent mental health services are underfunded and overstretched. Anyone who has attempted to support a parent who is having a child assessed for autism will certainly support the comment that CAMHS is overstretched. The sad reality is that, without the push from parents in many cases, the assessment would take a lot longer. The factual comment that children with autism and their families and carers struggle to access the right support, often when it is most needed, should make us all hang our heads in shame. The fact that thousands of children with autism will needlessly face a future of mental health problems must bring us all to a sense of shock and horror. We can change the lives of those children if we work with the National Autistic Society to provide a health and social care service that knows how to provide the relevant support. We can also improve the lives of the many parents and siblings out there who are at their wits' end trying to cope on their own.

Some people do not like reading books to the end to get the solution to a problem or to find out whodunnit. In this instance, you do not have to read the entire report; you have only to go to the conclusions, which are pretty straightforward.

I have already mentioned the need for improved child and adolescent mental health services. In previous questions to the Health Minister, I have sought a closer relationship between the Department of Education and the Health Department in that area. The necessity for protocols has, I feel, already been accepted by all Members, and there is no doubt that actions will speak louder than words. Access to specialist advice for staff working in CAMHS seems to be a reasonable expectation, and the need for an individual to play a lead role in training is clearly a logical step. Teachers, particularly primary-school teachers, are facing demands on their time, day and daily. However, as autism becomes more apparent —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Hussey: — and understood, we need to develop an in-depth training course that allows teachers and classroom assistants to create an ethos of understanding that will benefit children with autism. I support the motion.

Mr McCarthy: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I welcome the opportunity to support the proposal and ask the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to implement

the changes and improvements contained in the 'You Need to Know' report so as to make life better, in mental health terms, for children and young people in Northern Ireland with autism.

I pay tribute to everyone involved in the National Autistic Society Northern Ireland for the work they have done on behalf of everyone with autism, and also their parents, carers, teachers and the many other people who have contributed to the research and findings contained in the 'You Need to Know' report. The motion advises the Minister and his Department to take on board all available information as they progress to implement the Autism Act (NI) 2011, which came into being last year. I also thank the officers, staff, parents, carers and many more people who supported Autism NI as it steered that vital piece of legislation through the Assembly over two years.

I must say that I am extremely proud to have been a member of the all-party group on autism, under the excellent chairmanship of colleague Dominic Bradley, when despite some opposition from within the Health Department itself, the 2011 Act was passed and got Royal Assent one year ago in May 2011. It is now our opportunity to see dramatic improvements made in this field for the benefit of everyone with autism. The Assembly has spoken. The Minister is fully aware of what has to be done now. The Department must not delay or drag its heels. Action is required. We as ordinary Assembly Members will not tolerate any further blockages to the Act's fullest implementation.

The 'You Need to Know' report was launched last June, and the research carried out clearly said that mental health problems such as anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder and depression can be avoided if the proper service is provided to children with autism at an early stage. So, with the right support at the right time, autistic youngsters can have the same well-being as other children and a happy and contented childhood. It is up to us, the Minister and the Department to deliver.

It is fair to say that the Department of Education also has a vital role to play in ensuring that proper provision is made in schools. The report states that 48% of the parents surveyed felt that the lack of appropriate educational opportunities had a bad effect on their child's mental health. My experience as an MLA — I listened to other MLAs say this this afternoon — is that parents of children on the autistic spectrum are totally exhausted and exasperated when they seek help or even advice from the statutory authorities. They do not know who to go to to seek professional help, and when they do go, the time they have to wait for help is horrendous, thus building up anger, frustration and almost a sense of hopelessness. The 2011 Act, I hope, is a mechanism that will prevent such anxiety. Why should people who have enough problems have to suffer the indignity of not knowing where to go or where to seek help? They deserve help and, hopefully, they will get whatever is required at the time.

6.15 pm

The Department must listen, learn and act when it is dealing with autism. It is the least it can do to assist the children and their parents. The Department has complete access to the contents of the 'You Need to Know' report. It can see the fantastic work carried out by a voluntary

organisation and supported throughout the community. The Department will also have knowledge of the contents of the Bamford report and its recommendation to support those with learning disabilities and mental health issues. One is tempted to ask why there is such a delay in its full implementation.

In conclusion, the 'You Need to Know' report has to be the building block for the Department to reach out and ensure that the mental health problems of those children with autism —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr McCarthy: — are tackled at a very early stage, and so prevented before they even start. I support the motion.

Ms Brown: I welcome and support the motion. I want to begin by praising the all-party group on autism for the work that it has done to date, especially in securing the passing of the Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which amended the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 in order to include provision for those on the autistic spectrum.

Autism is characterised by impaired social interaction and communication, coupled with restricted and repetitive behaviour. Every person with autism will have different, but not dissimilar, symptoms. I also welcome the "You Need to Know" campaign, launched by the National Autistic Society, and its findings, as set out in the comprehensive report detailing the experiences of users.

Mental illness is prevalent in Northern Ireland, and as the campaign highlights, it affects 71% of those with autism. For those with autism and their carers, that is yet another set of circumstances to manage and deal with, coupled with those symptoms associated with autism. Autism is not a mental illness in itself, but sufferers can also suffer from anxiety disorder, depression or obsessive compulsive disorder, for example. That can, therefore, have an overall negative impact on their health and limit progress in other areas of their condition. The campaign seeks to highlight the message that children with autism can have good mental health and the name of the campaign, "You Need to Know", obviously aims it at many stakeholders, including government.

Autism has only recently secured the attention it requires, and many sufferers live here in Northern Ireland. For every sufferer, there is at least one carer, likely to be a parent or close family member. The campaign places a focus on services and inspires government to make changes and improvements to services, such as the child and adolescent mental health services, to provide support for autistic children who also suffer from mental illness.

The Autism Act not only amends the Disability Discrimination Act but ensures that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety produces an autism strategy that includes how the needs of those with autism are to be addressed, as well as raising awareness of autism in society, including the workplace. The Bamford review, published a number of years ago, set out a strategic direction for children's mental health services to ensure that they met the standards required in order to tackle mental health issues faced by children. The review puts a focus on those with special needs, including those with autism or a learning disability. The review and recommendations are

obviously linked to the issues pointed out by the You Need to Know campaign, and tie in with the change advocated by the National Autistic Society.

In a review completed in February 2011, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority reported that although progress has been made in the area, more needs to be done. I hope that further improvements will be forthcoming in the delivery of services so that the full scope of the Autism Act might be realised and that those most in need will truly benefit.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, support the motion, and I would also like to thank the all-party group on autism for the work that it did on bringing the Autism Act to fruition. I was a member of the Health Committee in the previous mandate, and I am very aware of the hard work that that Committee did in bringing the Act through. I quote Paula Bradley because, at this stage, the debate is all the same and everything else has been said. I just want to make some comments.

The three reports by the National Autistic Society were mentioned. Individuals with autism have difficulty with social interaction and communication, including using and understanding verbal and non-verbal language. They have difficulty with social imagination, the ability to understand and predict other people's intentions or behaviours and the ability to imagine situations outside their own routine.

The motion deals with children, but one concern across the board is about what is happening with welfare reform. Adults with autism are being migrated from incapacity benefit to employment and support allowance, and there are concerns about how those people are going to cope with the interviews and tick-box exercise carried out as part of the much-maligned and discredited work capability assessment. The problems that people have carry on into adulthood; I think that is a point worth making.

As has been stated, autism is not a mental health problem, but too many children go on to develop such problems. Again, it has been stated that there is no specific research into the prevalence of mental health problems for children here in the North, but research in England shows that seven in 10 children with autism have a co-occurring mental health problem such as an anxiety disorder, an obsessive compulsive disorder or depression. A lot more needs to be done to stop these problems occurring, and better support needs to be available when they occur.

Children with autism are often socially isolated because of the condition and are thus more susceptible to mental health problems, but if the right support is available, their emotional well-being can be just as good as that of other children.

Mrs McKevitt: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that the Health Minister should consider developing ways to make child and adolescent mental health services more accessible to children with autism, given the recommendation of the You Need to Know campaign that staff in tiers 2, 3 and 4 should be given the basic training in autism, and that there should be key individuals within CAMHS who are autism specialists? Does he agree that such a change would have a hugely positive impact on the lives of children with autism and their families?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Brady: I thank the Member for her intervention and absolutely agree with what she said. The people who deal with the children in this situation need to be trained to a level of understanding and need to be able to cope with the complex problems. The complexity of autism was mentioned. People who are going to provide a support mechanism need to be trained to the highest degree.

The 'You Need to Know' report outlines some of the mental health problems that children here experience. Parents who were surveyed reported that children's mental health problems were developing at a very early age in some cases. When parents were asked what things negatively affected their children's mental health, examples given included not getting the right support for the child's autism; lack of social support; non-mental-health professionals, including GPs, social workers, schools, etc, not having enough understanding of autism; and a lack of appropriate educational provision.

It is accepted that education plays a vital role in the mental health of children with autism. My colleague Seán Lynch mentioned the need for the Education and Health Departments to be collaborative in their approach to dealing with this particular problem. A supportive education setting working in partnership with mental health services can be crucial in maintaining emotional well-being and preventing mental health problems.

The Autistic Society recommends more training for education professionals such as teachers and classroom assistants. Health and social care trusts need to develop specific pathways, as has been mentioned, for mental health support for children with autism, and all staff working within care and mental health services need to have basic training in autism — again, that was mentioned — and have access to specialist support. Also, key autism specialists should be identified in each care and mental health service and act as a source of specialist advice.

Commissioners in each trust area need to know how many children with autism live in each of those areas and know what their mental health needs are. It is essential that the trusts acquire data on the mental health needs of children with autism in their area and that a work stream is identified for the provision of mental health services for children with autism and their families. Unless all that is incorporated into the implementation of the Autism Act, it simply will not be effective, and the hard work done by the all-party group will not be recognised.

Ms P Bradley: I welcome the opportunity to speak on such an important topic. Today, in our society, mental health still has a number of negative associations and a lot of stigma attached to it. In general, people are still reluctant to seek help for mental ill health. Every one of us has mental health, the well-being of which can fluctuate at any time for a number of factors. For many on the autistic spectrum, the ability to seek help and support may be additionally hindered by lack of communication skills or their experiences within the health service.

NAS research makes clear that people on the spectrum have a high incidence of mental health issues. Estimates and research place it at about 70% of people on the spectrum having some mental health problems. As has already been stated, those can include anxiety, attention deficit

hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). For too many people, those conditions are dismissed merely as an unfortunate side effect of autism. Autism itself is not a mental health problem, but it can, in cases, go together with the aforementioned conditions. Forty percent of people on the spectrum will have two or more mental health issues. When we consider the unique situation of Northern Ireland, with a higher level of mental health problems in the general population due to the legacy of the conflict and the effects of living in social deprivation, it is clear that mental health in ASD individuals needs to be addressed effectively, ensuring that they get the right support when they need it.

In passing the Autism Act, the Assembly did go some way to helping families and individuals living with ASD to get access to help and support. There is no doubt that defining ASD as a disability has meant that awareness of the condition has risen somewhat. However, much more is still to be done. Sixty-five per cent of families living with ASD felt that lack of support had negatively impacted on their child's mental health. Families also reported that this lack of support and understanding has impacted on the family's mental health.

People with ASD can be of average or above average IQ. This group in particular will have a heightened risk of mental health problems, especially anxiety or depression. Treating people with complex needs such as ASD needs an understanding of what the condition is and how different agencies can work. There needs to be more understanding in our schools, especially the mainstream sector, where a lot of ASD children are educated. Lack of understanding in the general population can make these mental health problems worse, as was the sad case in Suffolk, when an individual with ASD committed suicide after being bullied. Recently, we had the case of a child with Asperger's syndrome being attacked in a school in Carrickfergus. We must ensure that those stories are the exception and not the norm. Sadly, however, research has shown that children with ASD are more likely to be bullied, which can, in turn, affect their mental health and self-image. The work of CAMHS has endeavoured to address mental health in all our vulnerable young people. It is clear that there needs to be more guidance on what each of the different stages is and how people can access those services.

It is for those reasons that I support the motion that mental health in ASD individuals needs to be considered when implementing the Autism Act (NI) 2011.

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the important issue of autism, the first time I have had the opportunity to do so since being elected last year. I pay tribute to the National Autistic Society Northern Ireland, which produced the 'You Need to Know' report as well as the more recent 'A* for Autism'. Having that research carried out and those reports published adds greatly to the debate on recognising the needs of people with autism, their families and their carers.

Through relatives and constituents whose families have been directly affected by autism, I know that some people struggling with this disability can find the world a very puzzling and frightening place. Support at an early age can make such a positive difference. When a child receives dedicated help and guidance, so begins the process

of lifelong care and assistance, which helps people to communicate better and to relate to people around them, thus improving their everyday social interaction.

That is why the important issue of young people with autism or Asperger's syndrome and mental health has been an area of much debate. However, that debate has frequently been based on little or no information or evidence. Now, however, it has been proven that young people with autism are particularly vulnerable to mental health problems. The 'You Need to Know' report has clearly demonstrated that.

6.30 pm

The effects of autism, which is a lifelong developmental disability, are well known, including the fact that it affects everyone in slightly different ways. Difficulties with social interaction, communication and empathy can all have a fundamental impact on a child's early years and, inevitably, will affect how that child sees the world as they grow up. The link between autism and the challenges of mental health are clear. Although my party had well-known concerns about aspects of the Autism Bill, it supported its passage at the end of the previous mandate. We firmly believe that the Assembly should become an advocate and promoter of better services for autism in Northern Ireland.

Unfortunately, for too long, statutory provision was not at the level that it should have been. Despite the clear benefits of early support, more than half of children with autism in Northern Ireland still wait in excess of a year for appropriate educational support. I was shocked by the publication of research from the National Autistic Society Northern Ireland that revealed that almost one in three parents of autistic children felt that their child's level of education was not adequate. In addition, the 'You Need to Know' report revealed that 48% of parents felt that a lack of appropriate educational provision had an impact on their child's mental health. That is wholly unacceptable, and the Department of Education must identify the shortcomings immediately and work constructively with parents to deliver improved services and to restore the confidence that is so badly needed and so clearly demonstrated in the research.

Bringing service provision for people on the autism spectrum up to standard will be no easy task. It will take immense foresight and dedication, first, from Ministers and officials across several Departments; secondly, from the parents, who want to see the best education from their child; and, thirdly, from teachers, who know the problems and now want to be involved in developing solutions. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is taking the lead in the development and implementation of an all-encompassing strategy to improve services for those on the autism spectrum. However, the Ulster Unionist Party still believes that, to tackle issues such as the difficulties of mental health, a cross-departmental approach by the Health Department and the Department of Education is necessary to identify principles and standards of educational provision for children with autism. Again, it is about Departments and Ministers breaking out of their silo mentality.

At a time when we are debating reforms to the special educational needs system, we must consider issues such as we are discussing today. Realising the challenges that people with autism face should be a priority for every Member. The Autism Bill was passed last year, but, unless

there is a genuine change in approach, the problems may never be truly tackled.

Mr I McCrea: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I commend the Members whose names are on the Order Paper for presenting the motion to the House. Sadly, we are once again speaking on this issue. Nonetheless, it is a very important matter. I think that the House has given it and will continue to give it its utmost attention and the importance that it deserves. I welcome the Ulster Unionist Party's conversion to supporting the Autism Bill. It was a different mandate then, and we learn from our mistakes.

Mr Hussey: I was not here.

Mr I McCrea: I am not blaming either of you two, I have to say. The previous Minister was certainly not that supportive of the Autism Bill. Indeed, he did not turn up to respond to some of the debates. As I said, that was in a previous mandate, and we can move on from that. We can truly say, on this occasion, that we have full all-party support for the motion.

I want to take the opportunity to commend the Minister on the work that he has done on this since taking up office, and some colleagues and I have met him on a number of occasions to push the issue. He has been very willing to work with the all-party group to try to ensure that autism gets the support and attention that it deserves. As others have mentioned, this is not just a health issue, and the Health Minister cannot deal with it alone. He needs the support of the other Ministers, and the fact that the Bill is now in place forces all Departments to work together to deliver something that is better for everyone involved in autism.

I try my best to keep abreast of most of the documentation that comes in on autism, and, when reading one of the reports, 'A* for Autism', I noticed that one of the headings was about the consequences of getting the diagnosis wrong. That is an important part of the debate. It can sometimes, sadly, be well into adulthood for many people before it is realised that they have autism, and it is important that we do what we can to ensure that anyone who comes forward is properly diagnosed, whether it is a young person or an old person.

As others have said, autism is not a mental health problem, but not getting it early enough can have a detrimental impact on the education process and, as it says in the document, social and communication skills and behaviour as well as mental and physical well-being if the diagnosis is wrong. There is an onus on society to educate itself to understand autism and to understand how people react. I have spoken to many parents whose children have autism, and they have been in difficult circumstances. For example, they could be out at a restaurant and a child does something that they normally do and people find it offensive. That is understandable, but, nonetheless, as a society, we need to make ourselves better equipped to understand the issues.

I welcome the debate and look forward to the Minister's response. I encourage him to continue to work with the National Autistic Society and the all-party working group to ensure that —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr I McCrea: — everything that can be done is done to ensure that people who suffer from autism are dealt with in the appropriate manner.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I am grateful to members for bringing the motion to the Assembly and for providing me with an opportunity to outline the work that is already being done on autism in health and social care and the plans in place to develop a cross-departmental autism strategy.

I understand the difficulties in identifying and perhaps for the public in understanding the difference between the traits that relate to autism and those that relate to mental ill health. It is important to recognise that people who are on the autistic spectrum may have neither a learning disability nor a mental illness, for autism is neither of those things. Conversely, people with autism may also have a coexisting learning disability or mental health problem; the one does not preclude the other.

A proper and clear understanding among professionals in the health and social care and education sectors is vital in the early identification and treatment of mental ill health. Indeed, it is vital that, in wider society, autism is better understood and that, in areas such as employment and further education, those with autism can make a positive contribution. The report by NAS, entitled 'You Need to Know', very clearly identifies these issues and makes robust recommendations for health and social care and for education. I met NAS in October last year to hear their views and to get a better appreciation of their report and recommendations. At the time I agreed that the recommendations had considerable merit and that we would look at how best we could deliver them through the regional ASD network and the new autism strategy.

Members will be aware that significant improvements in autism services, particularly for children, have been made over the past three years, since the ASD action plan was published in 2009. For example, waiting times for assessment and diagnosis for children have dropped dramatically, down from more than 12 months to 13 weeks across all health and social care trusts. The number of front line specialist ASD practitioners has doubled from around 40 in 2008-09 to 80 in 2011. Furthermore, we now have ASD co-ordinators in place in all five HSC trusts and a regional co-ordinator, who together are taking forward a programme to improve ASD services in each trust.

Assessment and diagnosis are only the start of the journey for those with autism. More significant will be the identification and provision of interventions and services to meet their needs throughout their life. Awareness and treatment of other conditions is also a vital element, and that was the reason behind the development of 'Six Steps of Autism Care', which was published in October 2011. The guiding principle of 'Six Steps of Autism Care' is the promotion of a care pathway where the child or young person and their family are central to the process. The document provides an overview of the journey from the diagnosis of ASD through to ongoing assessment and on to interventions and services. It is an invaluable tool for primary care practitioners, health and education professionals, parents, carers and specialists alike. Importantly, it will bring consistency across Northern Ireland.

You can expect the same access to assessment, diagnosis and interventions no matter where you live.

Step 2 sets out the requirement to deal with autism assessments through multidisciplinary teams, including child and adolescent mental health services. In fact, 'Six Steps of Autism Care' includes a specific regional protocol that sets out the arrangements for joint working between ASD services and specialist CAMHS when a child or a young person has a co-occurring mental health need or where these concerns exist. I fully acknowledge that we still have some way to go until this protocol is fully implemented across all trusts. In some trusts there are resource issues and there is a need to reconfigure teams. However, all the trusts have indicated that they are committed to full implementation of the protocol, and parents and families should begin to see the benefits over the coming months.

Members will know that the Autism Act, which came into force in August 2011, requires my Department to lead on the development of a cross-departmental strategy that sets out how the needs of those with autism and their families will be met throughout their life. The strategy is to be published in May 2013 after full public consultation and the appropriate approvals by the Executive. Significant work has already been completed in the development of the strategy.

A project board has been established, with representation from all Departments, some key voluntary sector organisations including NAS, the Health and Social Care Board and trusts and those affected by autism. The project board has completed an initial consultation exercise through a series of engagement events across Northern Ireland to take views and identify priorities to be taken forward in the strategy. The engagement events were facilitated by the voluntary sector with active participation from the relevant Departments and agencies. Officials advise that this has been a very worthwhile exercise, providing us with a wealth of material to inform the strategy.

In addition, recognising that not all of those in the autism community can participate in this type of engagement event, my Department made available an online questionnaire and has received a significant and positive response. Officials are now in the process of evaluating the feedback received during pre-consultation. We anticipate that a draft document for consultation will be developed by the end of the summer, and I will bring it to the Executive for approval before it is launched for public consultation. Although the Act does not require it, our intention is to also issue an action plan setting out in the short, medium and long term the specific actions that Departments and agencies will take to address disadvantages being felt by those with autism. Of course, that means that the strategy and the action plan must acknowledge the most recent research and information available, and reports such as 'You Need to Know' are key components of that evidence base. It is not only important to take account of research in developing the strategy; we must continually examine best practice in how we develop and deliver our services.

6.45 pm

The Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 also requires my Department to provide data on the prevalence of autism in order to publish and update the strategy and to enable the Northern Ireland Departments to implement it effectively. A

prevalence of autism subgroup has been established to take that work forward, and it is in the process of establishing a base rate for children with autism in the HSC trusts. Also, as part of the planned process to modernise the child health system, improvements to enable better recording and monitoring of ASD in each HSC trust are under way. That will also have the capacity to identify co-occurring conditions, including mental health conditions. Parallel to establishing that group, I have appointed a voluntary sector organisation to chair a research subcommittee of the autism project board. It will be a key role of that subcommittee to bring the most up-to-date research and evidence to the attention of service providers across all Departments and agencies, with the potential to report on whether such evidence is being implemented effectively.

I trust that that gives Members a good idea of the range of actions we are already taking or plan to take to improve services for those with autism. A number of Members raised specific points. Some of those have been covered, but I will go through them briefly.

Mr Bradley raised the issue of limited data on ADHD. I will suggest to the prevalence subgroup that it looks at that area to see what additional data might be gathered.

Mr Brady referred to data on co-occurring conditions. That issue is being addressed through the prevalence subgroup of the project board, and the review of the child health system will address that specific need.

Gordon Dunne raised the issue of educational support structures in schools and training for teachers. The education sector is playing a key role in the development of the autism strategy and the action plan. My officials will work with Department of Education officials to ensure that a joined-up approach is advanced.

Seán Lynch questioned the support for families. The integrated care pathways that support families and children to get the right help at the right time are key elements of the protocol for co-operation between ASD services and specialist CAMHS.

Ross Hussey pointed out that CAMHS is overstretched and that parents with autistic children feel that they are not getting full support. The aim of the regional protocol, as identified in 'Six Steps of Autism Care', is to improve that situation by placing the child and their family at the centre of the process, where ASD services and specialist CAMHS work together to assist the family through the care pathway.

Mr McCarthy raised the issue of waiting lists, and, as I indicated, waiting lists have been reduced from one year to 13 weeks. It is our intention that that would also apply to CAMHS.

Pam Brown brought up the Bamford recommendations. The regional ASD action plan and the Bamford report 'Comprehensive CAMHS' emphasised the need for ASD specialist CAMHS to be family- and child-centred. I am pleased at the progress that has been made in that direction through the regional protocol. There is still much to do, and we hope that that will be highlighted in the autism strategy and the action plan.

Paula Bradley raised the issues of adults' reluctance to seek help and the bullying of ASD sufferers. The awareness aspect of the strategy should highlight those issues and

others, with the aim of reducing stigma and encouraging people to seek help. Of course, early intervention in the development of mental illness is crucial to avoid a worsening of the condition. Awareness among the public at large should also help with the identification and reduction of bullying.

I once again thank the House for bringing these matters to our attention. I hope that you have received some assurance that improvements have been made and that we will continue to make improvements that are based on the most up-to-date research and evidence available to us.

Mr Craig: I support the motion tabled by the all-party group on autism. It is important that we as an Assembly recognise that many children in Northern Ireland have autism. It is defined as a lifelong development disability, and many people across the Province are either directly or indirectly affected by it. It is a spectrum condition, which means that, while all people with autism share three main areas of difficulty — social interaction, social communication and social imagination — the condition will affect each person in a different way.

I found myself fully agreeing with many Members around the House today. It can lead to mental issues, but autism itself is not a mental condition. All of us have learnt that over the past four to five years, with the whole issue of the 2011 Act. Indeed, recent research carried out by the National Autistic Society Northern Ireland through the You Need to Know campaign has been well documented and sends out a clear message from parents and health professionals on how best we as legislators can effect positive change for children with autism in Northern Ireland.

The implementation of the Autism Act is a means to address many of the concerning findings through this research to better implement a positive way forward for those with autism. Many recommendations are made throughout the research document, and many important points can be noted from the qualitative and quantitative analysis of parents, which can be considered in the implementation of the legislation. Autism, while not existing as an individual mental health problem, must be addressed. As many colleagues pointed out in the debate, the research in England suggests that seven out of 10 children with autism also have a co-existing mental health problem.

Child and adolescent mental health services in Northern Ireland have recognised the need for a stepped approach that places the main focus on the person, according to their specific needs. Through the 2006 Bamford review, a clear case was presented for collaborative work to be conducted across Departments to treat the broad issue of mental health among children in all-inclusive way to support those with other mental health problems such as anxiety disorder and obsessive compulsive disorder. Isolation from social context can encourage such disorders among children with autism, and that is a problem that should be addressed more collectively.

A joined-up approach with collaboration between the Health Department, health trusts, the Department of Education and schools can provide adequate support for children with autism and help them to live a happy and rewarding life where they can have the same well-being as any other child. The role that education plays in the acknowledgement of the

needs and professional help that can be administered to those on the autistic spectrum cannot be underestimated. The report draws attention to the fact that 48% of parents surveyed believe that their child was adversely affected by the lack of appropriate educational provision. This outcome is not acceptable, and it is important that the issue be dealt with to increase confidence in the education service provided to those with autistic needs.

School experiences and settings are important mechanisms in meeting the needs of children with autism. The report says that giving teachers and schools greater training will result in an easier and more worthwhile experience for an autistic child.

Expertise should be provided to families. They should be well informed of the services provided by CAMHS. That is important for relatives who must come to terms with having a child who has autism. It may be necessary to introduce a range of measures to support families who have a child on the autistic spectrum. Living with someone with autism can require a complete lifestyle change. Indeed, that is something that I witnessed, as it was my childminder who got me involved in the whole autism issue. I can vouch for the fact that, when you have a child with autism, your life is turned upside down. It is not like a normal child when it grows up. In many respects, you can allow a young teenager to get on with his own life, but autistic children will never be in a position where they are fully independent. Parents and relatives have a huge role to play in continuing to provide support for them throughout their life.

In Northern Ireland, we have limited records of children with autism in each trust area who suffer from mental health problems. Again, the report suggests that data should be collected from across the health and social care trusts to better facilitate adequate care. A greater awareness of the specific numbers of children with the condition will inevitably aid the process of administering support services for them. On reflection, that is key to the overall knowledge of where there is particular need.

A significant amount of effort needs to be put into all those areas, but it would be wrong of me to stand here tonight and not commend the changes that have taken place, especially since the last mandate. First of all, I commend the Minister of Education. I was on the Education Committee in the previous mandate, and the one thing that appalled me was the special educational needs review that was brought to the Committee. That was universally disliked, but, in fairness to the new Minister, he has turned that on its head, brought new proposals to the Committee and is consulting the Committee to get those changes right. His approach to it all has been a welcome change.

The one thing that impressed me tonight was the contribution from our two Ulster Unionist colleagues. In the previous mandate, there was no such input from that party; in fact, if anything, it was obstructive. I commend the constructive points put forward by those two Members and look forward to them working with the all-party group to improve the situation.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety goes may be a party colleague, but I will say this: when it comes to autism, there is a basic understanding of the issue. As a colleague, he worked with the charity that I

chose when I was mayor, and he got a better understanding of what it is to be autistic. He has been very, very helpful in his approach to it. We have had several meetings with autism charities on issues that they have raised. We are seeing the whole issue move forward with the review group that he has put in place. I believe we will see a genuine strategy put in place by the lead Department to tackle a lot of the issues. Will we get it right? Probably not, but the one thing I know about this Minister is that the effort will be put into trying to get it right. All in the Chamber owe our thanks to the Minister for at least putting the effort into making changes for the better for all those with autism. I commend the motion to the House and hope you all support it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly views with concern the findings of the Northern Ireland-based research carried out by the National Autistic Society into the mental health of children with autism for the "You Need to Know" campaign; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take on board the main findings of the research as his Department prepares to implement the Autism Act (NI) 2011.

Adjourned at 6.59 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 29 May 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Before we start today's business, let me say that it seems it is going to be another warm day. If Members wish to take their jacket off in the Chamber, they may do so.

Executive Committee Business

Finance Bill: Second Legislative Consent Motion

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): I beg to move

That this Assembly agrees that the provisions in clause 49 of and schedule 14 to the Finance Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons on 10 May 2012, dealing with gifts to the nation should be considered by the UK Parliament.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Passing this motion will ensure that local interests are represented in the operation of a new cultural gift scheme. The scheme is proposed by the Treasury, HM Revenue and Customs and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. The scheme will enable individuals and companies to donate objects of national artistic, scientific or historical interest to an institution for the benefit of the public. In return, the donor's tax liability will be reduced.

This legislative consent motion will allow the British Government to confer power via the 2012 Finance Bill on the local Culture Minister. This will ensure that, in respect of donations related to the North, the local Minister will be consulted and will make a determination on whether an object or collection of objects should be accepted into the scheme. The details of the scheme and its operation are being finalised, and I intend to write to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to reflect the outcome of local consultations.

I think the scheme will have a positive impact on people here, as it may serve to widen access to cultural objects and could broaden the use of our cultural institutions as they diversify in their collections. If the Assembly is minded not to approve this legislative consent motion, the scheme will proceed and the Minister for Culture, Media and Sport in Westminster will determine whether an object related to the North should be accepted under the scheme. I commend the motion to the House.

Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): I welcome the opportunity to speak in today's debate as Chair of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee.

The Committee agreed to produce a report on its deliberations on the legislative consent motion to the cultural gifts scheme provisions of the Westminster Finance

Bill. The report was agreed at the Committee meeting of 17 May and laid in the Business Office on 18 May, when it was also circulated to all Members. The report outlines the Committee's discussions on the legislative consent motion, which I will summarise this morning.

The Minister initially advised the Committee of her intent to table a legislative consent motion regarding the charity and philanthropy measures contained in the Finance Bill on 5 April. The Committee then arranged a briefing from the Minister's officials on the background to and the need for a legislative consent motion. That briefing took place on 19 April. During that briefing session, the Committee questioned officials and sought additional information on several aspects of the legislative consent motion. In addition to seeking clarification on definitional issues, the Committee sought assurances that the Department had consulted the relevant organisations, particularly National Museums Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Museums Council, about the proposals outlined in the legislative consent memorandum. The Committee was satisfied that the Department had had informal discussions with those bodies and with PRONI, as those are the organisations that are likely to be the recipients of any donation. Officials also took on board the Committee's comments to discuss the proposals with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.

The Committee also enquired about the outcome of the equality screening exercise that had been undertaken as part of the process. Officials informed the Committee that the legislation impacts on companies that wish to donate in lieu of tax, individuals who wish to donate in lieu of tax and individuals who have increased access to cultural objects through visiting galleries and museums. The memorandum states that the equality impact assessment identified no different impact on any equality group, and there were no implications for equality of opportunity.

The Committee also sought assurances that Northern Ireland would have input to the panel that considers applications for the gifting of pre-eminent objects in exchange for tax reductions. It is satisfied that the proposals put forward by the Department here do not differ from the proposals put forward in England, Scotland and Wales.

As the Committee recognises the importance of our cultural tourism product and the significant role that our museums and galleries play in developing and growing that product, it explored the implications for Northern Ireland, should the motion not receive Assembly approval today. In that scenario, it would be the Minister for Culture, Media and Sport, and not the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, who would decide whether an article in Northern Ireland is pre-eminent. Furthermore, Northern Ireland would not have any significant involvement in identifying objects of interest to us.

On the basis of that evidence, the Committee was content that the Minister continue with the process of seeking Assembly support for the legislative consent motion. Therefore, on behalf of the Committee, I support the motion.

Mr McGimpsey: As a member of the Committee, I, of course, support its decisions, as laid out by the Chairperson of the Committee. This is a national matter. As part of the

kingdom, Northern Ireland would be foolish to step away from it, so we support it.

I have a query about an issue that might arise. In the event of a pre-eminent property being gifted in England, Scotland or Wales, it is clear where the home of that pre-eminent property will be. However, if a prominent person or someone with wealth or assets in property gifts a pre-eminent property in Northern Ireland and it falls within the scheme, it must be clear that that property stays in Northern Ireland and does not go to an exhibition on the mainland. That is my only query. I fully support our taking part.

Mrs McKeivitt: As a member of the Committee, I support the motion, and I welcome the opportunity to comment on it.

I commend the measures outlined, which seek to encourage a culture of charity, particularly with regard to the cultural gifts scheme, as set out in clause 49 of and schedule 14 to the Finance Bill. The cultural gifts scheme contains provisions for a personal tax liability to be reduced in return for giving pre-eminent property to the nation. Pre-eminent property accepted under that scheme is considered to be property that is of artistic, historical and scientific interest. The legislative consent motion will ensure that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) will play a pivotal role in deciding the pre-eminence of an object that is of sole interest or partial interest to the North of Ireland.

The profile of the arts must be raised in the North of Ireland. It should be acknowledged that the current economic climate is likely to have an effect on charitable giving. The reduction of tax liabilities to those who gift pre-eminent property to the nation provides the necessary incentives to encourage such giving. I welcome the cultural gifts scheme provision outlined in schedule 14 to the Finance Bill as a means by which to raise the profile and encourage the retention in Northern Ireland of artefacts that might otherwise end up in public auctions and be lost to us.

Incentivised schemes such as these will play an important role in boosting charitable giving in the arts. Reductions for individuals and organisations in income tax, corporation tax and inheritance tax will encourage both lifetime and legacy giving. It will encourage people to look again at their collections and consider donating a significant object to one of our museums. That, in turn, will improve our collections without any outlay from our resources. That has the potential to add to our cultural heritage, which has to be welcomed.

Ms Lo: I welcome the legislative consent motion. I love the arts and appreciate the potential cultural and social benefits of the proposed provisions. Although the encouragement of philanthropic and charitable giving is undeniably important, I believe that, in making culturally valuable objects available to all members of our community, we further the endeavour of a shared heritage in our society.

Although we support the motion, there are some reservations that should be highlighted. I understand that this is a UK policy and we can perhaps have very little influence on it. We should speak out, all the same. The cap of an annual £30 million tax write-off is relatively low, given that it is handled on a "first come, first served" basis and is a scheme for the whole of the UK. That figure seems quite small, and there would be more potential for businesses

and individuals to gift objects to the public if the limit was extended.

We welcome the transfer of some responsibilities to the Minister and ask that she ensures the speedy passage of objects, so that they may be made readily available to the public in Northern Ireland. I also take this opportunity to encourage the public and businesses who may wish to avail themselves of this chance to reduce their income, capital gains or corporation tax.

The arts can play a key role in shaping our future. There is a danger in surrounding ourselves with mirror images of the past. Stereotypes are born when we fail to see beyond what we know. The arts allow us to question our ingrained cultural assumptions. In doing so, we can break through these barriers and develop more understanding and a shared future.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Chair of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Members who have spoken to the motion. I am pleased that the information that was requested from my officials was forwarded to the Committee and provided assurances. Although some reservations have been expressed, I think that the consensus is that it is better that the powers are transferred to our institutions here, so that a locally based panel can make decisions about what artefacts or gifts are based within the DCAL family — in the arts, libraries, museums and PRONI. This is a worthwhile initiative that we can all support to encourage charitable giving by companies and individuals for the benefit of everyone here. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly agrees that the provisions in clause 49 of and schedule 14 to the Finance Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons on 10 May 2012, dealing with gifts to the nation should be considered by the UK Parliament.

10.45 am

Committee Business

GP Surgeries: 0844 Telephone Numbers

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to wind. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the actions that he will take to bring to an end the practice of GP surgeries using 0844 telephone numbers and the associated high call charges for patients.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am delighted to move this motion today on behalf of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

For the benefit of Members, the Minister and the Department, I want to provide some background information on 0844 numbers. Such numbers are not linked to a particular town or county. They are used by a wide range of organisations, from businesses and agencies to TV shows, which use them for voting. For 0844 numbers, there is a limit on how much BT can charge for the call. Other providers are not restricted in how much they can charge, but, in many cases, the landline providers set their call charge around BT's prices. For landline customers, that usually works out at somewhere between 1p and 13p per minute. However, the problem comes when people use a mobile phone to ring an 0844 number. Calls from mobile phones typically range from 20p to 41p per minute.

The main issue in today's debate is the fact that 23 GP practices still use 0844 numbers rather than ordinary landline numbers. The issue came to the Committee's attention because constituents had contacted members to tell them about the high call charges they are racking up when trying to get through to their GP's surgery on the mobile. The Committee began to dig a bit deeper into the issue, and what we have discovered is very worrying, particularly when one of our key aims is to address health inequalities. As I said, 23 GP practices still use 0844 numbers. We all know how long it can take to get through to a health centre receptionist. Sometimes, people end up on hold for 20 minutes or more or are asked to go through a number of options before they even get talking to someone. That has resulted in some constituents being charged £8 to make a phone call to their surgery. That is clearly unacceptable.

When we first raised the issue with the Minister, he replied that, if people ring an 0844 number from a landline, they will only be charged the local landline rate. However, the point is that many families, particularly in low-income households, may only have a pay-as-you-go mobile. Ironically, they do that to try to ensure that they do not have another bill at the end of the month so that they can deal with their money better. The response from the Minister and the Department

about using landlines just does not wash with us. We live in a time when technology is everywhere, and many mobile-only households use the mobile to call essential services such as councils, utility services and, of course, doctors' surgeries. Mobile operators are often keen for us to opt for inclusive call plans. Plans can help manage spending on calls and many people take up those offers, but, unlike 01 or 02 numbers, 0844 calls are never included in the inclusive minutes.

We in the Assembly support the principle of a health service being free at the point of use. That has to become a reality, and we cannot have people being charged £8 to make an appointment with their GP. We already know that social deprivation leads to health inequalities, and yet we have a situation where the least able to pay end up paying the most to access a basic health service. The result is that people potentially do not ring their GP and do not get the right treatment at the right time. We talk about early intervention and prevention being the key to transforming our health service, so we cannot have obstacles such as 0844 numbers being put in people's way.

The Minister also made the point to the Committee that the Health and Social Care Board had written to the GPs who use 0844 numbers to ask them to consider providing a callback service to patients at the practice's expense. That is all well and good in theory, but the reality is that patients are often put on hold for a long period before they even speak to a receptionist and, therefore, are already incurring a charge. It also puts the onus on the patient to say that he or she cannot afford to stay on hold, and I do not think that that is fair. It is not what we want in this day and age, when everyone should be treated equally.

Another aspect is that GP practices using 0844 numbers receive 2p per call from the provider. Although that income is ring-fenced and can be used only to support the maintenance of the telephone system and make other improvements to the surgery environment, it is an indirect profit for the GP practice, and the Committee believes that that is totally unacceptable.

The Committee has written to the British Medical Association (BMA) and the Royal College of General Practitioners to ask what they have done to encourage their members to stop using 0844 numbers. Both replied that they have issued circulars to their members to remind them that they must keep the price of calls for patients to a minimum. The Committee believes that that kind of voluntary approach is not good enough. Therefore, we move the motion today for two reasons: first, we want to ask the Minister to outline the further action that he will take; and, secondly, we want to bring the issue to wider public attention. I assume that the Minister will get a copy of the Hansard report of the debate. I do not know whether his officials are in the Officials' Box, but I would be disappointed if they were not.

Our actions seem to be having some effect already. Just yesterday, Ofcom, the communications regulator, contacted me to say that it had seen today's motion. It has the same view as the Committee on 0844 numbers and believes that the current system does not work. Ofcom's suggested new approach to the use of 0844 and other numbers went out to consultation last month. Therefore, Ofcom is doing its bit by looking at the call providers. The Minister and Department

must now do their bit and take urgent action to stop GP surgeries using 0844 numbers. I urge the Assembly to support the motion.

Ms P Bradley: As a member of the Health Committee, I support the motion. The National Health Service (NHS) was founded on the principle that healthcare should be available to everyone, regardless of their ability to pay. As a former NHS worker, I am very proud of the system that we have here, where no one is turned away from GPs or hospitals because their economic situation means that they lack the ability to pay for their treatment.

Patients contacting GPs want to be able to access their primary caregiver in a manner that is timely, easy and without fuss. For many users, the 0844 number represents an additional charge for seeking medical help, whatever that might be.

A number of benefits are associated with using the 0844 phone system. First, it allows GP surgeries to ensure that users do not hear an engaged tone but are placed in a queue. Secondly, the facility to reroute calls to the appropriate department can reduce the stress on doctors' receptionists and ensure that people are put through to the right department as quickly as possible.

We are all concerned that the most vulnerable are not unduly hurt economically by having to contact any Department. Therefore, it is right that we continue to look at these numbers to assess whether there are better ways for GPs to offer the same benefits while costing users less. It may be better, for example, for GPs to offer a repeat prescription service by e-mail. That would reduce the number of phone calls that the practice has to answer and ensure that those who need repeat prescriptions have an alternative way of requesting them. Most telephone users have some internet package, whether through their mobile or landline. Using the expanding IT option may be one way to mitigate the cost of phone calls and reduce the time that people have to spend in queues.

It is important to note that GP practices that use the numbers are not doing anything wrong. Any revenue that they receive goes directly back into the practice environment, effectively meaning that users get some of the benefit. Of course, that in no way negates the extra cost or helps people such as those on a low or fixed income who feel the extra cost more acutely than others. We should also remember that the Minister is restricted in what he can force GP surgeries to do. In an ideal world, no one should have to pay for the cost of a telephone call to their GP but, sadly, we live and deal with the realities of the world that we live in. Telephone systems can be costly, and the GP service is not the only government service that affects some of the poorest. Tax credit offices, for example, use non-local numbers. I am glad to note that only one surgery in my constituency utilises such a system. In Northern Ireland overall, the use of such numbers is the exception rather than the norm. I also welcome the fact that the Minister has written to the surgeries affected, reminding them of the policy context of telephone systems and their obligations. I support the motion.

Mr Gardiner: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion and support it.

I agree with other Members that the use of 0844 numbers is not a widespread problem. It occurs in only 23 of the 355 practices, which is just over 6.5%. Nevertheless, no matter how small the number, the fact is that there are still people in Northern Ireland who have no choice but to phone the 0844 number, if they want to speak to their local clinic. Although I understand that the figure is likely to decrease over time, especially as the Health and Social Care Board continues in its efforts to persuade practices to adopt a new phone system, it is vital that the Department of Health ensures that people are not taken advantage of unintentionally.

People phoning their local GP clinic will often be too worried about their own health or that of a loved one to think of the price of a phone call. However, people who, because of their illness, have to phone their local clinic quite often and for long periods are exposed to a potentially clear financial disadvantage. It is not only people who need to phone a lot and for longer periods who may have a problem with 0844 numbers; it also affects those who are signed up to what may seem like a normal telephone package but charges often very high rates for 0844 numbers.

When the Department legislated in 2005 to ban the use of premium rate numbers in GP clinics, that was a positive step. However, I have concerns about what exactly the Department can or cannot legislate for in relation to this matter because, in this case, it is unable to enforce the ban.

People expect a service when they phone their local GP. Instead of them being the customer, it is more a case of the National Health Service being the provider. I absolutely agree, and believe that members of the public should not incur costs that are unfair when compared with the ordinary local rate. Offering advice not to renew, extend or enter into contracts unless practices were certain that patients would not be charged more than a call to a local number was a very positive step. I am also pleased that the Health and Social Care Board has advised practices that continue with the 0844 numbers to offer patients the chance of a callback service and that the cost should be borne by the practice.

As the provision of primary and secondary healthcare in Northern Ireland continues to change, the Ulster Unionist Party is keen to promote the use of telemedicine and people remaining in the comfort of their own home for as long as it is safe and practical to do so. The use of 0844 numbers may not be a big problem, but it should be addressed. The Department is working toward this. However, it is vital that it works closely with GPs and their practices to address it.

Mr Durkan: As a former member of the Health Committee, I support the motion. From my time on the Committee, I know that this was a particular bugbear of Gordon Dunne's and of other members whose constituency is affected.

Healthcare should be free at the point of use but, as Ms Ramsey said, the 0844 numbers place a cost on people getting access. The fact is that those worst affected are those dependent on pay-as-you-go mobiles — generally, those who can least afford it. That is a blatant inequality in our system, and we should move to eradicate it.

11.00 am

The Department of Health in England has changed the general medical services (GMS) regulations to ban 0844

telephone numbers that charge patients more than a standard geographical telephone call. We should follow suit. Ms Ramsey cited a cost of up to £8 for some mobile users to get in touch with their GP. However, I am sure that we have all heard from people who have run out of credit mid-call, resulting in their being not only out of pocket but embarrassed and very anxious, which, in some situations, compounds their medical condition. Fortunately, the problem is not widespread, with just 23 practices still using 0844 numbers, so it should certainly be reasonably easy to solve, if it is the Minister's will to do so. We support the motion.

Mr McCarthy: As a member of the Assembly's Health Committee, I fully support the motion today and fully concur with the sentiments expressed by the Committee Chair, Sue Ramsey, and, indeed, all the Committee members. The issue has been discussed at the Health Committee on several occasions. Quite obviously, the use of the 0844 telephone system by 23 health centres is having a detrimental effect on their patients, who have to find the money to pay shockingly high tariffs. In our opinion, it is high time that practice was ended. I have to say I am deeply disappointed to discover that three of those 23 practices are in Newtownards, which is in my constituency.

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

We all know that we are living through very challenging times in respect of paying bills and, indeed, have been doing so for the past number of years. However, as yet, there is very little light at the end of the tunnel. In these circumstances, the last thing that local doctors should be doing is supporting high charges for telephone calls by people — their patients — who are sick. There is simply no need for this, and it should stop immediately.

From the information provided by our Research and Information Service, for which we are extremely grateful, I understand that Westminster and the local Assembly, including the Health Minister, have indeed asked that the practice should cease, but they simply cannot force the minority of surgeries to end the use of 0844 numbers. The Assembly is asking the Minister what actions he will take to end these unscrupulous charges. In his response to Gordon Dunne in January 2012, the Minister was certainly on the side of the patient. He said that he had issued letters to 17 Northern Ireland practices stating their obligation to try to ensure that patients do not incur high call charges when contacting GP practices. Then on 15 March, the Minister again wrote to the Health Committee advising that the offending practices were reminded of the need to change to normal BT charging for patients but that there is no legal power to require those practices to stop using 0844 numbers.

On behalf of the Alliance Party, I support the motion and await with interest to see what else the Minister can do and what his next move will be. In the meantime, I appeal to the GP practices concerned, including the three in Newtownards, to stop using the 0844 system in the interests of their patients and our constituents.

Ms Brown: As a member of the Health Committee, I also support the motion today. My colleague Gordon Dunne brought the issue to the Committee some time ago. The use of 0844 numbers is now quite common for businesses,

providing extra phone functions for customers and increasing efficiency. You can, for example, get put through directly to the person or the department you wish to speak to. Numbers beginning with 0844 provide consumers with a flat call charge rate, which nowadays is, in actual fact, more expensive than calling a telephone number beginning with, for example, 028. Going by the BT business price plan, it is clear that the use of a 0844 telephone number can be cheaper for a business, with savings made on monthly costs. However, calls to 0844 numbers, as we have heard today, are more expensive for customers, especially when dialling the number from a mobile phone, which can cost between 20p and 41p per minute, compared with between 1p and 13p per minute for a customer using a fixed landline.

Such phone numbers are regularly used by banks, credit card companies, internet providers and any other major business with a customer service department. As fixed landlines are becoming less common, and as more people adopt mobile phones, those costs can, therefore, build up significantly, in addition to the cost of monthly price plans.

In a letter from the Health Minister dated 15 March 2012, Mr Poots informed the Chair of the Committee that approximately 6% of practices in Northern Ireland used 0844 telephone numbers. The Minister also stated that his Department had informed GP practices three times since September 2011 that patients should not incur charges above the equivalent of a local call when contacting their GP practice; that, having taken responsible steps to ensure that excessive costs are not passed on to the patient when contacting their local GP practice, all practices should bring into being a callback system whereby the caller can ask to be called back at the expense of the practice; and that a practice should not enter into long-term or extended contracts with telecommunications firms if that results in additional costs being passed on to the patients that are greater than the cost of a local call.

The Minister also informed the Chair that his Department had no power to stop GP practices using 0844 numbers, but he did ask his Department to look into what can be done to raise awareness of the issue and limit additional costs being passed on to patients when they contact their local practice.

In a public consultation by the Department of Health in GB in 2008, stakeholders were consulted on the use of 0844 numbers. The Department stated that it wished to hear people's views on the issue, but understood that 0844 numbers offer patients and users additional functions, including, as we have heard, the use of call waiting, ending the engaged tone, push-button choices, redirection services or access to automated booking and appointment systems. Benefits, therefore, can exist for the patient and the GP practice in bringing about efficiency and easy access. However, as a result, the consumer ultimately ends up footing the bill.

Eighty-seven per cent of respondents to the consultation believed that patients should not be charged more than the local rate, and we fully agree with that. No person accessing healthcare should be charged more than a local rate, so I am pleased to support the motion.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also support the motion. It demonstrates a proactive approach by the Committee and shows that it is taking steps to address a number of problems raised by Committee members and constituents. I know that Gordon Dunne raised this particular issue in Committee on several occasions, and it is good to see that it has now been brought to fruition in the motion by the Committee.

I apologise for missing the start of the debate. I was in another meeting, but I think most of the stuff has been covered by other Members. I think it is accepted that only a small number of GP practices continue to use those particular numbers. As has been mentioned, the Minister, in reply to the Chair, stated that it was 23 out of 355, or approximately 6% of practices. Obviously, the reason why there is a continuing problem is because patients who use the 0844 numbers are paying more than the equivalent cost of a local rate call.

If the services offered by those numbers were not more expensive, people would have no particular problem using them. There may be benefits of being held in a queue and accessing push-button choices. They may be good and effective to some degree, but if the patient did not have to pay more for them, it would be even better. People who use those services are often on benefits and on low incomes. The GPs who continue to use those numbers may argue that they provide a better service, but they cost more. If someone is using a mobile, as a lot of people do now, it costs a lot more to access those numbers than it should. I know that social security offices had the same problem. They were offering free calls, but if someone was using a mobile and not a landline to contact them, it was costing a huge amount of money. I know of one case where it cost a woman £17 to call a local office while she was held waiting. That was out of a £20 top-up card. It is expensive to access these numbers, and it is something that needs to be addressed urgently.

The bottom line is that patients need to access their GPs. Such access should be efficient and not costly. It has been mentioned, as it was in the letter that the Minister sent to the Chairperson, that people can order prescriptions online, and so on, but if you do not have access to a computer and cannot get online, it becomes more expensive to use these particular numbers. Patients should be given the opportunity to have quick, low-cost telephone contact. As far as I know, Ofcom supports the motion. I am sure that the Minister will give his views on how he will deal with this issue.

Mr Hussey: I apologise to the proposer and to other Members for my late arrival. Unfortunately, I was on the phone, but not to an 0844 number.

When I saw the motion on the Order Paper, I felt that I had to come down and get involved. Many people have referred to the fact that it applies to only 23 out of 355 GP clinics. The use of 0844 numbers in GP clinics may have come as a surprise to some in this House, but it is no surprise to me in Omagh. My GP's telephone number is 08444773513; the sort of number that rolls off the tongue. If you are an elderly person, will that number resonate with you and will you remember it always? You will not; it is far too long and too complicated.

The number is used whenever you contact the health centre, and when you do so, you contact it immediately; it is not engaged, that is quite true. You get to choose an option, 1, 2, 3 or 4; you will then get other options; and you will eventually get through to sort out whatever you need to do. If you are using a mobile phone, the cost is excessive. I have to use the mobile phone to sort out prescriptions and various things for my mother, so I know the cost. Many sitting around will say; "you can well afford that". Maybe I can, but there are many who use their mobile phone who cannot afford it, and a lot of people have a mobile phone as their only source of contact.

You can also use the internet to contact your health centre. Again, that is a wonderful system, but how many older people can use the internet, have access to it or understand it? A lot of older people depend on their families to make the calls for them.

We have to have a situation in which health centres must use a local number. Most people will remember a local number, and I think that the time has come to do away with 0844 numbers for good. The cost of using them is excessive and they do not work. Older people do not remember the numbers, and we have talked about this issue for too long. Maybe I am being charged too much for the call, I do not know, but I think the time has come for 0844 numbers to disappear.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I am grateful for the opportunity to hear Members' views on this issue. I fully appreciate their concerns about the cost of telephoning those GP practices that continue to use 0844 numbers. High telephone call charges impact on the most vulnerable members of society; the elderly, the disabled and those on low incomes. For many patients, calling their local GP surgery can be very stressful and worrying, and concerns about high call charges only serve to add further stress.

We fully appreciate that, out of the 355 GP practices in Northern Ireland, only 23 use 0844 numbers, which represents approximately 6% of practices. Nonetheless, telephone systems used by GPs should not place undue financial burdens on patients. The cost of telephoning 0844 numbers can be very expensive for patients whose landline telephone packages do not treat calls to 0844 numbers as local calls. It can be even more expensive for those patients who use their mobile phones to telephone 0844 numbers. The use of mobile phones in our everyday lives has increased, and for many, they have replaced landlines.

In the industry, 0844 telephone numbers are known as non-geographical numbers or number translation services. When a call reaches the network, the number dialled by the caller is translated by the network to a geographical number to deliver the call to its destination. In 2008, the use of 0844 numbers was examined by way of a consultation exercise by the Department of Health in England. Although the consultation demonstrated that there was overwhelming support for the banning of 0844 numbers, the Department of Health concluded that banning the numbers would not necessarily solve the real issue; that some patients are paying more than the cost of calling a normal geographical number to contact the NHS.

11.15 am

The lessons learnt in relation to 087 numbers were that banning a specific number range simply led to the use of other number ranges and the same issues persisted. The Department of Health decided that, rather than banning 0844 numbers, it would put in place a legislative framework to prohibit the use of any number or tariff that resulted in patients paying more than a geographical number to contact health service providers. The legislative framework that the Department of Health put in place included the issue of directions in December 2009 and the amendment of its National Health Service (General Medical Services Contracts) Regulations 2004, which came into effect on 1 April last year.

The directions and the amendments to the regulations directed NHS organisations and GPs not to enter into, renew or extend a contract or other arrangements for telephone services unless it is satisfied that, having regard to the arrangement as a whole, persons will not pay more to make relevant calls to the NHS body than they would to make an equivalent call to a geographical number. They were also directed to review their existing contract and consider whether, having regard to the arrangement, the patient would pay more than they would to make a relevant call to a geographical number. If they would, the body was required to consider introducing a system under which, if the caller asked to be called back, the body would do so at its own expense.

Action taken by the Welsh and Scottish Departments and my Department in September 2010 mirrors that taken by the Department of Health. On 5 September last year, my Department issued policy guidance regarding the use of 0844 numbers. The policy directed that patients should not incur charges above the equivalent of a local call when contacting their GP practice. Having taken all reasonable steps to ensure that a patient will pay no more than they would to call a local geographical number, the practice must consider introducing a system under which, if a caller asks to be called back, the GP practice will do so at its own expense. The policy also stated that GP practices should not enter into new contracts or renew or extend contracts for telephone services unless they are satisfied that patients will not pay more than they would to call a local geographical number.

Telephone operator tariffs include many different options. They are very difficult to understand, and they change regularly. Many variables contribute to the cost of a call, including the telephony supplier, the tariff, the length of the call, the time of day at which a call is made and whether the call is made from a landline or a mobile. Given the number of variables, it is not possible to give a definitive estimate of the cost of phoning an 0844 number. The cost of telephoning an 0844 number is determined by the patient's telephone provider, not by the 0844 service provider. The 0844 service provider gets the equivalent fee that a geographical provider would receive for an equivalent call.

Unlike BT, other telephone providers, including mobile phone providers, are unregulated and, therefore, free to levy charges without approval from the regulator. Neither GP practices nor the 0844 service provider has any control over the charges that the telephone and mobile providers levy.

Mr Wells (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Will the Member give way?

Mr Poots: Certainly.

Mr Wells: Although the Minister is right in saying that we cannot be definitive, it is absolutely clear that, from a landline, it can cost anything from 2p to 4p a minute to ring an 0844 number, and from a mobile, the range is 25p to 41p. We cannot be specific, but that clearly indicates the quantum of the problem. If you pay 41p, which, I understand, is an Orange pay-as-you-go tariff, to ring an 0844 number, you can see why somebody like Mr Brady's constituent could rattle up — to use the slang — a bill of £17.

Mr Poots: Yes. Evidently, a higher cost of the calls generates increased income for the telephony service provider. For example, the current local BT tariff is approximately 8p a minute plus a 13.1p connection charge. In general, that charge will apply unless the caller's BT package specifically includes free calls to 0844 numbers. That rate applies only to BT landlines. It is possible — indeed, probable — that other landline providers may charge more for calling 0844 numbers.

My attention has been drawn to the fact that GP practices that use 0844 numbers receive 2p for each call that is made to the practice. However, I have been advised that the revenue is held in an escrow account, which means that GP practices do not have access to it and it is used to fund the rental cost and maintenance of the system. I am, nevertheless, concerned that patients of GP practices that have an 0844 number are essentially, through their phone calls to the practice, part funding the practice telephony system. That, to me, is unacceptable.

At present, neither the board nor the Department has the legal power to instruct GPs to stop using 0844 numbers. Under the relevant legislation, the GMS contract regulations, GPs are required to provide a telephone number in their practice leaflet, and that is the only reference to telephony in the general medical services contract regulations.

When the practices entered into the telephony contracts with the service provider, the use of 0844 numbers was not banned, and 0844 numbers were not considered premium rate numbers. The menu facility that the service offered was deemed to be innovative and offering a good service for patients. Practices have reported that one reason why they selected the 0844 service was to try to ensure that patients were able to get through to the surgery, because patients had often complained about constantly getting an engaged tone.

As GPs are self-employed independent contractors, to stop practices using 0844 numbers, the Department would have to amend the general medical services contract regulations, which would require consultation. As there were no restrictions on practices using 0844 numbers when they entered into their contracts with the service provider, and given that the practices will incur substantial termination fees, a proposed date for stopping the use of 0844 numbers would have to be flexible to accommodate practices whose telephony contracts have some time to run.

As Members have said, on 15 March, I advised the Health Committee that I had asked Department officials to examine

what action had been taken to heighten patient awareness on requesting their GP practice to phone them back, as well as ensuring that patients are fully aware of all other options for contacting their practice, including the use of the internet in seeking repeat prescriptions or making appointments. To help to inform my Department of what action could be taken to heighten patient awareness, officials wrote to the 24 practices on 21 April asking them to provide the following information: the date that their practice's telephone contract with the 0844 service provider is due to expire; the estimated cost of terminating their 0844 contract; confirmation that members of their practice staff are aware of the Department's policy on the use of 0844 numbers and are adhering to it; and confirmation that their practice has not renewed its 0844 contract with the service provider in contravention of the Department's policy.

Seventeen practices have so far provided the requested information. They confirmed that they are adhering to the Department's policy on telephoning patients back if requested to do so. They also confirmed that they have not renewed their 0844 telephone contract. Three of those practices' contracts expire in 2013, in June, September and October; four expire in 2014, in January, June, September and November; six expire in 2015, in May, August, September and December; and four expire in 2016, in February and April. Early termination of contract payments range from £9,500 to £31,000.

I understand that the service provider has offered the 23 practices the option of having a local number that would run alongside their existing 0844 number. It has also offered the option of a call-back facility. If practices were to avail themselves of those options, it would certainly help to resolve the issue of expensive telephone calls for many of their patients. It remains the case that practices cannot be required to sign up to those options, but it is good to know that they are available, and public pressure should be applied on GP practices to respond.

Telephone calls to GP practices should not cost more than an equivalent call to a local geographical number. A proposed date for stopping the use of 0844 numbers would have to be flexible to accommodate practices whose telephony contracts have some time to run.

Mr Wells: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: Yes.

Mr Wells: That line was in a response to the Committee from the Minister, but the reality is that, for the vast majority of BT customers in Northern Ireland, the cost of a local call to a landline number is nil, because the package that they are in gives free local calls of less than one hour to any landline number. So, it is not much use to those customers to say that it should be the equivalent to the cost of a local call, which is 8p or 9p a minute, when, in fact, it is nothing. That point has been missed by the GPs.

Mr Poots: People certainly pay more to get their calls free for up to an hour, and many are on such contracts. I fully understand what the Member is saying. What I said earlier was that GP practices could offer the local number alongside the 0844 number so that patients would not be paying more in that instance. It is important that we maintain pressure on GPs to respond to this particular issue.

My Department will examine the possibility of amending the general medical services contract regulations, making it a requirement that GP practices use geographical numbers. We will also explore with practices the option of installing a geographical line that patients could use as the alternative to the 0844 number until such times as those contracts expire. We will also explore with them the option of introducing the call-back facility, which the service provider can set up.

I trust that this information is useful to the House and that we can advance this over the course of the coming months and years.

Mr Wells: I had two teenage daughters. For many years, our phone bill was quite small and then, suddenly, it rocketed, and I learned that my daughters had become friendly with just about every boy in the neighbourhood and felt duty-bound to ring them on a regular basis for very long periods. I did not object to this, but the phone bill mounted dramatically. Then I discovered that British Telecom had a package that allowed you to ring an unlimited amount of landline numbers for up to one hour, free of charge. That was a bargain. I signed up immediately, my phone bill plummeted and I did not mind how many boys my daughters phoned, because as long as I could limit them to 59 minutes, the calls were effectively for nothing.

That is the reality for the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland who are on that package, be it with BT or any of the other providers. Equally, many people in Northern Ireland do not have a landline at all. Indeed, for young people, the concept of a landline is almost foreign to them because they are so used to mobile phone calls. Therefore, when they settle down and get married and have a home together, often they will simply continue to use mobile phone numbers.

Many of us have mobile phones — everyone in this Chamber has one — and we have inclusive minutes. In my case, it is 300 minutes for the grand sum of £10 a month and I think that I got a bargain. Therefore, if I phone a landline number as part of that inclusive package, I pay very little for the call. GP surgeries throughout Northern Ireland know that, but 6% of them, as Pam Brown quite rightly pointed out, have decided to opt for 0844 numbers. This is called revenue sharing.

If you ring an 0844 number from a mobile, as many Members, including Mr Gardiner, Mr Hussey and Mr Brady pointed out, you are in trouble. The minimum rate that I could discover, trawling the internet, was 25p, because those numbers are not included in the landline package. My 300 minutes, or whatever packages other Members may have, do not include calls to 0844, 0845, 0870 or even 0800 numbers. Therefore, when you call your surgery — unfortunately, three of those surgeries are in South Down, in Dundrum, Downpatrick and Newcastle —

Mr Hussey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: Certainly.

Mr Hussey: The Member is quite right about the rates that are charged, but those of us who live in the likes of West Tyrone incur international charges when we approach the border, which costs us an awful lot more.

Mr Wells: Every time I drive from Kilkeel to Newry, I get several text messages from Eircell or Eircom or whatever

welcoming me to the Irish Republic, but I have not set foot in foreign soil. I suspect that they are deliberately beaming signals into the North to pick up the roaming charges. In Rostrevor, you can be on O2 in your sitting room and on Eircell in your upstairs bedroom. That is the complexity of roaming charges, which is a problem even for folk in Portstewart or Portrush.

The lowest rate that I could find for a mobile phone call to an 0844 number was 25p, and the highest on a pay-as-you-go phone was 41p. Therefore, I am not surprised to hear Mr Brady's story of a constituent who clocked up a bill of £17. When you ring an 0844 number, you often get 'Greensleeves'. You get the first verse and the second and the third — it goes on and on. While that is happening, because you have got a connection you are paying the full 25p or 41p a minute.

11.30 am

Mr Hussey said, quite rightly, that we can afford it, and that is probably true. However, the large majority of people who contact their GP surgery are pensioners, people on income support or people on a low income, and they cannot afford to clock up a large bill. It is a deterrent. If someone is genuinely ill and trying to get through to their GP surgery, the last thing that is needed is to discourage people from ringing. So I am glad that the honourable Member for North Down, Mr Dunne, who, unfortunately, is not with us today, has raised this important issue and has ensured that the Committee has sufficient information to write to the Department.

As I said in my interjection to the Minister, the response from the GPs was inadequate. They do not understand the way that the packages work. Therefore, they do not realise that calls that should be free for most people cost them an extra 2p or 4p a minute. It is important that we try to eliminate that process as quickly as possible.

When I approached my local GPs in south Down, they made the point — as the Minister rightly did — that they had got themselves into a contract and that buying out of that contract would be extremely expensive. So, we will have to wait until that situation unwinds. Mind you, I congratulate the GPs in Dundrum: when they moved to a new practice in Clough, which I am glad to say the Minister is coming to open, they agreed not to install 0844 numbers in the new surgery. It will use a standard landline rate, and that is welcomed by the community.

I also accept, of course, that the money generated by 0844 numbers does not go into the pockets of individual clinicians or staff; it is used for the benefit of the surgery. I accept that that provides new facilities, perhaps in waiting rooms or a play facility for children in the surgery. That is to be welcomed. The problem is that it is probably those who can least afford to make such a contribution who are buying the new facilities. The vulnerable, the poor and those on income support should not be paying extra money for no good reason.

The Minister and other Members made the point that there is a halfway house. Granted, these GP surgeries cannot drop out of their 0844 contract at the moment without incurring prohibitive penalty clauses, but they should at least provide an alternative landline number for those who find the cost of ringing 0844 prohibitive. Ms Brown and Ms Bradley made

the point that the 0844 numbers gives flexibility to reroute calls etc. You can get exactly the same facility on a standard landline number. Of course, no income is generated for the surgery by doing that. Therefore, there is always the tendency to go for the more expensive option, which, in this case, can rake up quite a large amount of money.

I would love to know — because of the unique relationship between GPs and the Department, I do not think that the Minister is in a position to say — how much money in total is generated by the use of the numbers. It would be fascinating to see how much money is generated by the thousands of people who ring a surgery every day and where it goes. I understand that GPs negotiated separate, very generous contracts through the BMA in 2005 with which the Department is stuck. The contracts were negotiated under direct rule, and, frankly, there is little chance of them being changed, certainly not by the GPs' side. Therefore, in this situation, the Minister's power is limited. I certainly hope that what he has said to us today will see the gradual phasing out of this practice.

In the real world, SayNoTo0870 is a useful website that I use all the time. You look up the expensive phone number and you get a landline alternative. Sadly, it is not possible to look up an alternative number for a GP surgery in Northern Ireland; it is only for the big insurance companies etc.

I have no objection to the principle of 0844 numbers. If I watch 'Britain's Got Talent' or a similar television programme and I am impressed by Pudsey the walking dog — I was very impressed by Pudsey the walking dog — and I wish to spend my hard-earned money to vote for that dog to win by ringing in on a premium rate number, that is fine. However, if I am a 70-year-old pensioner with a heart condition who constantly rings my GP, I should not be worried about the size of my bill. That is the difference. There is no objection in principle to 0844 numbers, but they need to be phased out.

Sam Gardiner is on a good run. I notice that he has been asking some very interesting questions of the Minister. He was the first to point that only 6% of GP practices in Northern Ireland — 23 out of 355 — use the facility. I would like to think that, by 2016, it will be none of the 355. Mark Durkan, who is no longer in the Chamber, made the point that the people who are least able to pay bear the brunt of the cost. He also said that the vast majority of GP surgeries had opted not to go down this route. I will be very careful what I say about Mr McCarthy. Appropriately, he appealed to GP practices to end the situation voluntarily, and I agree with him. Pam Brown brought up a very useful piece of information: a consultation by the Department of Health in Great Britain found that 87% of respondents agreed that the use of the numbers was not acceptable. A survey in Northern Ireland would show similar results, and the practice needs to end as soon as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the actions that he will take to bring to an end the practice of GP surgeries using 0844 telephone numbers and the associated high call charges for patients.

Single-use Carrier Bags

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 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 to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises that the intention of a charge on single-use carrier bags is to reduce bag consumption and the impact on the environment; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to confirm that implementation of the levy, including its current and future scope and further increases, will be conducted in a way that focuses solely on these aims.

On behalf of the Committee for the Environment, I am delighted to move the motion and open the debate. I welcome the chance to speak in this important debate, which will help to clarify a number of key issues with the levy on single-use carrier bags.

At the start of the process, the introduction of a levy was exclusively aimed at the impact of single-use carrier bags on the environment. It was communicated as a tool for encouraging people to do their bit for the environment by using less plastic and other manufactured materials. However, as the levy's financial implications come to light, it is seen by many as less of an environmentally motivated mechanism and more of an additional revenue stream for both the Department of the Environment (DOE) and the Executive as a whole. This is illustrated by the fact that the Executive have set the target revenue at £4 million, which is the amount that has been removed from the Department's baseline budget in anticipation of levy receipts.

The Committee for the Environment received a briefing from the Department on 2 February 2012 at which it outlined its proposal that the levy be set at 5p in the introductory year, rising to 10p from April 2014. The Committee followed up on that by receiving a briefing from a delegation made up of the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association, the British Hospitality Association and the Northern Ireland Retail Consortium. The delegation indicated that a significant reduction in single-use carrier bags could be achieved with a relatively low charge. It highlighted the fact that the Welsh Government introduced a mandatory charge of 5p in autumn 2011 and early indications are that it has resulted in reductions in usage of over 80%. The fact that the evidence from Wales suggests that the 5p charge has had a huge impact on the environment through the reduction in single-use carrier bags further calls into question the Department's decision to increase the levy to 10p in April 2014.

Of particular concern to the Committee was the suggestion that the initial levy would encompass bags made from plant-based or natural materials such as cornstarch. Those bags are generally considered to be an acceptable and environmentally friendly alternative to regular plastic bags. In fact, many councils issue them for disposing of

biodegradable waste. The Committee is worried that this will give out a mixed message.

Similarly, the Committee is concerned about the proposed extension of the levy to lower-cost reusable plastic bags in the second phase of the levy in 2014. The Committee recognises that there is a risk of people increasing their use of lower-cost reusable bags and that that might have an impact on the environment. However, what exactly is a lower-cost reusable bag? How that is defined in legislation will need to be carefully considered, and the Department must make sure that it gets its message across to retailers and consumers alike, so that there can be no misinterpretation of the levy, which is about reducing the environmental impact and is not a means of raising revenue.

An important part of the introduction of the levy will be how it is communicated to the public. It is essential that the Executive play a full role in communicating how and why the scheme will operate. It is vital that the potential for confrontation at the supermarket till is eliminated. That can only be done with the correct message being delivered to the public.

I will touch briefly on the exemptions that will apply to the levy. The Committee encourages the Department to look closely at the exemptions that operate in Wales, which cover a range of areas, including unpackaged food, mail order goods and the supply of medical products. Once again, it is imperative that those exemptions are effectively communicated to the public to avoid further confusion and confrontation.

The Committee for the Environment recently embraced the latest technology by becoming the first Committee to launch a blog on the Northern Ireland Assembly website. We used the blog to ask for comments from the public on the proposals for a single-use carrier bag levy. The blog ran for two weeks, and a number of comments were posted. The vast majority of the comments were in support of a levy but for the right environmental reasons. Some comments also focused on the exemptions to the levy and asked for them to be extended to include bags made from recyclable and natural materials. I put on record the Committee's appreciation to those who took the time to post their comments on our blog.

The Committee for the Environment wishes to see a reduction in the consumption of single-use carrier bags and ensure that everyone enjoys the benefits that that will bring to our environment. Although the key thrust of the Committee's motion was to encourage the Minister to keep environmental impacts to the fore as he introduces and manages the levy in Northern Ireland, the Committee supports and welcomes the amendment as a further indication of how that might be achieved.

If I may, I will say a few words as a Member for South Belfast. The concept of introducing a levy on reusable bags to fund the Department's environmental programmes is fundamentally flawed, particularly in light of the £4 million deduction from DOE's budget in anticipation of the income from the levy. It sends out a message to the public that the Department does not see allocating funding to protect and improve our environment as a priority, and that is the wrong message.

11.45 am

Moreover, it is anticipated that the first year of levying at 5p a bag — from April 2013 — will yield revenue of only £1.5 million, and it falls to the Minister to bid through monitoring rounds for money to fill the deficit. If a bid is not successful, we face cutbacks in the protection of our natural environment that impact on all our daily lives. It seems that the Executive are prepared to fund environmental projects only when extra money is found through levying reusable and environmentally friendly bags. That is a far cry from the actions of our counterparts in Wales, where businesses donate money raised through the levy on plastic bags to fund local charities and organisations to instigate environmental initiatives —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I apologise to the Member: the clock was not set, so you have one minute left.

Ms Lo: I have one minute left? OK.

Those initiatives complement existing statutory environmental programmes.

The levy must be seen primarily as a means of discouraging consumers from throwing away millions of plastic bags every year. That increases our carbon footprint, and disposing of the bags damages our environment. The levy should not be used as revenue to pay for the very important duty that DOE exercises to safeguard and enhance our environment. I look forward to the rest of the debate.

Mr Kinahan: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after the first "environment;" and insert

"calls on the Minister of the Environment to clarify the scope and type of carrier bags that will be subject to charging and to confirm that the list of exemptions will include environmentally friendly reusable bags; and further calls on the Minister to take into consideration the concerns of the retail trade, so that the method of collecting the charge, the size of the charge and the point at which the charge is collected are all taken into account."

I welcome the motion, as it was something that I put forward when I was on the Committee. There were so many differences on matters that we wanted to discuss that I felt that a motion was the way forward. However, when this motion was tabled, I felt that we could do a little bit better and expand on it with our amendment.

We must remember, as the motion indicates, that we have to strike a balance between the environment and taxation. We need to know from the Minister today the size of the tax, exactly how it will be levied and how it will be paid for. The more I looked at the motion, the more I felt that we needed the amendment. The motion is right to state that we want to see a clarification of the charge so that it benefits us and the environment first, as that was the intention of the original Bill. I call on the Minister to confirm that that will still be the case.

Think about the litter on the ground — plastic bags and other single-use bags — and the damage that it does to birds and wildlife that choke on it. Think about the litter that we see in our hedges, our rivers and our lakes. I think that it was two years ago that 11 lorry loads of litter were

taken out of a corner of Lough Neagh. On Ram's Island, I was involved in collecting 36 bags of rubbish. I wish to point out that that rubbish was not all made up of bags: it was bottles, crisp bags and masses of other things, so perhaps we should look in time at a tax on one or two other things or at becoming better at recycling and dealing with our waste.

The Ulster Unionist Party tabled the amendment so that we might expand on what is being discussed today, and I am glad that the Chairman of the Environment Committee has accepted it. We really wanted to clarify the scope and type of bags involved. What types of single-use bag are we looking at? There are plastic bags, biodegradable plastic bags, paper bags, hessian bags and cloth bags. If we take cognisance of the research paper that came out in February 2011 when I was on the Committee and keep it in mind that the intention is to limit damage to the environment, we will know that paper bags are worse than plastic bags. They take four times as much energy to produce, and, of course, there is the deforestation that comes with cutting down trees or using pellets. Turning the pellets into paper produces toxic materials. There is also the fact that paper bags generate 70% more waste and 50 times more water pollutants. On a smaller point, it takes seven lorries to carry as many paper bags as you can carry in one lorry of plastic bags. You then think of the pollution that goes with all the lorries moving everywhere. So, the Minister should really also target paper bags.

We should not forget that plastic bags take between 400 and 1,000 years to decompose and that many different conditions come into how different bags decompose. We should also keep it in mind that, although cloth bags are much better for the environment, you can only get 30,000 cloth bags in a 20-foot container, whereas the same container holds 2.5 million plastic bags. We have to keep all that in mind when we think about how to protect the environment. We also have to keep recycling in mind and consider which bags are easier to recycle. When you recycle plastic or paper, you are, of course, halfway there, as that causes less damage to the environment. That is partly why we wanted to table the amendment. We wanted to reiterate those points and make sure that we really look at how we can protect the environment.

I also want to touch on the list of exemptions to see whether environmentally friendly, reusable bags will be included. They should not be. The Chair of the Committee touched on the Welsh exemptions, and they do not charge for cloth bags, jute bags, cotton bags, hessian bags or the permanent black bin bags that we all rely on so much. They have other exemptions, and I want to touch on a few of those. They include bags for unwrapped food items; bags for seeds and bulbs; bags for uncooked fish and poultry; bags sealed before the point of sale; bags containing live aquatic animals or fish, such as goldfish at fairs; bags used for mail order purchases; and many more. I would like to hear from the Minister whether we will adopt all the same exemptions or have some ideas of our own.

We in the Ulster Unionist Party want to make sure that we protect the environment first and then make the whole system work. However, we are concerned about the retail trade, as the levy will impose an extra burden on a trade that already suffers high fuel prices and many other things. We need to keep all that in mind. We could maybe even look at having graded charges depending on a business's

turnover or no charge at all if a businesses' turnover is at a certain level or below. We also want to know how the levy will be charged. Will it be charged at the till or, as some wanted originally, at the source, when companies such as Tesco or Asda are buying the bags in bulk? They would then share the cost over everything else that they sell. How will we advertise it and get the message to the public and the shopkeepers? Will the Minister look at a pilot scheme, or will we go straight in across the whole of Northern Ireland? How will it be collected? Will it be HMRC, Land and Property Services or our poor councils, which are already overstretched without any more resources? How will we enforce it? Will it again be the councils, which have the responsibility for food safety, or the NIEA, which is also stretched? How will the resources be put into those bodies?

If I can take you back to how we actually got here, I remind you that it was the Climate Change Act 2008 that gave us this power and that the Ulster Unionist Party has always been behind the driving principle that we must try to save the environment. I also remind you, as the Chair of the Committee has done, that there is a hole in the budget and that we need money from the tax on plastic bags to pay for work on our rivers, the marine environment, heritage, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and much more. We have to be very clever in how we make it work, and I look forward to hearing how the Minister thinks the levy will achieve both aims of looking after the environment and raising enough money.

We should keep it in mind that we were using 246 million plastic bags and the hope was to get that down to 40 million before the Bill changed its title and exactly what it would do. We are also told that it will cost £820,000 to administer. There are a lot of things that we want to know more about, and that is why we put our amendment forward.

We want to see things getting better for the environment in Northern Ireland. We should charge for plastic bags and paper bags. Maybe we should charge a bit less for reusable and recycled bags and not charge for those that are better for the environment. There is a great deal we still want to know, but we want to see a better environment. I like the idea of raising funds for charities, particularly those that help the environment. We should look at that. So, I move the amendment.

Mr Weir: I welcome the motion. I will deal with the amendment first. It is a little unusual for a party to table an amendment to a Committee motion. I am not quite sure about the exact necessity for that because I felt, in many ways, that the points raised by Mr Kinahan could be brought out in the debate. However, the DUP favours the broad sentiments of the amendment and, from that point of view, would be happy to support it.

In the previous Assembly, of which I and many others were Members, we agreed to bring this matter forward through legislation, people rightly saw it as a win-win opportunity. Principally, the purpose of this is environmental. It is about changing cultural behaviour and, therefore, impacting in a positive way on the environment.

Concerns were raised about revenue generation. I do not have such concerns. If this is, to a certain extent, a tax on bad behaviour, ring-fencing it into environmental concerns and having additional income going into the Department

on that basis is worthwhile. We have to be careful, though, to ensure that the primacy of any scheme is in tackling environmental problems. It is about changing cultural behaviour.

Mr Kinahan highlighted the length of time that plastic bags survive. I choose an example that may resonate from a historical point of view: if plastic bags had existed in those days and King Billy had come across the Boyne with one, it would still be degrading today. Indeed, if William I had had one at the battle of Hastings, it is quite possible that even it could be in existence. That gives you an idea, to some extent, of the scale of the problem.

A key issue also is to ensure that we get this right. If we take the principal driver as protection of the environment, the crucial point becomes the exemptions and what is practical. Reusable bags were mentioned. I practise what I preach: on the rare occasions that I go shopping I make sure that I use a reusable bag. We have to ensure that they are treated in a different fashion. That can be drawn clearly in legislation. Penalising people who are simply reusing a bag and treating it in the same way as other bags would be rather foolish.

Indication must also be given from the practical point of view of, for example, the hot food industry. It is perfectly practical for me to go to a supermarket with the same bag. I cannot go to any of the popular hot food carry-outs with the same plastic carton as I used on the previous occasion. That is simply not practical. So, we have to make sure that there are not undue burdens on particular industries, and the fast food industry is, obviously, one that we need to look at. There is also a range of other concerns, which I assume the Minister will address, such as prescriptions, where there is a certain need for privacy, and a range of other exemptions.

As the Chair indicated, there are good examples of where this has been brought in. Wales is often used as a model, and, to a large extent, it provides useful guidelines. I would just be a little cautious that we do not take everything wholesale. One concern raised by a major supermarket is that, in the Welsh situation, using plastic bags for their online sales is not explicitly covered by the legislation. They do not charge for bags online but do charge for bags in stores. So, we need to ensure that there is clarity and consistency.

12.00 noon

We also need to ensure that, from a pricing point of view, this does not become an additional tax on the poor. Concerns have been raised that this may disproportionately hit the poorest. Therefore, we need to make sure that we have something that is simple and straightforward.

Finally, on the same vein, we need clarity on how this is going to be done, from the retailer's point of view and from the Government's point of view. I look forward to the Minister's remarks on that. We need a simple system: one that is easily collected; one that is difficult to evade or avoid; and, therefore, one that bears that dividend. The real dividend that will be shown, and how successful this will be, is how it changes consumer attitudes and behaviour.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Please bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Weir: If we can lead to fewer bags being out there damaging our environment, the Assembly can say that it is a job well done.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I rise to speak in favour of the motion and the amendment. When I looked at the amendment, I was slightly concerned, but I think Mr Kinahan has brought it with genuine interest. I am willing to support it on behalf of the party.

As we know, there is consultation ongoing on the process. With your indulgence, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I brought in a white plastic bag, just in case I would offend anybody. What started out as a simple process of trying to reduce the use of plastic bags has turned into a complicated Bill. However, the Minister might disagree with that. There is confusion out there in relation to reusable bags, and the Chair and other Members have touched on that matter. We need to get the message out to the industry and the consumer of exactly what we are trying to do. We need to send across the message that this is a levy as opposed to a tax, and it is about the reduction of the usage of plastic bags. That was my colleague's intention when he brought forward the Bill in the first place. It has changed somewhat, but we are certainly in favour of it.

There are a couple of key issues, and Members have mentioned some already. I would like to talk about the charges and collection. Minister, I was looking at one thing in the consultation paper in relation to regulation 2, which is about interpretation. I am concerned. I do not propose to read it all, but, at one point, it says that sellers may choose to charge customers more than the minimum amount and that the proceeds of any additional income will not be forwarded to the Department. The whole aim of it is to have a small charge, but it is also to eradicate the use of these bags. I would like to hear your thinking in relation to that, because I think that that is going in a different step. I would like to hear your thinking on why that is in the consultation document.

There are concerns about the collection. The council has been on to me and would like more clarification on that. I understand that there is consultation ongoing, and we await a synopsis of the responses coming to the Committee.

In relation to the exemptions, the Welsh model is a good model, but I agree with Mr Weir that we should not go down the route of all of that. Pharmaceutical companies have raised issues and want more clarification. There is also the issue of hygiene and fresh foods and cooked foods. Obviously, there have been responses from those groups in relation to that. Maybe the Minister has been contacted by those groups and has had some communication with them.

The key element for us as a party is the revenue that is generated. We would like to see any revenue that is generated put back into environmental projects. That is the main aim of it. We would not like to see it just put in a pot. We feel that the Minister should come out clearly and identify the revenue that is generated and address the issues of environmental impact and environmental concerns.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate on behalf of the SDLP. I lend my party's support to the motion and to the amendment tabled by the Ulster

Unionist Party. Concerns have been raised across the sector. It is right and proper that they are addressed, and I am confident that the Minister will do so during the course of the debate.

The Committee Chairperson clearly set out the concerns that arose as a result of the consultation that the Committee carried out on the Assembly website by way of the blog. I support the Chairperson in establishing that the sole thrust of the legislation is the environmental initiative and that it is not designed to generate income. I am sure that the Minister will speak further on that matter. It is an opportunity for all parties in the Assembly to set out their green credentials in relation to protection of the environment and, therefore, I look forward to future contributions from other parties supporting the establishment of national parks and the Climate Change Bill. That will be a greater test of parties' environmental credentials than the single-use carrier bag levy.

It is interesting that, over the weekend, there were reports of some five tons of litter being left at a beach in Comber. That is absolutely disgraceful and shows that there is a great need for cultural change right across our society in relation to litter. This initiative will be something of a cultural change in shopping practices, but there is a greater need for enforcement and change to the culture of society in the North that thinks it acceptable to leave litter lying around public spaces.

There are a couple of other points that I would like to raise with the Minister. I hope that he will respond to them. I believe that many of the retailers' associations have raised a number of concerns and there is a need for clarification as to the duties and responsibilities that the legislation will place on retailers, particularly with regard to enforcement and record-keeping. We all know how difficult it is for retailers, particularly small retailers struggling with the current recession. I urge the Minister to take a light-touch approach towards enforcement and record-keeping.

I want to mention the issue of the £4 million of revenue that was not raised in the Budget this year because the legislation has not yet been approved. What impact will that have on the Department's budget, given that the £4 million was included in the past year's financial delivery plan? Perhaps the Minister will say something about that. I hope that members of other parties, in speaking to their Executive colleagues, will urge them to support the Environment Minister in meeting any shortfalls that he highlights in the June monitoring rounds and other monitoring rounds that are coming up over the course of the year ahead.

Many Members have spoken of the need for this legislation to be seen in the context of a wider initiative in protecting the environment, energy efficiency, sustainable economy, minimisation of waste and efficient use of resources. I hope that the Minister will lay out very clearly that that is the thrust behind this legislation and I look forward to the clarifications that the Minister and the Department will offer in the summation of the debate.

Mr Campbell: I join with other Members to support both the motion and the amendment, however unusual the timing.

With regard to the background of this issue, there was a broad consensus, which I think remains, regarding the pollutant nature of plastic bags. That transcends all

sectors of society. People want to see action taken. The genesis of the Bill was to try to address the problem of the 240 million plastic bags that are in use, the potential harm that they cause to farm animals and their general unsightliness. However, I am afraid that the consensus started to break down when we ran into the issue of whether it was purely an environmental consideration or whether it was a revenue-generating scheme dressed up as an environmental approach. Many in the community are still coming to terms with how it will pan out in that respect. The Member for Upper Bann and others referred to what will be done with the £4 million revenue that will, potentially, be generated and how best that should be utilised. I remain to be convinced of the extent of the revenue that will be generated, as, I think, do many others. Therefore, we await the Minister's deliberations on the £1.5 million from the initial year, how revenue will be generated thereafter and what the net effect will be.

Much reference has been made to the Welsh model. Most comments were supportive, and Members saw it as beneficial. Many people want any net benefit of the levy to be diverted to good causes so that it becomes a genuinely environmental approach from which those across society benefit. However, the Minister must address the issue of online sales, which my colleague and friend from North Down Mr Weir raised. I do not know what the Minister's view is on that, and, hopefully, he will respond. The Minister would be in a win-win position if he addressed this issue, perhaps even going beyond simply treating everyone equally and giving the high street a boost by asking its shops to pay less tax than online stores. Their sales are increasing year on year, much to the detriment of the high street.

Many fresh food, vegetable and meat sales in Northern Ireland's high streets will be significantly hit by the tax on plastic bags. It will also add unnecessary bureaucracy, albeit minimal. Hopefully, those matters will be addressed. There is broad consensus, although there is a bit of concern and uncertainty about how the net proceeds will be spent. Hopefully, we can get clarification on that today.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. As a member of the Environment Committee, I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion and, indeed, support it. We all recognise the growing awareness of the amount of waste that we continue to produce. Indeed, carrier bags have become symbolic of that problem. In the North of Ireland, we use more than 200 million carrier bags every year, and the environmental impact of such blasé reliance is severe. That includes carbon dioxide emissions and the air and water pollution associated with their production, as well as the cost of removing discarded bags from public spaces and disposing of them.

For much of the past decade, people have been asking what could be done to reduce the environmental impact of our reliance on the plastic bag and what supermarkets and shops should be doing about it. In my opinion, the answer is quite straightforward. We need to create less waste, which means that we have to reuse bags and remember to bring bags with us when we go shopping. For supermarkets and shops, it means encouraging us to bring our own bags while using the fewest resources and least energy to produce the bags that they give out.

Those are the broad principles that gave rise to my party colleague Daithí McKay's private Member's Bill, which the House passed as the Single Use Carrier Bags Act last year. At that early stage, the introduction of a levy on single-use carrier bags was aimed exclusively at their environmental impact. However, as the commercial dynamics of the levy evolved, it has been viewed by many as a catalyst for creating additional revenue for the Department and not the environmental check and balance it was intended to be.

Increased environmental protection must be the primary motivation for such a carrier bag levy. Moreover, any funds raised should be invested in that. We also need further clarity, and an effective communication strategy, on the Department's plans to extend the levy to reusable bags and, indeed, to those bags viewed as environmentally friendly.

12.15 pm

Some Members have previously expressed the desire for biodegradable bags to be exempt from the levy as they are held by many to be the answer to the problem. However, even that is a very complex situation, because, to a large extent, biodegradable bags can also have a serious environmental impact. Our landfill sites are not designed to break down our waste products effectively; they are more an attempt to hide society's excesses, which, unfortunately, means that even biodegradable products take years to decay. Even when they do, they release levels of methane and carbon dioxide that are inconsistent with our attempt to reduce greenhouse gases. Most biodegradable plastics will not decay at an acceptable rate in compost systems. In fact, it is said that they could take up to five times longer to do so than food and garden waste. Biodegradable plastics can go unnoticed in recycling systems and, as a result, they regularly contaminate an entire quantity of recycled plastic.

Clearly, there are complex problems around the issue. I share the concerns of previous Members who spoke that mixed messages will be delivered to the public and that our hedgerows and rivers will become strewn with biodegradable bags that do not decay overnight and, indeed, will be just as destructive to the environment that we are trying to protect.

Like the Committee Chair, I agree that the Department must ensure that any confusion and potential conflict is nullified and that the environmental context of the levy remains at the forefront of the Department's plans.

Mr Beggs: I, too, thank the Chairperson and members of the Environment Committee who tabled the motion. It is healthy to have this debate on the Floor. However, I am pleased that my colleague brought forward an amendment, which, I believe, improves the motion. From listening to what everyone has said, it seems that that has been widely recognised. Although it might be unusual to amend a Committee motion, surely it is correct to do so if it brings about improvement, and it has been widely recognised that this amendment has improved the motion to a wider basis.

There was a danger that the tax on single-use bags would get caught purely in the focus of a tax-raising capability. Therefore, it is important to widen the motion and refocus it on where the need arose and on the original purpose, which was to address the misuse of the frequently disposed single-use plastic bags that litter our countryside. As someone who has taken part in a number of beach cleans, I am well aware that, ultimately, many plastic

bags go down our streams and rivers and end up on our beaches at a time when we are trying to improve the environment and encourage tourists to come and enjoy our wonderful environment. It is important that we focus on the environmental aspect of the purpose behind the levy, and I am pleased that the motion and amendment have helped to do that.

Originally, there was talk about a green new deal. Of course, that has gone by the wayside. No funding from this issue will go towards the green new deal as there is no proposal for a green new deal at present. In any case, I am concerned about the economics and the figures that are coming out. The administrative costs will be £820,000 a year. Surely, we must look at that very carefully to see how we can better manage such a proposal so that we are not simply raising money for more bureaucratic systems. We need to do better than that.

I agree with the content of my colleague's amendment, in that we need to look very carefully at which bags are included. If we are going to simply place a levy on every bag without any thought, including reusable bags, there is the danger of a very mixed message being sent out. I, too, support the concept of looking more closely at the practice used elsewhere, particularly the Welsh model that was mentioned by a number of Members, in which very careful consideration is being given to environmentally friendly reusable bags so that there is a clear focus on them and that the producers of those bags are not penalised. Where it is possible to make reusable bags, we should not tax them, because there may be some additional costs in their manufacture. By looking at very careful practices elsewhere, it is possible to refocus on what is happening here.

When I was researching for the debate, I was interested to discover that it is projected that 242 million plastic bags will be in use in 2012. However, by introducing some sort of levy, that could drop to 40 million, which is still a considerable number. Clearly, the use of 242 million disposable bags is unacceptable, and there is a need to bring about improvement. Nevertheless, there is a need for certain bags; mention has been made of fresh food, etc. Clearly, some items require disposable bags and bags that do not disintegrate when they come into contact with moisture. So, there will always be exemptions, and I think that those were going to be in the original proposal. The area clearly needs to be looked at more carefully.

Also, on the issue of administration, I have a concern about the undue burden that could be placed on smaller corner shops. Big supermarkets can reprogram their tills relatively efficiently and produce an extra button for this. However, what will happen to the small guy who is already working very long hours to survive in business against such large competition? It is very important that we do not introduce a system that results in more corner shops being closed. I suggest, for instance, that we look at introducing some thresholds if we cannot charge at source.

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

Mr Beggs: We do not wish to put an undue burden on small shops. I support the amendment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension today. 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. This debate will continue after the Finance Minister's statement, when the Minister of the Environment will respond.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.21 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Mr Speaker: Questions 4, 8 and 10 have been withdrawn and require a written answer.

Speech and Language Therapy

1. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the speech and language therapy waiting list. (AQO 2076/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): The agreed Health and Social Care target for speech and language therapy (SLT) provision is that no patient should wait longer than nine weeks from referral to commencement of treatment. As at the end of April 2012, 292 patients across Northern Ireland were waiting over nine weeks for their initial assessment, which equates to 11% of the total. The majority of those cases relate to the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, with 139 patients, and the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, where a further 115 patients were waiting. To help to address the current SLT waiting times in the Belfast Trust, the Health and Social Care Board has made available non-recurrent support of £88,000 to reduce the waiting time from an 11-week average to nine weeks. It is anticipated that the nine-week maximum wait will be achieved by the end of September. The board has also provided non-recurrent support of £70,000 to the Southern Trust to help to address the current waiting times and to support the delivery of the nine-week maximum wait.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. I am sure that he would agree that, for children with communication difficulties, it is an enormous disadvantage to start school without having received appropriate speech and language therapy. In my constituency, the Twinbrook and Poleglass areas, in particular, have the longest waiting list in the North. Does the Minister have additional plans to put more resources into speech and language therapy to ensure that children can overcome communication difficulties before they start school?

Mr Poots: In this instance, we have taken action to reduce waiting lists. In 2007, there were 326.1 whole-time equivalent speech and language therapists, and there are now 385, so there is a genuine commitment to speech and language therapy. We get really good value from our allied health professionals, and we need to support those services. The Department has recognised and demonstrated that that is the case. The additional funding for the Belfast Trust and the Southern Trust should help to clear the backlog and ensure that children are seen quickly and

appropriately, with the vast majority seen within the nine-week target.

Mr Weir: In the past year, what progress has been made on waiting times for all treatments?

Mr Poots: From April 2011, no more than 50% of patients have waited for more than nine weeks. No patient should wait for more than 21 weeks for a first outpatient appointment. As at 31 March 2012, the number of patients waiting for a first appointment stood at 103,000. There was a decrease of 21,000 people — 17% — on the figure at the end of December 2011 and a decrease of 3,000 — 3% — on the number waiting at the end of March. So the figures are coming down. Of the total number waiting for a first outpatient appointment at the end of March 2012, 27.5% — 28,000 people — were waiting for more than nine weeks, and 5,900 were waiting for longer than 21 weeks. All in all, the figures are going in the right direction. Much work remains to be done, but we are making good achievements and progress.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. The Minister mentioned the number of personnel who work in speech and language therapy. Over the past three years, what percentage of SLT graduates have gained permanent employment as speech and language therapists in Northern Ireland?

Mr Poots: Our Department continues to support speech and language therapy students in the universities because we recognise that we will need them. Not all of them get a position after they leave university. Many of them will go to other countries, for example, to gain experience and come back here at a later point armed with that experience. I cannot create jobs for the number of people who are coming out of university; what we need to ensure is that we meet the need. There is certainly an effort being made to deal with that and to have the need met. My focus and my challenge will be providing the appropriate number of speech and language therapists for those who need them.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister will be aware that last year his Department, along with the Education Department, disgracefully allowed an excellent speech and language therapy centre in Ballynahinch, the I CAN centre, to close. Does the Minister agree with me that, because of that closure, extreme pressures have been put on waiting lists for youngsters? In fact, the closure has deprived a number of those youngsters of the speech and language therapists that they were entitled to have.

Mr Poots: Perhaps I should let the Member know that it was actually two years ago that the centre in Ballynahinch was closed, and it certainly was not this Minister who allowed that to happen. In fact, in the last year, the Department of Education proposed to close another facility, and my Department objected because we have seven speech and language therapists in that facility. It is important that we maximise the services that we get from our speech and language therapists, and, therefore, in facilities such as that described, the I CAN in Ballynahinch or Knockmore in Lisburn, it is important that those services receive the appropriate support from both Departments. I can assure the Member that they receive that appropriate support from my Department.

Health Service: Royal College of Nursing

2. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he has had any engagement with the royal college of nurses to discuss the concerns raised in the recent survey on the state of the health service. (AQO 2077/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am aware of the comments made locally by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), which draw on the data that the RCN used in its national survey, 'Frontline First'. I will meet the RCN in the near future to discuss a range of issues. We share a desire to ensure that patients and clients have access to safe and effective services.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he inform the House what steps he plans to take to address the concerns raised by the RCN, particularly over our over-reliance on band 5 nurses?

Mr Poots: In terms of meeting the demands of the RCN, I will meet the RCN and have discussions with it, and they will be reasoned, sensible and rational discussions. Our nurse workforce is very important in the healthcare system, and we need to ensure that we have the appropriate staff carrying out the appropriate job. My view of the health service is that we need to upskill all our services, where that is possible. Over the last number of years, that has been happening with our cadre of nurses, and I would like to see that continue, so that we can get as much out of the nurses as possible in terms of the services that are provided. However, it is also important that we provide them with the support for doing that. If you ask someone to carry out more responsibilities, it is also important that they are paid accordingly. They will still come considerably cheaper than consultants.

Mr Campbell: I know that, later today, the Minister will respond to specific questions about nurses and other services in a particular part of Northern Ireland, but, in a general sense, can he give a response in terms of the numbers of nurses available in acute hospitals in Northern Ireland now, compared with when he took up office?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for the question. There are currently 16,168 qualified nurses employed in the HSC. Some of them are part-time, so that works out at 13,822 whole-time equivalents. That represents an increase of 1.3% in the whole-time equivalent from March last year to March this year, so there has been a significant increase in this period. Over the period of 2008-2012 there was a 0.6% decrease. So, in previous years, there had been a decrease in the number of nurses, and in the last year there has been an increase in the number of nurses. I greatly appreciate the work that our nurses do on the front line, saving lives on a daily basis.

Human Papilloma Virus

3. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the human papilloma virus vaccine, including when the quadrivalent vaccine will be made available. (AQO 2078/11-15)

Mr Poots: In line with the rest of the United Kingdom, the quadrivalent human papilloma virus (HPV) vaccine, Gardasil, will be provided for use in the HPV vaccination programme

for girls in school year 9 from September 2012. There is no change in the programme for the current academic year, with Cervarix being the vaccine offered. The HPV vaccination programme remains very successful in Northern Ireland, and I urge all eligible girls to take up the offer of vaccination to help protect themselves against cervical cancer.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat as an fhreagra sin. Will the Minister update us on what he is doing to increase uptake of the vaccine?

Mr Poots: We will continue to press for a high uptake of HPV vaccinations. It has been a very successful programme thus far. The UK is the world leader, and Northern Ireland leads the UK in the number being tested. From 2012, HPV testing is being rolled out in England for the triage of women with borderline or low-grade cervical abnormalities and as a test of cure in those treated for abnormal cervical cells. We will watch and consider that work very carefully in due course.

The number of young people taking up the HPV vaccination has been excellent, and we will continue to press ahead with that. There will be a programme for those aged up to 18 who did not fall into the categories last year. We will encourage those young ladies to partake of the HPV vaccination.

Ms P Bradley: What is the latest update on the possible introduction of screening for HPV?

Mr Poots: The Public Health Agency (PHA) prepared a report on proposals for introducing HPV testing into a cervical screening programme that was presented to the Northern Ireland screening committee (NISC) in January 2012. A final report from the PHA was received in April 2012, and NISC members have endorsed the report's proposals and recommended that HPV testing be incorporated into Northern Ireland's cervical screening programme. The one-off cost for the programme is estimated at £314,000 in year 1 and £122,000 in year 2. Officials are in negotiations with the Public Health Agency to see whether the costs can be met within the PHA's current programme budget allocation. We also have a policy letter on the introduction of HPV testing in the Northern Ireland cervical screening programme that will be issued to the health service once we have agreed the approach and timing. We aim to issue that policy letter by June 2012, with an implementation date for HPV testing of sometime between October 2012 and January 2013. I trust this information is useful.

Mrs McKeivitt: The Minister mentioned that there was an extension to the programme for those who did not make it last year. Was that extension based on the success of the HPV pilot programme?

Mr Poots: Yes, it will be based on that success. It has been a very successful campaign. The treatment that we have eradicates the risk by such a high margin that we strongly encourage young women to take it up. We still lose too many people to cervical cancer, but something can be done about it, and something is being done about it. We can go so far in our actions, but we cannot force people to get a vaccination. I am delighted at the numbers that are getting the vaccination. I encourage others who have not got it up to now to get it, and I encourage those who have not had the opportunity to get it to do so at the earliest possible point.

Mr Kinahan: In 2009, the uptake for screening of HPV was 90%. Does the Minister have the figures for the intervening years?

Mr Poots: In the intervening years in Northern Ireland, the percentage uptake rates for all three vaccinations, as opposed to just a single vaccination, remained in the mid-80s, which is high compared with the rest of the UK. Although that is good, we will pursue higher figures because the vaccine is a real lifesaver.

Mr Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

2.15 pm

Health Service: Consultants

5. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps have been taken to deal with the shortage of consultants and the impact that this is having on health service delivery. (AQO 2080/11-15)

Mr Poots: Apart from the occasional vacant post in smaller specialties, there is no shortage of consultants in the health service. The consultant workforce has grown steadily — by about 15% in the past four years — and the vacancy rate is comparable with other parts of the workforce. In line with the year-on-year increase in consultant numbers, turnover rates are also normal and have remained consistent, with very few reported problems filling vacancies at consultant level. The retirement or resignation of consultants in highly specialist areas can, on occasion, impact on service delivery, but such impact tends to be short-term. Trusts have the capacity, and I expect them to manage such situations effectively through, for example, changes to the job plans of other consultants, rotation, the appointment of locum consultants and, in exceptional circumstances, the use of an external locum agency.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for his answer. Do I take it that he rules out considering any merit in using emergency weekend teams to deal with the waiting list backlogs that we are told about in specific trusts?

Mr Poots: Quite frankly, we have backlogs in a number of areas, such as orthopaedics, neurology and a small number of others. I will seek to eradicate backlogs where they exist. On some occasions, it would not be in Northern Ireland's interest to have a team that provided 110% of the service requirement. Very often, it is better to have teams in place that can deal with 90% or 95% capacity and to acquire that thereafter because it makes financial sense. We also need to ensure that the capacity of theatres is maximised so that all those who can make a real difference to people's lives have the opportunity to do so. I will continue to impress that on the trusts to ensure that that is the case.

Mr Gardiner: There are 95 unfilled consultant posts in Northern Ireland, including 12 in the Craigavon Area Hospital. Will the Minister tell us how many of those 95 posts are in accident and emergency, where there is a national shortage, and how many are in other specialisms in hospitals?

Mr Poots: The figure of 95 came from September 2011. It should be noted that, at March 2012, there were 84 more consultants, so a lot of those consultant posts have been filled. Four consultants have recently been appointed in Craigavon hospital, which continues to operate very effectively. Recent news showed that waiting times in that facility's emergency department compared very favourably

with other hospitals in Northern Ireland, so the Member can draw some comfort from that. Nonetheless, it should be said that attracting consultants to emergency departments is always more challenging because staff there work weekends or nights. Very often, the people who get that service do not show much appreciation. Sometimes, they show violence towards the people who care for them. People need to recognise that we, as a community, need to take a stand and say that violence or abusive language against hospital staff is unacceptable. When people go to hospital for care, they should treat staff with the respect and courtesy that one would expect in any other field.

Ms Brown: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. Will he support trusts offering posts that require consultants to work part of their week at a smaller hospital?

Mr Poots: That issue has certainly come up on a number of occasions, and we need to ensure that our smaller hospitals can operate effectively and provide a good local service that is sustainable, safe and resilient. Asking consultants to work in more than one hospital is not in the least bit unreasonable. In many other fields of expertise, people are not dedicated to a single location and perform their services in more than one. I am very comfortable with the idea of trusts encouraging consultants to provide services for part of their time in some of the smaller locations.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am delighted to hear the Minister's answer to that question, and I am glad that he is amenable to the idea. However, does he not agree that it should be written into contracts that consultants spend some of their time in regional hospitals to ensure that what happened a number of years ago, when obstetrics and gynaecology had to close in the Erne Hospital because of a lack of consultant cover, does not happen again?

Mr Poots: Through 'Transforming Your Care', we wish to create centres of expertise, with more people treated locally. For example, we may have a centre of expertise on diabetes that is not local, but 85% of people with diabetes will still be seen in a local facility. Therefore, it is incumbent on us to ensure that the people who are seen in that local facility are seen by capable staff. Although consultants may not normally work on more than one site, that can happen, and, in my opinion, it should happen where it is the appropriate level of care. It is a matter for the trusts to negotiate in the contracts with consultants, and they should make that clear when they advertise the positions and engage to ensure that we fulfil 'Transforming Your Care' by taking as much care close to the person's home as possible.

Alcohol: Minimum Pricing

6. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on plans to introduce minimum pricing for alcohol. (AQO 2081/11-15)

Mr Poots: I have no doubt that the price at which some supermarkets sell alcohol, which is sometimes cheaper than bottled water, is damaging to individuals, communities and families. Therefore, I am determined to take action to address the affordability of alcohol. I believe that that is vital. Alcohol is 67% more affordable than it was in 1980. My Department has been working closely with the Department for Social Development, and together we led a joint consultation on the principle of introducing minimum

unit pricing in 2011. We are now commissioning research to model the likely impact of minimum unit pricing in Northern Ireland. That research is essential and will help to inform our future decisions in this area. It will also allow us to bring forward proposals that will have a proportionate and positive impact on physical and mental health and well-being in Northern Ireland. However, minimum unit pricing is only one part of our approach to the issue, and it is important that we take a range of actions to address alcohol misuse across the population.

Mr Craig: I thank the Minister for his answer. I hope that he will also take on board the experience in Scotland, where, after consultation with the police, the minimum unit price was increased. What other parallel actions will the Minister take to try to reduce this blight on society?

Mr Poots: A number of Departments are working across the issues, and the management and monitoring of clubs and the happy hours create problems in themselves. I was speaking recently with people who work in that sector, and they indicated the problems that they face with, for example, people arriving at their premises at 11.00 pm already well inebriated. They also have to deal with other problems such as fights and people leaving the bars and causing disturbances. An awful lot of that is a consequence of people having already consumed in their home large amounts of alcohol supplied cheaply by supermarkets and off-licences. The consequences are very damaging, in that people take far too much drink. Drink is not a social thing; people are drinking to be drunk and are doing their body real damage as a consequence.

Mr Copeland: Minimum alcohol prices have been set in other parts of the United Kingdom. I believe that in England it is 40p and in Scotland it is 50p. There is a suggestion, seemingly, that the minimum price here will be between 45p and 50p a unit. What criteria were used to arrive at that figure?

Mr Poots: We could charge anything up to 70p a unit. The higher the unit price, the better the results, probably. In the first instance, however, it was suggested that we should not go all the way at the outset and should make it very clear that it is something on which we intend to take action. I recently saw a leaflet offering two two-litre bottles of dry cider for £2.50 and 500 millilitre bottles of vodka for £1. Those prices will incentivise people who do not have much money to drink until they are blitzed and absolutely drunk and do real damage to their body and to their liver and lose control of their own actions. The sale of alcohol by those organisations, companies, supermarkets and businesses at such a low price will have really damaging consequences for the health of our community and for the justice system, and they really should hang their heads in shame for making offers like that to the public. I will not advertise those companies by naming them.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his responses thus far. When does he expect the research to be completed? Have any scoping exercises been carried out in Scotland or elsewhere that would help to determine the impact of this proposal?

Mr Poots: Yes, scoping work has been carried out in Scotland. We have been working quite closely with the Scots. I have met Nicola Sturgeon on the issue, and she knows that she has my support in what she is doing. I have also met colleagues in the Republic of Ireland and have been very encouraged by the work that they are doing. We have agreed to move forward so that one country is not ahead of the other, and we will seek to introduce the

measure as close to simultaneously as possible. That is very important.

The research work will be completed later this year. It is absolutely vital that we have that research to sustain us as we move forward to a public consultation and the introduction of legislation. The Scots are that bit further ahead of us, and we will learn from their experience and the challenges that they face as a consequence of that and will work closely with them.

Skin Cancer

7. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what actions he has taken to reduce the number of deaths from skin cancer. (AQO 2082/11-15)

Mr Poots: In July 2011, my Department published a new 10-year strategy aimed at reducing the incidence of skin cancer and deaths from it in Northern Ireland. This strategy focuses primarily on the prevention and early detection of skin cancers. A multidisciplinary implementation group has been established by the Public Health Agency to ensure delivery of the strategy action plan.

One of the factors linked to the rising number of skin cancer cases is the increased use of sunbeds. On 1 May 2012, I introduced new subordinate legislation making it an offence to allow anyone under the age of 18 to use a sunbed on commercial premises or to hire or sell a sunbed to someone under 18. My Department has also endorsed updated National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidance on improving outcomes in people with skin tumours including melanomas. The health and social care sector is expected to take account of the guidance in the delivery of services to patients with skin tumours.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for his answer. How widespread is the problem of skin cancer, and how many deaths are caused by it every year?

Mr Poots: Sometimes, people do not take skin cancer as seriously as they should. In Northern Ireland, melanoma cases have more than trebled, from 80 cases in 1984 to 282 cases in 2009. The latest mortality figures for 2010 show that there were 66 deaths from the disease, compared with 30 deaths in 1998. Therefore, I encourage people to take seriously the Public Health Agency's messages on these issues and ensure that they have protection. In particular, young people should not be next to or near sunbeds.

2.30 pm

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Mr Speaker: Question 13 has been withdrawn.

Social Investment Fund

1. **Mr Durkan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what is the estimated date for the publication of the finalised social investment fund zones. (AQO 2091/11-15)

3. **Mr Storey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how educational underachievement will be addressed by the social investment fund. (AQO 2093/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will group questions 1 and 3 for answer.

The proposals on the formation of social investment zones received Executive approval on 17 May 2012. Following that, we announced the zones, along with other proposals that allow the fund to become operational. Details are on the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) website.

There will be nine zones in total: four in Belfast, based on Assembly constituencies, and one in Derry, with the four remaining zones to follow health trust boundaries. The issue of the zones featured strongly in the consultation responses. We have considered all the views and opinions that were expressed and we are confident that the final choice made is the right one to allow those most in need to benefit fairly from the fund. Of course, not all areas in a zone will receive funding. However, those that can identify and evidence objective need will benefit. The strategic objectives of the fund are to support communities, build pathways to employment, tackle the systemic issues linked to deprivation, increase community services and address dereliction. Educational underachievement may be considered under the objectives focused on building pathways to employment and tackling systemic issues linked to deprivation.

It will be for communities, working through the steering groups, to identify, prioritise and evidence need and to propose associated interventions for inclusion in their area plans. Now that the final operational decisions have been reached, our main purpose is to get moneys on the ground as quickly as possible and to establish the structures that are needed to do that. I assure you that we are working to make this happen. Our officials will very soon hold a series of public seminars to provide further information on the fund and advise on steering group formation, following which a nomination and selection process for steering group membership will commence.

Mr Durkan: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer and welcome the identification of these zones. Can he give an estimate as to when the first tranche of these moneys will be released from the Department into the communities?

Mr M McGuinness: We are obviously conscious of the pressures that are clearly out there. Processes are in place to establish the steering groups and to develop the plans in a way that will see delivery on the ground. It is important that we all recognise the need to engage in a sensible way with local communities and to ensure that, in engaging with them, we identify projects that will add to the many other processes and projects that are in place through other Departments. So, producing and delivering against comprehensive, needs-based, strategic area plans is the ultimate goal, but we recognise that zones will need support to get to that stage. Our aim is to have some form of steering group, whether that is a collaboration of existing structures or something completely new, to oversee the development and co-ordination of such plans.

The steering groups will consist of a maximum of 14 members drawn from four key sectors: community and voluntary, political, statutory and business. We recognise that communities will have differing levels of capacity. Some will require additional support to help identify the priority

needs and develop proposals to tackle them effectively. That is the primary reason for the technical assistance element of the fund, and it is absolutely essential that we get that right. Only when that is right and there is a proper relationship between projects proposed on the ground coming through the steering groups, can we ensure that the funding is going to them. I suppose that the timing of the funds going to projects will depend on how quickly we get the steering groups established and how quickly they engage with the local community.

Mr Storey: Will the deputy First Minister explain to the House that if underachievement has been identified by his Education Minister and by the Executive as an issue that needs to be addressed, how does that square with the decision to remove funding from areas such as the Achieving Belfast project, which was clearly dealing with underachievement? Given that he said that underachievement “may be” addressed, will that be re-addressed and dealt with under the fund that he referred to?

Mr M McGuinness: Obviously, some of the question that has been put to me would be more appropriately put to the Minister of Education, but I understand the point that has been made. When decisions are being taken on how funds will be used, particularly in the context of how we address educational underachievement, it will be very important that people who can identify what might be a gap in particular areas put that forward through the steering groups so that the issue can be addressed and financial support can be given. Whether we can go all the way towards meeting what might be a gap in funding for the type of projects that you raised will be a matter for some consideration when the final decisions are taken on what size of funds will be given to the projects that are being proposed at grass-roots level.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Obviously the Minister is aware that there is concern in some communities about getting money out onto the ground, and there is a process that has to be gone through. Has the Minister given consideration to allocating any funds to groups that, in the first instance, meet the strategic objectives of the fund but which might also form part of the area plan proposals in advance of the area plans being agreed?

Mr M McGuinness: The Member has raised an important point, and I reassure him that we will put in place mechanisms to allocate money for technical assistance as quickly as possible so that areas can proceed with assembling their plans. We recognise the need to be flexible to the needs and capacities of individual zones and that some areas may be in a position to have plans in place earlier than others. Therefore, we are looking to develop possibilities that will allow these areas or projects to receive early funding and not be disadvantaged or held back while still giving sufficient time to those areas with less capacity to ensure that they get the full support that they need. In addition to that, the point that he made about funding projects and plans that are likely to meet the strategic objectives of the fund is under very active consideration.

Mr Cree: On the question of membership, has consideration been given to offering a place on the social investment fund (SIF) groups to members of local area communities?

Mr M McGuinness: Yes, that is very important if this is to succeed in the way that we would like it to succeed. It is very important that community groups are fully represented and that we are dealing with the issues that are coming up from grass-roots level. That is the beauty about this fund. We are saying to communities that we are absolutely willing to work with them to identify the issues that they think can make a difference to their local community. Given the level of interest in the SIF, many community groups will be searching to find how they will play a role. We are determined that they will play a role and that this approach will be inclusive.

Integrated Education

2. **Mr Lyttle** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the importance of additional investment and specific targets for increasing integrated education opportunities in promoting good relations and reconciliation. (AQO 2092/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: Mr Speaker, with your permission, junior Minister Anderson will answer this question.

Ms M Anderson (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Mr Speaker, with your indulgence, as this is quite likely to be the last time that I will fulfil this role, I will take the opportunity to thank you, the Deputy Speakers and your staff for the assistance that they have given me. I thank Members for their questions, and I thank Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister officials for their help. I thank junior Minister Bell for the professional working relationship that I have had with him, and, in particular, I thank the deputy First Minister for his guidance. I thank our private staff members, particularly Carol Morrow. Thank you for allowing me to say that, Mr Speaker.

We in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister believe that creating more opportunities for sharing education can play its part in improving good relations among and for children and young people. We also recognise that the nature of our education provision means that the vast majority of children and young people of school age are educated in a single identity setting with little or no opportunity at all to meet and build relationships with their peers from other traditions or identities. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister have already shown their commitment to addressing that through our partnership with Atlantic Philanthropies, an investment of £4 million over a three-year period to encourage greater sharing in interface areas and areas of contested space. Many of the projects already under way involve early years provision, primary schools and post-primary schools, and we are already seeing evidence of very serious outcomes.

The Executive are committed to building a more shared learning environment. That is reflected in the Programme for Government, which commits to ensuring that, by 2015, all children will have the opportunity to participate in shared education programmes. There is also a commitment to substantially increase the number of schools that share facilities. The Programme for Government also commits to progressing work on the plans for the Lisanelly shared education campus site in Omagh and to establishing a ministerial advisory group to explore and bring forward recommendations to the Minister of Education to advance

shared education. That work will be taken forward in parallel with the implementation architecture of the finalised good relations strategy.

Mr Lyttle: I wish the junior Minister well in her new role and welcome the shared education opportunities that have been brought forward to date. Does she support the Good Friday Agreement principle, endorsed by the majority of people on the island of Ireland in 1998, that essential to national reconciliation is the delivery of integrated education? If so, does she genuinely believe that one shared education opportunity per year is sufficient delivery of that principle?

Ms M Anderson: Obviously, without doubt, I fully endorse the essential good relations element in the Good Friday Agreement. That said, the Executive, as I have already pointed out, are very committed to building a more shared learning environment. It is remiss of you to try to reduce that to one learning experience a year, because nothing could be further from the truth.

If we look at education as part of the revised curriculum for instance, we can see that good relations, reconciliation, cultural diversity and citizenship are addressed through the personal development and mutual understanding parts of it. You have area learning communities, where schools are sharing resources and expertise to break down barriers. You have the extended schools programme, where 96% of schools are working in partnership with neighbouring schools, and many of those are doing that with schools associated with what is called "the other tradition". You also have the entitlement framework, where you have 27 subjects for each pupil, which will require more collaboration and sharing.

So, that work, taken in parallel with the implementation architecture of the final good relations strategy, will ensure that we reach the target of greater sharing. I must say to the Member, given that he asked the question, that it was most disappointing that his party left the working group, where we were making very good progress on this issue and on many other issues.

Mr Molloy: I thank the junior Minister for her answers and wish her well in her job in Europe. I am sure that she will ensure that more funding is brought into the Assembly.

On the point that she just made about the Alliance Party's withdrawal from the cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) working group, will the Ministers and the Department continue with the work that has begun?

Ms M Anderson: Without doubt, we will. There is a commitment to do so in the Programme for Government. As I said, we were deeply disappointed by the Alliance Party's decision to withdraw from the cross-party working group on cohesion, sharing and integration. The purpose of the working group's establishment was to facilitate a process whereby all the Executive parties could continue to shape the final strategy. All parties have had the opportunity to do that throughout the document's development. We have been revising and rewriting the document, chapter by chapter. Throughout the process, the Alliance Party had an equal opportunity to provide comments and input to the document, which were discussed in the same manner as all the other contributions.

The eight points that we were handed by the Alliance Party representatives at that meeting before they walked, which were subsequently given to the media, had either been addressed or accepted in the context of the document or were subject to continuing discussion in the cross-party working group. For instance, there will be a motion brought before the Assembly about a review of segregation in housing. That is already in the document. We remain absolutely committed to the cross-party working group process and to bringing forward a robust final community relations strategy and high-level action plan.

2.45 pm

It has been the subject of much discussion, so we put on record that the Alliance CSI representative missed two meetings. He found a replacement for one, and maybe you can see that in people's diaries there would be pressure on those meetings, but on seven occasions, he asked for CSI meetings to be postponed or cancelled.

Mr Kinahan: I, too, wish the junior Minister all the best in her future job.

Mr Lyttle touched on this, but will the junior Minister confirm that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister are working towards a single, shared education system?

Ms M Anderson: I think that I have been quite clear that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, through the commitment in the Programme for Government, are working towards a shared system. Therefore, although all of us would like to see more integrated education, I would not like to think that the UUP is at all suggesting that the Catholic education sector or the Irish-medium sector should be abolished. People have got choice. The system that we have was born out of history, and we will not go over that history that we all have come through.

Through the Programme for Government, all children will have the opportunity to participate in shared education programmes, and I outlined all that the Education Department is doing. We will have a substantial increase in the number of schools sharing facilities, the Lisanelly site in Omagh and the establishment of an advisory group that will explore and bring forward recommendations to the Minister to advance shared education.

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has already been answered.

Queen Elizabeth II: Diamond Jubilee

4. **Mr Allister** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans they have to mark Her Majesty's diamond jubilee by way of a gift on behalf of her subjects in this part of the United Kingdom. (AQO 2094/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: We recognise that many people here wish to celebrate the occasion, and we understand that there are many opportunities to enable those who wish to celebrate to do so. I understand that the First Minister wishes to make a proposal that there should be a gift. Any proposal for a gift brought to the Executive will no doubt be considered alongside other Executive business.

Mr Allister: Is it the case that, after the phoney words of the weekend, this will be something of a test of whether the

republican veto will be exercised? One is surprised that it has taken so long to get a proposal.

The Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust has been set up, receiving contributions from Commonwealth countries across the world. No doubt Northern Ireland will in due course expect its citizens to benefit from the trust, so what contribution have the Northern Ireland Executive made to the jubilee trust, or what contribution do they intend to make?

Mr M McGuinness: If the Member thought that the words at the weekend were phoney, how will he work out whether the words that I am about to utter are phoney also?

I have not heard of that particular fund but I absolutely understand that, in our society in the North, there are many hundreds of thousands of people who hold Queen Elizabeth in very high esteem. I respect their right to do so. I have passed, I hope, many tests over the past 20-odd years of the peace process and I intend to continue to work in a very sensible and reasoned way with political colleagues on the Executive. As I said, I have not heard anything about the particular fund that the Member mentioned, but if issues come up that we need to deal with, such as that which the Member raised, the Executive, as always, will consider all those issues very responsibly indeed.

Mr Campbell: I suppose that most people would accept that the present position is better than murdering the Queen's uncle.

Does the deputy First Minister accept that the best gift that Her Majesty could give to the people of Northern Ireland is for both her and her successors to continue to reign over the people of Northern Ireland?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr M McGuinness: The Member for East Derry is as positive and constructive as ever.

Mr Campbell: East Londonderry.

Mr M McGuinness: He reminds me that he represents East Londonderry. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Campbell: That is correct.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr M McGuinness: Anyway, over the past months, there has been a determined effort by the First Minister and me and the Irish and British Governments to recognise the importance of commemorating events, many of which we face over the next 10 years. Thus far, I think that we have successfully managed to ensure that we send a powerful message to the community that we all have to move forward while respecting each other's diversity.

The Member who asked the question has different political allegiances from me. However, the beauty of the agreements that his party and my party have entered into with other parties in the Assembly is that, through them, we have transformed the political and security situation in the North to the enormous benefits of citizens. That work has to continue, and, without attempting to score political points, we have to try to move forward sensibly and recognise that enormous change has occurred and that more enormous

change will occur in the future. The agreements are there, and I respect the agreements. I absolutely respect the Good Friday Agreement, the St Andrews Agreement, the Hillsborough agreement and all the other agreements that I have made with the Democratic Unionist Party and other parties in the Assembly. That is the way that we need to go forward, and it would be of great service to the House if the Member who just asked the question in a very negative way were to join in that spirit.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. How and why has the deputy First Minister's attitude to the Queen changed over the years?

Mr M McGuinness: I do not know what that question is based on. However, through my involvement in this institution, the North/South institutions and the east-west institutions, I have worked with many other political leaders to move the political process forward and to bring about an end to conflict. I think that we have been particularly successful in that because our peace process is considered to be one of the most successful peace processes in the world.

People will obviously have their own views about Queen Elizabeth. There will be many views in the broad nationalist and republican community about the monarchy. Many in that community will not support the monarchy and, certainly, many will not support a monarchy that reigns over what those people consider to be this part of Ireland. There is no doubt that we are dealing with a tricky situation and that many of the questions asked today — whether by the Member for East Derry, or East Londonderry as he prefers, or by the other Member for East Derry — were asked in such a way as to trip people up. I think that it is important that we recognise that, in dealing with these highly sensitive situations, we have to do so in a way that is respectful to everyone in our community, whether they are from the unionist/loyalist or the nationalist/republican sections of our community. I am an Irish republican and will be an Irish republican until the day that I die. However, that does not, in any way, inhibit me from being part of processes that move our society forward in a way that brings not only peace but economic prosperity.

Executive: Legislative Programme

5. **Mr Dallat** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on when a legislative programme will be published.

(AQO 2095/11-15)

7. **Mr Gardiner** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the Executive's legislative programme for the remainder of this Programme for Government period.

(AQO 2097/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask junior Minister Anderson to answer that question.

Ms M Anderson: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 5 and 7 together.

Members will be aware that six Bills have been introduced in the Assembly during this mandate. Subject to Executive agreement, the potential exists for the introduction of a further nine Bills before the summer recess. The

Programme for Government highlights a number of areas in which Ministers intend to propose legislation. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister are confirming the intention of Executive Ministers to introduce Bills during the 2012-13 session. Following that, and to assist the Assembly in its forward planning, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister will advise the Assembly before recess of all the legislation and legislative proposals that Executive Ministers intend to bring forward in the 2012-13 session.

The co-ordinating role that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister are undertaking on the legislative programme in no way impedes progress on legislation. That is illustrated by the Bills that have already been brought forward in this mandate.

Mr Dallat: I am sure that the junior Minister would agree that the Assembly's success is judged in very large part by the quality and quantity of legislation that should pass through it. Does the junior Minister share my disappointment and, indeed, embarrassment that that record has been abysmal to date? Will she reassure the House, and the wider world, which voted for this Assembly, that sleeves will be rolled up so that the work will get done?

Ms M Anderson: There were 65 Bills introduced in the previous term, and all but one were passed. If we were to compare that with the situation in 2002-09, we would find that only 34 Bills were passed then. In the previous term, the Executive also provided assistance to John McCallister and Daithí McKay for their private Member's Bills.

So, the successful passage of 65 Bills during the previous mandate left limited scope for the quick introduction of Executive legislation in the early part of the current mandate. Taking into account where we are with the 13 proposed Bills, as well as the 65 of the previous mandate, we can compare our position with that of other legislatures, even though they differ from the Assembly. It is interesting to note that the Scottish Parliament, which, unlike us, did not have a five-party coalition, introduced some 45 Executive Bills, while the Welsh Assembly introduced only 19 Government-proposed Bills.

So, I think that it is important to say that Executive business is more than plenary business. We acknowledge the central role of legislation in the Assembly, and although six Bills have been introduced so far, it is important to put on record the full extent and range of engagement. That shows that 75 oral questions have been asked and that there have been responses to eight Statutory Committee motions, 82 private Member's motions, 31 Adjournment debates, and 136 Question Time sessions, for which 2,044 questions were tabled. There have also been six legislative consent motions and responses to five questions for urgent oral answer. That in no way takes away from the fact that the Executive are very conscious and aware of the important role that legislation plays in this Assembly. However, I think that it should be put in context.

Mr Gardiner: Mr Speaker, given that the junior Minister decided to take questions 5 and 7 together, question 7 being mine, may I ask a supplementary question of her?

If there is a sudden rush to bring forward business in response to media criticism of the amount of Executive business that is coming before the Assembly, will the junior

Minister assure us that accelerated passage will not be widely used, as it avoids proper debate and scrutiny?

Ms M Anderson: Just to give you some comfort, there is no sudden rush. In fact, I am sure that all Members would know that the Programme for Government included bringing forward legislation in a number of areas, such as reorganising local government, establishing a single education authority, improving access to justice, making any necessary legislative change to tackle crime, particularly against older and vulnerable people, and eliminating air passenger duty for long-haul flights. That is just to give the Member some comfort about that direction of travel. That has been the intent, and it has not been under pressure from the media.

This could, obviously, be the subject of some adjustment, so keep that in mind. However, our estimation for the equivalent number of Bills for this mandate is that there will be 15 to the end of this session. There are indications of 27 in 2012-13, a rough estimate of 29 in 2013-14, and a final Budget Bill in the short period from 2014-15, which is a total of 72 Bills.

3.00 pm

Peace-building and Conflict Resolution Centre

6. **Mr McCartney** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the peace-building and conflict resolution centre at the Maze/Long Kesh site. (AQO 2096/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: On 5 March, we accepted the offer of EU funding from the Special European Union Programmes Body towards the cost of a peace-building and conflict resolution centre at Maze/Long Kesh. We have also applied to the Heritage Lottery Fund for funding and have got through to stage two of the application process. It is intended that the centre will be built by 2015. It will have four key functions: international exchange; education, research, teaching and training; exhibition space and archive; and shared location of facilities. The work of the centre will focus on promoting and encouraging peace-building and conflict resolution here and across the globe.

Assembly Business

Mr Elliott: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I noticed that Mr Alex Maskey walked in front of Mr Durkan when he was asking a supplementary to the first OFMDFM question for oral answer. I know that you have ruled on that before, Mr Speaker, but clearly it is something that Members continue to do.

Mr Speaker: I am glad that the Member has raised the point of order. I have noticed that it happened on two occasions in the House yesterday and today. I remind Members not to walk in front of the Member who has the Floor. Hopefully, that is the convention that everyone understands.

Ministerial Statement

Public Expenditure: Provisional Out-turn 2011-12

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to update the Assembly on the outcome of the 2011-12 provisional out-turn exercise. I bring glad tidings of great joy in the statement today, and it is not even Christmas.

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

The provisional out-turn outcome is important, since it is the main gauge of departmental spending performance over the past financial year. It is also important because it determines the amount of resources that the Executive can plan to carry forward into the 2012-13 financial year. The key context for the provisional out-turn is the new end-year flexibility (EYF) arrangement, which is referred to by HM Treasury as the Budget exchange scheme. I negotiated that scheme on behalf of the devolved Administrations with the Chief Secretary last year. It allows the Executive to carry forward end-of-year underspends up to a limit of 0.6% resource DEL and 1.5% capital departmental expenditure limit (DEL). Without that scheme in place, all end-year underspends would be lost to Northern Ireland, as, indeed, is the case for Whitehall Departments. HM Treasury has confirmed that the Budget exchange scheme limits for 2011-12 amount to £49.5 million in respect of non-ring-fenced resource DEL and £13.6 million in respect of capital DEL. Both those limits exclude the Department of Justice, which is subject to separate end-of-year arrangements. Any underspends above those amounts will be lost to the Executive.

Before I set out in detail the terms of the amount of resources the Executive intend to carry forward into the 2012-13 financial year, I will highlight key aspects of the departmental provisional out-turn position. The departmental provisional out-turn returns resulted in total underspends of £68.5 million in respect of total resource DEL and £30.1 million in respect of capital DEL. That corresponds to departmental underspends of just 0.7% in respect of total resource DEL and 2.1% in respect of capital DEL. The departmental outcome is shown in the tables attached to this statement. I consider that overall spending performance to be excellent.

Let me take one example, because I know that there will be attacks and I will be asked why, at a time of austerity, there are any underspends. The Department of Health delivered a total resource underspend of £13.1 million out of a total budget of £4.4 billion. Now, if we put that in a context that perhaps the man or woman in the street can understand, we can see that it is equivalent to a household budget in Northern Ireland on the median wage of £355 per week. The amount that you would have left over out of that budget, had you achieved that level of underspend, would be just £1. I hope that those who criticise and carp about underspends recognise that that is the degree of tolerances that we work within. I doubt whether very many people could manage their weekly budget and finish up with just £1 of an underspend out of a weekly wage of £355.

There are some exceptions to that excellent overall performance, and I will highlight a few of them. In total resource expenditure, the Northern Ireland Audit Office recorded the largest underspend in percentage terms at

7.7%. That is deeply disappointing, as the Audit Office uses scarce resources that would otherwise be deployed by the Executive to deliver essential front line public services. Unsurprisingly, the capital underspends were greater in percentage terms, with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) having an underspend of 9.8% and the Department of the Environment (DOE) returning one of 10.4%. Those were the largest underspends among the main Departments. The Northern Ireland Assembly and the Food Standards Agency returned capital underspends of some 20%, although we must balance that against the fact that the monetary amounts were small.

The departmental provisional out-turn also shows that administrative expenditure declined by 5.3% in real terms across the Departments compared with the 2010-11 provisional out-turn position. I welcome that development. It demonstrates that significant inroads have been made into the departmental efficiency agendas. It also indicates that Departments have sought to protect front line services in a difficult budgetary environment.

I now turn to the Budget exchange scheme. There are two key points that I will make before going into detail. The first is that the Budget exchange scheme assesses the 2011-12 spending performance at the Northern Ireland block level. Therefore, account needs to be taken of the various centre items that impact on the overall block position. In addition, although the caps apply to each of the spending categories, the Executive's focus is on the non-ring-fenced capital and resource DEL categories, since the ring-fenced resource DEL is tightly controlled by HM Treasury and cannot be used for any purpose other than that for which it is designated. The second is that the Department of Justice is subject to end-year flexibility arrangements agreed as part of the devolution of policing and justice powers. The Department of Justice should, therefore, be excluded for the purpose of the planned Budget exchange scheme carry-forward. The Department of Justice accounted for a significant amount of the departmental underspends, and I will return to the specifics of that Department later. Departmental underspends, excluding the Department of Justice, amounted to £44.8 million in non-ring-fenced resource expenditure and £7.2 million in respect of capital investment.

As to capital investment, the only centre item was a £1.3 million pressure relating to the asset management unit (AMU) receipts. Although the asset management unit identified and delivered £2.8 million of capital receipts in 2011-12 against a revised target of £2.5 million, those were all below £1 million in value. In budgeting terms, the additional receipts were de minimis and were, therefore, retained by Departments. Hence, they did not address the remaining £1.3 million pressure at the centre. That situation should not occur in future years, as most of the remaining £97.5 million AMU receipts have now been allocated to Departments.

The Executive now plan, therefore, to carry forward £5.8 million of capital DEL into 2012-13. There were four centre adjustments to non-ring-fenced resource DEL. First, the regional rate provisional out-turn outcome was £13.5 million less than was forecast at January monitoring. That was because of a number of factors, principally valuation reductions, increasing levels of rate exemption and an increase in the planned write-off of bad debt. Secondly,

£13.2 million of unspent resources were carried forward at the centre following the conclusion of the January monitoring round. Thirdly, we paid £0.6 million less in reinvestment and reform interest payments than we had forecast. Finally, a small balancing adjustment between the ring-fenced and non-ring-fenced categories added £1.2 million to the total underspend. The combined impact is that the Executive now plan to carry forward £46.3 million of non-ring-fenced resource DEL into 2012-13.

As I mentioned, the Department of Justice has separate end-of-year flexibility arrangements covering this spending review period. Under those arrangements, the Department can carry forward an unlimited amount of resources from one year to the next, and its provisional out-turn return should be viewed in that context. However, any funding carried forward must first be used to address additional security pressures, albeit with certain exceptions applying in each year.

The Department of Justice is allowed to carry forward the capital underspend on Desertcreat in 2011-12 for drawdown in future years within the current spending review period. It is also allowed to carry forward the first £10 million of its 2011-12 underspend for drawdown within the same period to meet any pressure. The Department of Justice now plans to carry forward £20 million of capital investment underspend on Desertcreat and make full use of the £10 million carry forward facility. Any remaining underspends that emerge will be set against security funding pressures.

The overall provisional out-turn position demonstrates that the strong spending performance that has emerged since the restoration of devolution has continued, which, in an increasingly difficult budgetary environment, is commendable. The levels of underspend recorded by Northern Ireland Departments were relatively modest, and, crucially, the total amounts were within the Budget exchange scheme limits. That means that no resources have been lost to Northern Ireland. An important implication of that is that, contrary to what some believe, we do not have large amounts of unspent resource available to meet emerging financial pressures. The caps agreed in the Budget exchange scheme and the very modest levels of departmental underspend mean that the resource available to carry forward from one year to the next is not sufficient to address emerging financial pressures. However, the amount that the Executive now plan to carry forward is a significant funding boost for the 2012-13 financial year, and we can use it to deliver essential public services here. That is good news for all people in Northern Ireland, and I commend the provisional out-turn outcome to the Assembly.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for his statement. The Minister has spoken on this issue before, but, in view of the high level of reduced requirements declared in the January monitoring round, the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) is undertaking a review of Budget allocations for 2013-14 and 2014-15. Does the Minister consider it likely that there will be significant movements of money in this year's monitoring process? How can he ensure that Departments declare their reduced requirements at the earliest possible opportunity? Will Departments have the opportunity to bid for any proposed reallocations for 2013-14 and 2014-15? What

criteria will be used to determine any reallocations between Departments?

3.15 pm

Mr Wilson: The exercise that was undertaken looked first at the moneys allocated at the beginning of the Budget period in 2011-12 and at the return of moneys by Departments during that year's monitoring rounds. We also look at the provisional out-turn figures and what Departments had anticipated as underspends for the rest of the year. We will also look at whether those were simply exceptional to that particular year or whether there was likely to be carry-over and the same behaviour repeated in future years in order to see whether there was a systemic issue in the budgets. The appropriate time for me to give details of that would be once we have completed the exercise. I would then reveal to the Assembly the outcome of that review.

We have not decided on definitive figures yet. However, the whole point was that, where we saw that there was an issue with the Budget allocation to Departments throughout this Budget period, money would either be taken back or additional money would be made available to them, and Departments could make a case if they believed that they had a long-term underprovision or we would make an assessment if there was a long-term overprovision. That will be subject to a separate statement in the Assembly. I do not have the detail of that because, as Members will understand, that exercise is still being completed.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his statement. How does the Northern Ireland Audit Office performance compare to the departmental average?

Mr Wilson: The departmental average, if you take ring-fenced and non-ring-fenced, was 0.7%. The Northern Ireland Audit Office was 7.7%. We can draw our own conclusions from that. As I have said in the Assembly before — I am not attacking the Northern Ireland Audit Office — I believe that a body that preaches to other Departments prudence and proper management of money needs to do the same itself. Of course, the money that is used and then not spent is money that was not available for proper planned spend for other front line services.

Mr Cree: I congratulate the Minister on what looks like a very good return. I have two points. Will he clarify when provisional becomes absolute? We have the resource and capital figures and we have the carry forward figures, but, as far as I can see, we do not have the ring-fenced figures. Does he have those to hand?

Mr Wilson: I do have the ring-fenced figures, if I can just find them. The ring-fenced resource is on table 2, which, I hope, is attached to the Member's statement. I am not too sure whether those tables are with each Member. However, we do have a table for the ring-fenced figures. I am sure that the Member does not want me to read out the long list of ring-fenced figures for each of the Departments now. The underspend for ring-fenced resource was £14.2 million or 3.3% of the resource figure.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What level of resource has been realised through revenue-raising activity and how does that compare with the Minister's very positive prediction in his pre-Budget statement to the House of December 2010?

Mr Wilson: I indicated that the revised figure for AMU was £2.5 million, and it achieved £2.8 million, which leaves £97.3 million to be delivered over the rest of the budgetary period. We have already had the discussion in the Assembly where we explained that, in the first year, much of the work that had to be done in identifying resources was being done. Given the level of market interest, it was deemed appropriate, in some cases, not to proceed with a sale. In some cases, although some of those sales were progressing, there were legal issues and other issues that still had to be sorted out in the first year, and that then had to be carried over to the second year. However, the important thing is this: no Department was impacted by the level of asset sales, in so far as Departments were able to live within their budgets. Departments were able to manage within their budgets, and the underspend and, indeed, overspend — there was not a huge amount of overspend in any Department — were kept to a very manageable level. So, I do not think that the service or, indeed, the capital spend was affected in any way. Departments met their planned current spend and capital spend targets. That is what the provisional figures show: what was planned was actually done. I think that the Member is looking for some criticism here. However, the fact is that there was not any negative effect from the revised capital sales.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his statement. Given the considerable amount of underspend, would the Minister consider putting some of it towards supporting the green new deal, which has been shelved for some time?

Mr Wilson: First of all, let us just knock this on the head: there was not a considerable level of underspend. Average underspend for the past seven years — if I can find the figures — was 1.4% and 7% in respect of resource and capital. We have less than half of that; in fact, we have a third of it for this year. So, the level of underspend is well down. The money we are carrying forward — £46.3 million in resource money and £5.8 million in capital money — will be available for Departments to bid for. I do not know whether that will go towards the green new deal, education, health or all the other things. The Executive will receive bids from Departments and, on the basis of those bids, will decide what should be given the highest priority. I am sure that the Member will come to me time and time again during the next year with the many priorities she sees. I think that it would be very foolish of me to say at this stage that the money will be exclusively set aside for one purpose. I want to see what bids come from Departments, the priorities in those bids and how Departments can manage the spend they ask for.

Mr McQuillan: Why did the Department of Justice register such a large underspend?

Mr Wilson: The main reason for capital underspend in the Department of Justice is that the training college at Desertcreat has not yet been started. The Minister, I am sure, will be able to give the Assembly full reasons why that has not happened. However, following the negotiations that the First Minister and deputy First Minister had with the Government at Westminster, we now have the ability to carry that money forward. Indeed, any underspend in the Department of Justice can be carried through until the end of this financial period. That gives the Department some breathing space to make the decisions that have to be made in respect of Desertcreat.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also want to acknowledge that this is a very good report. It continues the progress that has been made in recent years.

I note the Minister's specific reference to the Audit Office. I have to say that I am disappointed by that; I think that it is a petty point. We are talking about a reasonably small sum of money — £700,000 — in terms of essential front line services. Perhaps the Minister will comment on the fact that his Department had an underspend of £2.7 million, which is more than four times that amount, and the impact that would have had on essential front line services.

Mr Wilson: Of course, the important thing is what percentage of the total budget that represents, not just the money. My departmental underspend was below the average; it was 1.4%, I think, as opposed to 7.7%. That is the context in which it has to be looked at.

Mr Hilditch: Thank you for your statement today, Minister. What was the gross level of capital expenditure in 2011-12, and what are your views on that?

Mr Wilson: We spent — I hope that I am right on this figure — £1.6 billion in capital spending in 2011-12. Given the calls from various sectors of the economy for the Assembly to do something to alleviate the impact of the recession, especially in the construction industry, and in a year in which budgets were fairly tight, the Executive took actions such as switching some current spending to capital spending, looking at how we could borrow, the sale of assets and a range of other things to spend £1.6 billion. Let me put it in context. Again, I do not have the exact figure, but I remember reading it in one of the journals recently. It probably means that more than half of all construction work in Northern Ireland now depends on spending by the Assembly. It means an awful lot of jobs for people in the building industry, an industry that has been hit fairly hard by the recession. That is the kind of impact that this has, while improving the infrastructure in Northern Ireland so that we have one that is capable of being used once the upturn in the economy occurs.

Mr Beggs: I concur with others that those who have been managing the finances must be congratulated.

The Minister explained that there is a sizeable capital underspend in the Department of Justice as a result of Desertcreat and that that money can be carried forward. Other than that, the two Departments with sizeable capital underspends are Agriculture with £2 million or 9.8% and Environment with £700,000, which is, I think, 10.4%. In his statement, the Minister used the word "unsurprisingly" about these Departments. I know that there has been a repeated failure in the Department of Agriculture, but what is happening to ensure that lessons are learnt and there is better financial management in such Departments?

Mr Wilson: In my answer to the Chairman of the Committee, I indicated that we were looking at the budget allocations that had been made over the period. We asked whether there were any systemic issues that needed to be addressed and whether there was a need to look at some of the budget allocations that had been made. I suppose that that is one of the areas that we have to look at. Where Departments underspend consistently in a certain area, we have to drill down and find out the reasons for that.

I do not have the specific answer to the Member's question at the moment, but it may well be that, like the Department of Justice, the other two Departments have some huge capital expenditure that they intend to undertake but that has been delayed for one reason or another. If that is the case, the capital money can be brought back to the centre and reallocated at some other stage. I know that some Departments returned money, which would not show up in these figures, during monitoring rounds last year because they could not spend it but indicated that they would be looking for it again this year as they would be capable of spending it then. I do not know why DARD and DOE did not return the money at an earlier stage, and it has been left as an underspend at present.

Mr P Maskey: The Minister mentioned the underspend of £700,000 by the Audit Office. I suppose it is up to the Audit Committee to go through the figures there. However, there is no mention of the tens of millions of pounds that the Audit Office and its joint work with the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), has saved government in recent times, which has been very effective.

Recently, the Minister's Department has attacked the Audit Office. Is that because some senior civil servants are now starting to run scared of the Audit Office and the PAC?

3.30 pm

Mr Wilson: I do not think that anybody is running scared of anyone. The Audit Office has a job to do, which it does, and no one expects it to do its job other than properly. All I have done is highlight the fact that the office, which scrutinises departmental effectiveness and efficiency, consistently — this is not a one-off — year on year, bids for resources that it does not spend and, even worse, waits until the end of the year to surrender those resources. Had that happened with a Department, I guarantee that the Audit Office would have had something to say. It is perfectly legitimate for me to point out that the people who scrutinise should also be subject to scrutiny about how they spend —

Mr P Maskey: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Wilson: The Member, from a sedentary position, says that that is what we do. Perhaps Members could be given an explanation about the recommendations that his Committee has made to ensure that the Audit Office does not return a year-on-year underspend of around 7%, which is certainly above the average. That could be the subject for a debate in the House some time. Perhaps the Member's Committee is not doing its job either.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the pleasant report and the fact that we have spent the majority of the money and are left with a very small underspend: 0.7% in resource DEL and 2.1% in capital DEL. What has driven the reduction in administrative expenditure? Have any Departments breached their budget controls, as set by their original budgets?

Mr Wilson: This out-turn is not being driven by a draconian percentage that has been laid down arbitrarily by the Executive or the Department. That is a good thing. Departments were allocated their budgets, and they then produced savings delivery plans to show how they were going to live within those budgets. It is pleasing that most Departments took on board instructions from the Assembly

that, at a time of budgetary constraint, Members did not want front line services to be cut while Departments and departmental administration stayed fat. The result is a pleasing 5·3% reduction in departmental administrative costs. Some areas have not performed as well as that, and some have had overspends — for example, the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) and the Department for Social Development (DSD). In DSD's case, that might be due to the fact that, as unemployment goes up, more staff have to be employed to administer benefits, and so on. The PPS is ramping up its role, so its administrative costs have probably risen.

Mr Allister: I am sure that the Minister would agree that, in a time of austerity, one would expect the underspend to be at its lowest because, if times are austere, there cannot be much money to spare. Today, the House is being given a retrospective view of the out-turn. For the good conduct of financial management, how important is it that there is transparency from the very beginning of the process, when money goes into Departments, until it comes out, spent or unspent? Will the Minister update the House on the apparent reluctance of the Department of Education to co-operate and give financial transparency? How big a drag is that on financial management?

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for the question. That is an issue that I have brought to the House. I promised that we would move forward on that during the debates on the Budget last year. I think that it is important that Committees and Members of the House should know when the money goes into a Department, what it is meant to be spent on and whether it has been spent on that. If it is not spent on that, Departments should have to come back to the Executive and ask for the money to be moved from one heading to another.

The Member is quite right. I am disappointed, and I think that the Committee for Finance and Personnel has expressed its disappointment. The new budgetary arrangements would also cut out a lot of the duplication in this House in respect of debate on the same issue time and time again, and it probably would have focused the debate more on where the money is being spent, how the money is being spent and whether it is being spent on the things that Ministers said it would be spent on. I am disappointed that we have not got that through. I do not know why, as the Member has pointed out, the Minister of Education does not want such transparency. The one thing that I do not believe we can do is compromise on delivering that transparency, and I hope that the matter will be resolved quickly enough for legislation to come through the House and to have the changes for the next Budget period.

Assembly Business

Mr P Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. With regard to some of the issues that were raised by the Minister, maybe somebody could explain the workings of the Assembly. It is not actually the Public Accounts Committee that scrutinises the Audit Office; it is the Audit Committee. Maybe the Speaker could write to the Minister about that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We will put that on the record, and no doubt the Speaker will confirm that it is the Audit Committee that scrutinises the Audit Office.

Committee Business

Single-use Carrier Bags

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly recognises that the intention of a charge on single-use carrier bags is to reduce bag consumption and the impact on the environment; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to confirm that implementation of the levy, including its current and future scope and further increases, will be conducted in a way that focuses solely on these aims. — [Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment).]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after the first “environment;” and insert

“calls on the Minister of the Environment to clarify the scope and type of carrier bags that will be subject to charging and to confirm that the list of exemptions will include environmentally friendly reusable bags; and further calls on the Minister to take into consideration the concerns of the retail trade, so that the method of collecting the charge, the size of the charge and the point at which the charge is collected are all taken into account.” — [Mr Kinahan.]

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): As I have said before in responding to Committee-tabled motions, I welcome the debate, because it again demonstrates, on a very particular point, the vigilance of the Committee and its challenging role of calling the Department and me as Minister to account. It also expresses the concern that an environmental intervention is, in the view of some, being reconfigured as a revenue-raising intervention.

In her opening address, the Chair of the Committee said that there were mixed messages being sent from the Department, and that was touched on by other Members. Let me say clearly, with certainty and definitively, that there are no mixed messages coming from the Department of the Environment (DOE) or from me as Minister in respect of the importance of our environment and the protection of our environment going forward. I have been arguing since I came into the Department that the scale, wonder and beauty of our natural environment is a big part of the character of our lives and a big part, if positively developed, of our economy going forward, in terms of tourist numbers and tourist revenue.

Indeed, in my view, the role of the DOE is to be the leading Environment Ministry and, at the same time, to be a leading economy Ministry. If we are to grow our tourism by 100% over the next number of years to be a £1 billion-a-year industry, it follows that a big part of that story will be the continued protection, promotion in a positive way and development in a proper way of our natural environment, and so on, for our built environment and our archaeological and Christian heritage.

I believe, as Mrs Kelly touched on in her address, that the next year is the defining year in whether we live up to the standards I have just outlined. If we believe that the quality of our natural environment is so important to us and so important to others, we must be unambiguous in demonstrating, through law and practice, that it will

be protected. That is why I hope that, in the fullness of time, this House will endorse a proposal for a marine management organisation when it comes the Marine Bill; that it will endorse national parks legislation as a mechanism to better protect and promote areas of scenic value; and that it will endorse a climate change Bill that will include rigorous and challenging emission targets. If we are to be a world leader in carbon reduction, and if renewables are to be our biggest single industry, we must demonstrate in law, in this House and through the Executive, that we mean what we say when we speak warm words about protecting our environment.

Anna Lo, Mr Boylan, Mr Kinahan and others said that the proposed carrier bag levy would be seen by many as a revenue stream. That was the tone and content of various contributions. Let me explain that it is, first and foremost, solely an environmental intervention. It will have some revenue consequences, but those are secondary and arise from the sole intention and ambition of current and future legislation on carrier bags, which treats the issue as an environmental one. I will explain to the Chair and others why that is the case. Initially, the intervention will set a charge of 5p in the first year. If I was inclined to make this a revenue-generating proposal, I would go a lot further than charging 5p in the first year and 10p in the second year. I would go down the same road as the Dublin Administration; they charge 22 cents for bags captured by their legislation.

I have set the charge of 5p in the first year to encourage a change in culture. As people have indicated, we currently use 265 million plastic bags a year, and we hope to get that down to 40 million, although even that is too high. Setting an introductory charge of 5p encourages a change in culture, and a 10p charge creates a discipline that will, hopefully, maintain a change of culture. I will not go any further than that. I have made the call. Options were put to me to go further than 10p, but because it is an environmental intervention, I made the call that that is the right charge to change culture, maintain that change and ensure that the environmental credentials of the legislation are fulfilled.

As Members know, the Executive endorsed a proposal for further legislation to widen the scope of the current legislation to capture lower-priced reusable bags. A consultation on that is ongoing, the purpose of which is to capture, in a second piece of legislation, reusable bags that might become an alternative to single-use bags but not to consequentially capture those bags that people rightly said are environmentally friendly and should not be captured by a single-use carrier bag levy.

That is the intention of the consultation, and that is my ambition for the legislation; to capture something that may become a cheap alternative to plastic bags, but not to capture the cotton and other bags that people rightly feel should be exempt. I fully agree with them. In that way, I think I am also demonstrating that the ambition of the current legislation and of any subsequent legislation will be to capture what we aim to and exclude those environmentally friendly products that should clearly fall outside of the scope of the Bill. I give that reassurance and undertaking to the House. If the Executive and the Assembly follow those directions, in my view, the concern being flagged up by the Committee and by some outside it will not come to pass.

I will deal with some of the points that have been raised, as the debate clearly went beyond the purely environmental issue of the single-use bag levy. I confirm that the management and collection of the single bag levy will be done in-house. I tried, through the Minister of Finance and Personnel, to persuade HMRC to undertake that responsibility. I made the argument that, as the character of devolution changes and the devolved Administrations take onto themselves more powers, including financial powers, HMRC has to get its head round the fact that it may have to adjust its systems to accommodate those financial differences. However, it was not minded to do that.

3.45 pm

We looked at subcontracting the work to a private contractor. That was unnecessary and prohibitive in cost terms, so we are doing it in-house. It will cost around £500,000 to create the mechanism and in and around that figure annually to maintain it. There will be 10 jobs, which will be located in Derry. I trust that that will be somewhat good news for the citizens of the City of Culture. I reassure Danny Kinahan, Dolores Kelly, Cathal Boylan and others that the administrative burden will be the least that we can engineer in respect of the businessman's responsibility. The tills, obviously, will have to be reconfigured to have a charging mechanism in their memory. The businesses will be obliged to do only a quarterly report to government on what the levy has produced. It will not be anything to do with the councils, which was a point that was raised by Mr Kinahan; it will simply be a relationship between the 10 people up in Derry, who will manage that responsibility, and the businesses.

The scale of the project is primarily to capture the plastic bags and other single-use bags offered by the multiples. That is where the problem is: 75% of bags of that character in the North are used and distributed by the multiples. That is where the big issue and responsibility will be in living up to the new regime.

I confirm that the exemptions will be extensive and appropriate. They will be modelled in the image of the Welsh model, which has been live since late last year. Medicine bags, fresh fruit and vegetable bags, fresh meat and poultry bags, seed and bulb bags, bags for knives, and so on and so forth, are not covered under the terms of the current legislation and will not be covered under any future legislation. There is an issue about how we manage unpackaged or partially wrapped hot food. The Welsh have gone down a certain road; I will look at their experience, which has been captured by the current consultation. It seems to be somewhat of an incongruity that somebody on the Falls Road who goes to Fusco's and gets a chip would not have to pay the levy but somebody who comes out of McDonald's up at Kennedy Way with a burger would have to pay for the bag. I will look at that in light of the consultation over the next short period of time.

I also confirm that the carrier bags intervention is part of a much wider strategy around waste. I have instructed officials to look at our waste strategy and recast it — the term that I have used is “recast-plus”. Given the changes around waste issues, even in the past six or eight years, given the reach of our councils in their recycling targets, given the growing opportunities for recycling on the island of Ireland, not least in respect of plastics, and given the changed environment that now exists around waste generally, we

need to recast-plus that strategy to ensure that it captures all the ambitions that we need to move towards being a world leader in reduced carbon emissions. On the far side of the implementation of the current law next April and of any subsequent law a year later — I trust that the Assembly will endorse that approach — I believe that we will go down the road of Wales and the rest of Ireland to reduce the use of plastic bags and single-use carrier bags.

In the Republic, bag usage is now down 94% compared with 2002, and the levy of 22 cents has meant that, on average, 18 bags are now being used per person per year. There was a time recently when I used 18 bags for my weekly shop, never mind over the course of a year.

Lord Morrow: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Attwood: You may criticise, but that is not the case anymore, Lord Morrow. I want to give the reassurance that if you see me going into any local shops, I try to carry a reusable bag and not a cheap one.

In Wales, since the introduction of the voluntary levy in October 2011, the multiples are reporting reductions of anything from 60% to 90% in plastic bag use. I do not believe that the people of Northern Ireland are pathologically different from our Celtic cousins on the rest of this island or in Wales, and the ambition of our legislation should be to reach the achievement of Wales in the first instance and Ireland in the second instance in the reduction of use of plastic and other single-use carrier bags. If we are to boast, rightly so, of our green and clean credentials, and if that is the character of our lives and of our economic opportunity, this legislation and subsequent legislation can define us in that image.

Mr Elliott: I thank all those who have taken part so far, the Committee for bringing forward the motion and the Chair of the Committee for leading on it. I apologise to the Chair; I missed her introduction but I was given details of what she said.

We sought clarification on the issue, and my thanks to the Minister for at least giving a level of clarification on some issues. There are one or two issues that I want to draw out further, and some further information may be required at a later stage. However, I was pleased that quite a lot of contributors focused — the theme has run right through almost every contribution after being led by the Chair, Ms Lo — on the environmental issues. We need to concentrate on the environmental issues of the legislation and not just, as the Minister described it, the add-on to it, which is the financial aspect.

The second issue that I noted running through quite a lot of the speeches today was that we need to ensure that the legislation is not a burden on businesses, at least one that they could not tolerate or handle, or a burden that will not be cost neutral in terms of the environment, let alone the financial aspects. It is important that the thoughts of businesses are respected. I noted that Mrs Kelly called for a light-touch approach to the legislation to allow businesses to manage and utilise it in a way that is reasonable and appropriate.

I was interested to hear the Minister, quite near the end of his speech, talk about the significant reductions in plastic bag use in the Republic of Ireland. Information that I have indicates that, since those charges on plastic bags were

introduced, the usage of black bin liners has increased by 1,000%. Although we may get rid of one kind of plastic bag, the use of another kind may increase. We need to be wary of that and find methods to overcome it.

Quite a lot of Members talked about the Welsh model, as did the Minister. My impression is that we will use a lot of information from the Welsh model. They did not get everything right, and, at this stage, we, hopefully, have the opportunity to learn from their mistakes and do things better in Northern Ireland. If we do not, we will continue to regret it as well.

Interestingly, Mr Beggs mentioned the green new deal. He said that it would cost quite a lot to introduce some aspects of the deal, whereas we could introduce something here that was not only cost neutral but would bring in some revenue. That was not the main benefit. The environmental aspects would be significant, and it would be either cost neutral or have some cost advantage. He said that we needed to weigh up the environmental implications of that and, indeed, other policy issues, to ensure that we do not spend quite a lot for very little reward. That was an important issue.

The Ulster Unionist Party tabled the amendment because of our concern about exemptions. I know and appreciate that the Minister has gone to some lengths to explain those. In future, we will look for particular information on what are termed cheaper reusable bags. I have no idea how to define a cheaper reusable bag, because what may be cheap for some may not be for others. I do not want to suggest that supermarkets would try to manipulate the system, but some may take the opportunity to sell bags at what we would call a reduced rate, but those might not be of any better quality than disposable bags are now.

Quite clearly, the Ulster Unionist Party wants to ensure that we get this right.

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

Mr Elliott: I appreciate the support from all sides of the House.

Lord Morrow: Before I make my winding-up remarks, it has to be said that it is regrettable that some Members felt compelled, having agreed in Committee to the motion, to amend it later. This takes us into new territory for a Committee motion coming before the House. After all, the Committees are all-party, and the motion was agreed. I hope that the Chairperson of the Committee will not take this as a snub towards her in any way, but the Committee on Procedures must look at the situation in which a Committee tables an agreed motion only to discover that an amendment has been tabled by members of the same Committee.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Lord Morrow: No.

I emphasise that the amendment does not enhance the motion. Admittedly, it does not damage it, and that is why I and my colleagues will not oppose it, but it certainly does not enhance it in any way. I ask the Members concerned to take note of that. They and they alone know why they tabled the amendment because I suspect that, outside their group, no other MLA understands why they have tabled

an amendment that does not change the motion but just expands it by a couple of dozen words. Having said that, I want to concentrate on the motion.

4.00 pm

From the debate and the Committee's blog, it is clear that this issue is of interest to many. I reiterate the Chairperson's thanks to all who took the time to inform the Committee on this issue. I also pay tribute to the Committee Chair for how she led on the issue and the staff for assisting in bringing this to this stage. It should be said that the motion before the House is purely for debate: it is not a formed opinion. I would like to get that point over.

Before I summarise the contributions that we have heard, I will mention two additional points. First, I was interested to read the research conducted by the UK Government, which pointed to the fact that the poor and socially excluded are less responsive and more likely to pay the charge. I encourage the Department, the Minister and the Executive to do everything in their means to ensure that these groups are not unfairly burdened by this levy.

I will also address the carrier bag levy administration arrangements. The Committee for the Environment is concerned about how the Department intends to fund this team of 10 civil servants. Will that additional expenditure come out of its existing budget or is it part of the £4 million "hole" that requires plugging by the levy? At this stage, I thank the Minister for coming here today. I listened intently to what he had to say. He is still in his place, and I have no doubt that he will take that concern away with him. We will watch with interest how that pans out in the future.

I turn to those who contributed to a quite wide and varied debate, which generated more discussion than many anticipated. Danny Kinahan moved the amendment, as he said, to "expand on" the motion. I do not think that it does that, but that is his view and I have said what I have to say in relation to that. He spoke about how charging would be done and the collection of the charge, and asked whether an overstretched Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) would be responsible for that function. Those are all valid points that I have no doubt the Minister will take on board, and the Committee urges him so to do.

Peter Weir was quite interesting in that he was able to bring King William III into the debate. That must have been because someone mentioned the fact that it was reckoned that it takes a plastic bag something like 400 years to break down. I suspect that he drew that conclusion since King William landed on these shores some 400 years ago. In fairness, I do not think that he was blaming him for bringing the plastic bags with him. Anyway, he did not elaborate too much, but it is amazing how some can draw different parallels and different issues into a plastic bag debate.

Mr Beggs spoke on the amendment with great relish and was commanding about how it improved the motion. However, as I have stated, it does no such thing; it just multiplies words, and I think that the motion would have been better left on its own. He talked about the £320,000 cost in administration to be lost per year. It is important that we keep a sharp eye on that, and we agree with him in relation to the costs of administration, etc. That was one of the themes that seemed to grip quite a number of Members: cost, how it was going to be administered and the

additionality of the whole thing. I listened to the Minister on that, and I think that he has got the grasp of it OK and has got it into his head. It certainly came out in his speech that this was not an issue that he was going to allow to get out of control; he was going to keep a firm grip on it, because it could undo all that the Bill was ever intended to do.

Dolores Kelly said that the legislation's main thrust is to protect the environment. That, of course, is absolutely right; that is what it should be all about. It should not be a tax on shoppers or another revenue stream. The Member urged a light touch on the responsibilities for retailers, and someone else mentioned that. That point was in relation to enforcement, and I think that we all echo it. As we step into this territory, we would certainly say the same thing as Dolores Kelly.

Gregory Campbell spoke of the polluting nature of plastic bags, and he said that this must be the drive and inspiration of the Bill, or words to that effect. As I make this winding-up speech, I echo those words 100%. Mr Hazzard said that 200 million carrier bags are used here each year, and he also spoke of the polluting nature of that. If that figure is accurate, when you stop to consider it, it is startling and frightening. I was glad to hear the Minister admit that he has turned away from getting perhaps 10 or 12 plastic bags and that he does not do that anymore. As MLAs and members of the public, we should take note of that. If it is good enough for the Minister, it is good enough for the rest of us. He assured us that he will not transgress in that way any longer. So, there is nothing like living by example.

Mr Elliott said in his winding-up speech on the amendment that he was concerned lest the levy become a burden on business. That issue concerns us all. Businesses, particularly small businesses in the retail sector, are struggling. Mr Elliott echoed what the rest of us will want to say about that, which is that if small businesses — the small corner shops — are to have a further taxation with further expense added, it will not bode well for their future. It is easier for the big multinationals to deal with and cope with these issues, but businesses that someone described as the “corner shop” will have much more difficulty doing so.

Mr Speaker, I see that you are going to tell me that my time is up. I would like to say more but I will stop. I commend the motion, as amended.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises that the intention of a charge on single-use carrier bags is to reduce bag consumption and the impact on the environment; calls on the Minister of the Environment to clarify the scope and type of carrier bags that will be subject to charging and to confirm that the list of exemptions will include environmentally friendly reusable bags; and further calls on the Minister to take into consideration the concerns of the retail trade, so that the method of collecting the charge, the size of the charge and the point at which the charge is collected are all taken into account.

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

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Causeway Hospital, Coleraine

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes. The Minister will have 10 minutes to respond. There has been considerable interest in this debate, so we have had to cut down to four minutes the time that is available to all other Members who wish to speak.

Mr Dallat: I thank my party colleagues, and I thank the Business Committee for selecting this topic for the Adjournment debate. As always, there are competing issues in every constituency, but, in this case, there was no dissent from selecting the Causeway Hospital as an issue that is worthy of debate. Indeed, the fact that so many Members are present and so many individuals are in the Public Gallery is an indication of how seriously the issue is being taken.

The concern felt due to the uncertainty that arose following the Compton report has sent shockwaves throughout the North, well beyond the catchment area of the Causeway Hospital. For decades, people like John Robb, who is in the Public Gallery, and other distinguished members of the medical profession campaigned for a new hospital. When the foundation stone was laid by the late Mo Mowlam, the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, we all believed that we had a facility that would serve the people of that area for decades to come.

We could leave behind the appalling history of deception and indecision of the 50s and 60s and the false dawns and piecemeal thinking of the old regime, which thought that it could fool all the people all the time. We could forget the appalling neglect of the 70s, 80s and 90s, when local people had no say and were at the beck and call of non-elected direct rule Ministers. Lord Melchett, the chap in the blue jeans, with neither a vote in Ireland or Britain, was in charge of the health service and contributed to the non-decisions in the north-east.

How wrong we were to believe that we had left the past behind. No sooner had the spanking new hospital opened its doors than the rumours began. Promised services that were to be provided in the Causeway were not commissioned and other services were downgraded. It came, therefore, as no surprise that the Compton report has re-energised those with a death wish for the Causeway. The plotting is well under way, and options are doing the rounds. One option is to do nothing. How stupid, how condescending, how patronising — indeed, how humiliating — to the intelligence of those who live in the catchment area of this wonderful hospital? Doing nothing is not an option for any hospital.

The rationalisation of acute hospitals and the provision of accident and emergency services in the Belfast area may be appropriate, but we do not have four hospitals on our doorstep. It is not appropriate, sensible or wise to be applying the same rationale when deciding to deprive

a whole catchment area, which runs from Limavady and beyond to the glens of Antrim. That suggestion is crazy and misguided, and it should be binned immediately.

The Causeway is a new hospital that is still settling down and it could do without the uncertainty that is currently prevailing. Where are the rights of the citizen? What is this doing to the collective community morale? Has anyone calculated the social cost, the hidden economy?

Minister, you said on the radio this morning that you would make your decision based on population figures. I suggest that population figures are not the only criterion that you need to consider. There are other critical factors that you, as a politician, need to take seriously, which were well articulated by a local GP, Pamela Logue, who was also on the radio this morning. If the decision is based on population figures alone, the bureaucrats and the clinicians would win and have their way. However, that is not democracy, because it disregards the rights of people to have a decent acute hospital and A&E services in their area and compels them to make a tortuous 45-mile journey to the nearest acute hospital with an A&E department.

I have the hospital services configuration options paper, which has been circulating since 11 April. Quite frankly, that is a discredited document, poorly camouflaged to achieve an object that would be a stab in the back to the people served by the new Causeway Hospital. Here is the preferred option:

“Causeway Hospital ... delivering a reduced range of unscheduled hospital services, with extended in-patient elective surgical services achieved through directly additional elective work being directed from Antrim Hospital and Altnagelvin provided under a Trust/secondary care lead model of delivery.”

I do not expect everyone to understand that. I am sorry Minister, but intelligent people will not buy that sweetener, because even the authors do not believe that elective surgery from other hospitals, even if it were to happen, is any kind of substitute for a fully functioning hospital that caters for the needs of people when they need it.

4.15 pm

Antrim Area Hospital was designed to accommodate 35,000 A&E patients; it is now dealing with double that number and is failing badly because it does not have the capacity to deal with that kind of unplanned expansion. The local doctors have their backs against the wall and could not, with the best will in the world, replace doctors at the Causeway Hospital, who are constantly training in, updating and specialising in the skills that must be available when that ambulance arrives with its blue light flashing, with precious little time to find a solution to a crisis that in many cases is the difference between life and death.

We are told that this kind of rationalisation has taken place in England, Scotland and Wales, where large hospitals with huge capacity are within easy reach by motorway. Neither applies in the case of the Causeway, because Antrim Area Hospital is relatively small, with no possibility of absorbing additional pressure, and the network of roads is not of a standard to accommodate high-speed blue-light ambulances.

We are told that Coleraine cannot attract the type of clinician needed to work there, but I have evidence to the contrary.

Malcolm Brown, brilliantly trained in Australia in vascular surgery, was not allowed to work in the Causeway Hospital.

For years, I have asked the Northern Trust and the Western Trust to encourage the Causeway Hospital and Altnagelvin Hospital to work in partnership to achieve increased economies of scale and a better service for patients in both areas. That has happened but not to the extent that it should have, and further development in that area now appears to be ruled out.

Simply to downgrade A&E services does the very opposite. It erodes the mainstream medical and surgical departments, which are essential for the proper functioning of a modern hospital. It sets in motion the next stage in the demise of a hospital built at enormous cost just over a decade ago. What shame, what disgrace, what nonsense?

Just a week ago, a petition with more than 28,000 signatures was handed over, calling on the Minister to save the hospital's A&E department. I assure him that that is only a tiny fraction of those outraged, appalled and disgusted by a review that is designed for only one thing: to downgrade and dilute the A&E department at the Causeway Hospital. I repeat that this is not on, any more than is doing nothing.

I look forward to what other Members have to say on the subject and I am delighted that so many are present. I am particularly interested in the Minister's response, and unlike his predecessors during the distant past, I want to hear a political mind. On that point, I suggest that there are still people in the Department and in the trust who would feel more comfortable with Lord Melchett in blue jeans than with our own Minister in a suit, elected to listen to the needs of ordinary people let down so badly in the past but now hoping that the Assembly will make a difference.

It is well known that if you create enough doubt about a project, you will eventually bring it down. Unfortunately, that works, and I fear that if the green light is not given to the Causeway to stabilise, expand and develop its services in a way in which it was prevented from doing from the beginning, a whole community of people, numbering many thousands, will be deprived of a service to which they are entitled, not in Antrim or Belfast but in the heart of the catchment area, stretching from Greysteel to Ballycastle and beyond.

Minister, you are long enough in the tooth to realise that your judgement in this case is best because it is more likely to represent the wishes and needs of people. You know that your fingers have already been burnt by the stupidity of other health trusts that have stretched your endurance to the limit. You can avoid further embarrassment, further anger, additional hurt and unnecessary anxiety by defusing this ticking time bomb.

My plea is primarily for those who will need the A&E department and aftercare, but it is also in the interests of the staff, who have given years of loyal service to making the Causeway Hospital a sanctuary for people when they are at their lowest, critically ill and in need of urgent medical and surgical care.

Minister, a wise old man once told me that it is much better to be remembered for what you built rather than to be forgotten for what you knocked down. I have never forgotten that, and although you and I have had our differences, I would not want you to be remembered, or indeed forgotten,

as the Minister who knocked down the A&E services at the Causeway Hospital.

The bureaucrats in the Northern Trust, fuelled by so-called advice from the clinicians, will tell us on 22 June 2012 that they have plans for the Causeway Hospital, Coleraine. That will fuel the anger that is felt, and only you can stop it. You can end the disgraceful history that I talked about and you can certainly ensure that it does not repeat itself.

Minister, I will take a chance and say that I have confidence. I listened to you on the radio this morning, but you need to go further this evening. I am delighted that you turned up for the Adjournment debate. You could have chosen not to be here but you are. I hope that you will send many people home this evening reassured that the long and turbulent history of getting a hospital in Coleraine will not be undone by those who do not have to go to the electorate for a vote, who do not have to publish a manifesto and who base their decisions purely on considerations that do not represent the people who matter the most: the people of that catchment area.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have not presided over an Adjournment debate for which there has been such considerable interest. I am very conscious that, given that the issue affects Members' constituents, if we are to allow everyone who wishes to speak the time to do so, we could be strapped for time. On this occasion, I do not intend to allow an extra minute for interventions. However, Members may allow interventions at their discretion if they wish.

Mr Campbell: As so many Members want to get in, I will keep my remarks brief.

Last year, when the issue of the possible winding down of the Causeway Hospital began to surface, a number of colleagues and I arranged to meet the Minister, who kindly agreed to see us in his departmental offices. We met during the Milk Cup. As we met that morning, the daily newspapers were in front of us and some of their front pages recorded an incident that occurred at the Milk Cup the previous night, when a young footballer had taken seriously ill on the field of play and was rushed to the Causeway Hospital. Of course, had an effective service not been provided at the Causeway Hospital, we may have been met with a front-page headline of a much starker disposition. That was purely coincidental, but, in a particularly stark and individualistic way, it painted the picture of the issue of the services to the north coast.

I will endeavour to summarise those issues as briefly as possible. Over the next few years, the Northern Trust will serve a population of about half a million, which will make it the largest trust in Northern Ireland in population terms. The Causeway Hospital is sometimes described as a smaller hospital, yet, last year, it delivered 35% of total live births in the maternity units at the Causeway Hospital and the Antrim Area Hospital, both of which are in the trust area, and it carried out 37% of all elective and non-elective surgery.

The Compton report and other health service reports that assessed changes in services indicated that a withdrawal of emergency services should result in 80% of an acute hospital's work continuing as before. However, professionals in the Causeway Hospital and elsewhere have indicated to my colleagues and me that that is not the case anywhere else in the United Kingdom. That simply has not happened

before, and there is no reason to believe that it would happen at the Causeway Hospital.

My colleagues and I had a series of meetings with the Northern Trust, as it has grappled with the issues that came out of the Compton report. My colleagues and I met Mr Donaghy and the Minister on a series of occasions. Each time we met Mr Donaghy, however, he indicated that — if I were to simplify the problem, as alluded to by Mr Dallat — the issue is the difficulty in attracting surgeons and other senior staff in sufficient numbers to maintain the services required.

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

Mr Campbell: My understanding is that there is a gap of about 18 months that can be bridged by overseas and other qualified personnel being brought into the Causeway Hospital —

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

Mr Campbell: — to maintain 24/7 elective surgery and A&E facilities, which need to be maintained.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Member's bringing this debate forward. I hope that the Minister will provide some clarity so that the debate is not self-defeating. There is, I believe, a serious lack of confidence among the staff and nurses at the Causeway, which has sometimes been contributed to by the attitude of the trust in dealing with this. Like others, we, too, met on many occasions the trust and Mr Donaghy, and in the case of the Causeway, we really should have been doing it all together and singing off the one hymn sheet.

Mr Campbell referred to the population issue. Of course, that is the issue we looked at. We have figures of some 458,000 being alluded to within the trust area, with additional visitor numbers of upwards on half a million over the three- to four-month summer period. That is already well through the upper threshold and glass ceiling of the provision of two acute hospitals.

We all know the historical reasons why the Antrim Area Hospital went where it did. If it was being done today, of course, it would not have gone there but perhaps somewhere more central, but that is history, and we now have to look at how best to deal with what we have. The Causeway Hospital deals not only with the boroughs and council districts of Coleraine, Ballymoney, Moyle, Larne, Ballymena, Antrim and Magherafelt but areas such as the other half of my constituency in the Limavady borough, where people will attend the Causeway.

Admittedly, we have a reasonably good road from the likes of Dungiven to Derry, and people will go on the relatively minor mountain road to the Causeway because of the time factor and because of the treatment factor. So, it is the hospital of choice for many people in the Limavady Borough Council area. A neighbour of mine's wee lassie got a fractured wrist at a camogie game the other evening, and they had her down at the Causeway and were in and out within an hour, which in itself stands as a testament because elsewhere that could be increased manyfold.

There are quite a number of Members wishing to speak, but I think we will be saying virtually the same thing: that we believe that there should be no diminution in the provision of service at the Causeway Hospital, particularly in relation to the A&E and surgery cases. What is needed, perhaps, is a proactive pushing of the Causeway, and there seems not to have been that. Some sort of skewed weighting seems to have been applied to the Antrim Area Hospital, and that has resulted in a differential between the two hospitals that goes into the pay structures and recruitment. That has left a feeling very much of inequality at the Causeway.

Five of the area's six MLAs met the consultants and local GPs at an emergency meeting last night. They reinforced yet again the uncertainty that exists.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Would the Member draw his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Ó hOisín: So, there has to be a radical review of the management of the Causeway, but it is an essential hospital delivery within the area.

4.30 pm

Mr G Robinson: I am glad to be able to speak in the Adjournment debate on the future of the Causeway Hospital, Coleraine. First and foremost, I congratulate and commend all the health service staff on their dedication and service to the health service. I also commend the Unison union personnel who gathered in the region of 26,000 signatures to support the retention of all services at Causeway, including the critical A&E facility.

My colleagues and I have attended meetings with trust officials in the past few months, and we have been reassured at each meeting that all facilities at Causeway are safe. All those facilities must equate to those available at Antrim Area Hospital. The commitment by the trust to the parity of services on a long-term basis at Causeway and parity with Antrim Area Hospital on a 24/7 basis will enable the trust to recruit the appropriate staff to fill the current vacancies. It will also have the positive side effect of boosting morale among the existing staff.

Many have welcomed the news that the Irish Open golf tournament is coming to the north coast and have pointed to the number of visitors that we expect to be attracted to that great event. That is just one event to add to those that annually benefit the north coast, which is in the Causeway Hospital catchment area. We have the North West 200 road race, the raft race and the air show. Sadly, we saw at this year's North West 200 why the first-class A&E services that Causeway provides are required. In forthcoming years, we will have more sporting events. We must have A&E facilities and the infrastructure to cope with them, as well as with the communities that stretch from Ballycastle to Limavady. A fully functional, 24/7, quality hospital, namely the Causeway, is absolutely critical to the needs and welfare of a large community, plus the needs of the large influx of visitors to the north coast.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Member for bringing this debate today. I had the pleasure of handing in a petition to the House last week on behalf of the Causeway branch of Unison. The petition had some 26,182 signatures and was the largest petition ever presented to the House. I believe that that extremely high figure speaks for itself in

demonstrating the strength of need in the coastal area for this hospital in its current status. I also believe that any change to its current status would only have a detrimental effect on the provision of health services in the area and to the economy. Events such as the North West 200, which is one of the best attended events in Northern Ireland's sporting calendar with over 100,000 spectators, the international air show and the Milk Cup would not be able to meet the very stringent risk assessment criteria to enable them to continue at their current location. Tourism would suffer, jobs would be lost and businesses would fail. That would have a serious, long-term, damaging effect on the area, and economic revenue would fall. Unemployment figures would rise, social deprivation would increase, education would suffer and skills would be lost. The list is endless.

The coastal area has an ever-increasing elderly population, as it is one of the most popular retirement locations in Northern Ireland. It is proven that elderly patients are more likely to present with an emergency need than they are to have an elective appointment.

Regionally, by population, the Northern Trust is the largest trust in Northern Ireland by over 100,000. It currently serves a population of 458,750, which is ever increasing and is predicted to rise to over 500,000 in the next 10 years. The current guidelines recommend that there should be one acute hospital for every 250,000 population, and, with those figures, the Northern Trust justifies the need for two acute hospitals.

The north coast has a very large caravan and holiday let population and a high rise in weekend visitors. The population figures in the Causeway Coast area fluctuate to up to three times the normal residential level, which is well above the recommended figure to require and sustain an accident and emergency department. I sincerely hope that that fluctuation is given serious consideration.

The Causeway Hospital currently handles approximately half the work of Antrim Area Hospital on approximately one third of the budget. Understandably, seasonal variations impact on the Causeway Hospital more than on any other hospital in Northern Ireland, due to its location. When you look at the Northern Trust figures for theatre operations for 2011, you will see that Causeway Hospital carried out 11,402 operations, which is 37.6% of the total for the Northern Trust, compared with Antrim, which carried out 9,636 operations or 31%. The operations at the Causeway were carried out with fewer surgeons and fewer consultants and with a significantly lower budget.

I will look now at emergency medicine. Causeway Hospital handled 37.8% of the total new and unplanned attendances for the Northern Trust in 2011. Those figures more than prove that there is a significant requirement for two acute hospitals in the Northern Trust area. There needs to be an improvement in the network across the two acute sites to provide continuity of service, more efficiency, enhanced budget management and the quality primary care of patients. There needs to be an improvement in the sharing of services and resources, and that can be done through the networking of skilled consultants, surgeons and specialists between the two sites.

I do not disagree that, in some cases, the merging of two hospitals or services can be a viable and sustainable option, provided that the sites are located in relative proximity. However, that is not the case with the Causeway and Antrim Area hospitals. There is not the significant infrastructure to meet the golden hour delivery service that the Compton report recommends. Given the vast rural and remote areas in the Northern Trust area, the distances to be travelled would have a major detrimental impact on the patient. It has become clear that, unless services are delivered as close as possible to the patient's home within the constraints of safety, there is a considerable danger that medical care will become economically inaccessible to a significant proportion of the population.

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

Mr McQuillan: There needs to be a clear vision for the sustainability of both acute hospitals in the Northern Trust area. Any change to the status quo will have a damaging impact on the service and care provided.

Mr McClarty: I thank John Dallat for securing the debate. No subject in the constituency concentrates minds more. Many of the arguments have been rehearsed, and I will not go over them again.

We all recognise that the Causeway Hospital suffers from challenges, and staffing lies at the heart of them. The European working time directive set the maximum working week at 48 hours, which led to a significant reliance on locum doctors. Furthermore, middle-grade doctors are apparently not attracted to work at Causeway. It is thought that training is of a lower standard because of the lower population. However, from talking to clinicians in Causeway, it seems that this is absolute nonsense. There is no more attractive area for doctors to come to than the Causeway area. How can you attract any clinician when there is a threat of closure hanging over the Causeway Hospital? I have every confidence that the problems can be resolved through the better management of rotas, the rotation of doctors throughout the trust and a determined effort to recruit staff. Perhaps it is not as simple as I make it sound, but that is certainly the preferred option to safeguard an essential service and employment.

Since the publication of Mr Compton's health and social care review, the Minister has seemed very enamoured of it. In an ideal world, the report would certainly be fitting, but there is one problem: we do not live in an ideal world. We live in a world where, when a child falls over and cuts its head badly, the concerned parents take him or her to the nearest A&E. They do not think about which facility will best provide for the child. They simply want to get the child treated as quickly and safely as possible. I suggest that the Minister looks outside the box of black-and-white bureaucracy and considers realistically what A&E means for the general public. Ultimately, A&E is an accessible, on-demand and known service. People know where the nearest A&E is. They know that it is available 24/7, 365 days a year and that they will be treated for whatever ailment they are suffering from. A&E contributes greatly to addressing the inequalities of access to other healthcare, particularly by marginalised and excluded groups, because it is universally accessible. A&E is simple. Of course, other services, such as the GP out-of-hours service and even pharmacies, are more appropriate for many ailments, but knowing where to

go and what service to approach is complicated. For most people making decisions while panicking about injury or illness, A&E will be the first service that springs to mind.

Minister, I appeal to you: listen to the 26,000 people who signed the petition against closure and listen to the clinicians at the Causeway Hospital. I conclude by quoting Dr Owen Finnegan, a respected and long experienced senior consultant at the Causeway Hospital:

"Without these services in the Causeway, the local population would be put at significant health risk and the services in Antrim Hospital would be unable to cope, leading to significant deterioration in the delivery and the standard health care model for the whole trust area."

Mr Deputy Speaker: Other Members who wish to speak will have three and a half minutes. I call Daithí McKay.

Mr McKay: I was going to say thank you, a LeasCheann Comhairle, but I do not think I will. I will try not to repeat what other Members have said. I think everyone here is singing from the same hymn sheet, and I hope that the Minister is also singing from the same hymn sheet. It is unusual to have 16 Members from seven constituencies present for an Adjournment debate, so credit should be given not only to the Member for East Derry who brought this issue to the Floor but to those who campaigned and protested and to the 26,000 people who signed the petition.

For me, it is quite simple: this is a good service. You hear of all the horror stories coming from some of our other accident and emergency units, but there are no problems in the Causeway Hospital. The Member for East Antrim, who is to my right, and I visited the A&E one Thursday night, along with council colleagues, and the staff there were doing sterling work. There were no issues of any great concern. The only problem was staff morale. Staff morale has been severely damaged since the Compton report came out, and the only threat that I can see comes from the trust and from all this discussion. That can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The Member who brought the issue to the Floor is right that what we have here is a good health product. It is valued greatly by the people of the Causeway area and my constituency of North Antrim, and we need to build on that and make it a more successful hospital. It is a rural area; it is not Belfast. It is not an urban area with a big population; therefore, it needs to be treated differently.

A lot of discussion in the local press has been about what would happen if the Causeway Hospital were to close. People in Ballycastle would have to travel 40 minutes in an ambulance, as opposed to 25 or 26 minutes to Coleraine. That would be longer again if there were an emergency on Rathlin Island, and we need to take the islanders' health concerns on board as well.

Antrim hospital has a capacity of 45,000, and Causeway Hospital has a capacity of 30,000. Antrim hospital is due to have an upgrade, which will increase that to 90,000. However, the combined demand of Causeway and Antrim at the moment is 114,000, and, as some Members said, given the fact that there is a growing population that will reach nearly half a million by 2020, there is no way that Antrim hospital will cope, never mind Altnagelvin to the west. So, we should not rush into any decisions. I urge the Minister to consider the great value that the Causeway Hospital brings

to the health service. It is one of our only A&Es that has a clean sheet and a good service record.

The Hinds and Rutter reports that came out last week were quite shocking in what they outlined. There is clearly a need to reflect on decisions that have gone before in respect of Belfast.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Could the Member draw his remarks to a close, please?

Mr McKay: I urge the Minister to take those on board because what we need now is an assurance from the Minister that the Causeway Hospital is not going to follow in the wake of Whiteabbey or Mid-Ulster hospitals.

Mr Kinahan: I am extremely pleased to be speaking here instead of my colleague Robin Swann, who cannot be here today and would also have liked to speak. I am concerned that a little bit of this debate is caused by the politics of rumour and panic that have been set about by comments elsewhere. However, the Ulster Unionist Party recognises that cuts are needed. I reiterate that one of our Minister's key points all the way through was not to cut hospitals. People should remember that.

What puzzles me is why we have to tie ourselves to Compton's ideas at all times. If we follow them, it looks like the Causeway Hospital and Antrim hospital could be closed in years to come, and then what will happen? I wonder if Paisley Jnr was right when he said that the Causeway Hospital was going to be closed. I would like the Minister to clarify that matter. Compton thinks we should close hospitals because he is comparing 1.8 million people in four acute hospitals in England. Where is he comparing? Is this greater London? Is it the west of England? We should judge and make those calls on our own merits. I shall borrow from Windsor Park: "We're not Brazil, we're Northern Ireland". We should make those decisions on our own merits.

4.45 pm

I will focus on the Causeway Hospital. I talked to Mr Donaghy last week, and the only cut that is coming at the moment, so we are told, is the blue-light service between midnight and 7.00 am. Yet, that means that somewhere between 340 and 440 cases every month will be moved to Antrim. We know that Antrim is struggling to cope at the moment. While I am talking about Antrim, I suggest that someone needs to go in there and talk to staff and take the stress away from them. We have fantastic staff there working in very difficult circumstances.

If we are going to cut those hours, what publicity will be put in place to ensure that the public know what is going on? What ambulance cover will be put there? What paramedic cover will there be, and what cover will there be from the doctors? If even those little cuts are happening, the public must know what is going on.

Running all the way through this is the concern, hidden at the back, that there will have to be a cut to Antrim Area Hospital — even a closure, some have said. I hope that that is completely wrong. However, it will cost more than £250 million to build a new hospital. Surely, we can get our health service running better so that the right people go to the hospitals or to GPs and pharmacies. Surely, we can get a system where the health service runs at its very best so

that we do not have to cut anywhere and we can keep all our excellent hospitals and keep everyone in their job and, particularly, keep the Causeway.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, agree with everything that has been said by everybody here today. I would like to take the line that, instead of looking at closing the Causeway Hospital, we should ask whether we have got the best out of Antrim Area Hospital. I believe that bad management has led that hospital to where it is today. Look at efficiency and the way that the Causeway Hospital works: that lesson is not in the Compton report. I ask the Minister to look at that and try to get the two hospitals working closer together to get Antrim up to its maximum potential. We have not seen that yet.

We have seen what the trust did for years. It hid the fact that there were trolley waits; it hid trolleys in rooms when people went to visit the hospital; it told lies until it had to come out and tell the truth. I do not think that we have seen the best of Antrim. If we close —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Could I ask Members to be moderate with their language?

Mr McMullan: Sorry, Chairman, it is a very emotive subject. We have to get to the core of the matter.

We talked about not being able to get staff for the Coleraine hospital. When the Mid-Ulster Hospital closed, where did all the staff go? They went to Antrim. It seems to me that Coleraine was penalised for its efficiencies. It met its targets, and it did everything that it was supposed to do. The targets for Antrim were not met. I thank the Minister for answering my question in a letter. We talk about people saying things. The rumour mill is out there. The rumour mill started when a statement was made in a council meeting. It is the kind of thing that will close, and I do not think that we need that.

I come from the glens, and we find the Causeway Hospital vital. One thing that has not been mentioned is that, if the Causeway is to close, it will put the Ambulance Service at breaking point. At present, we have one ambulance unit in Ballycastle to cover everywhere. You could end up with an ambulance coming from anywhere to take you to hospital. More times than enough, people from the glens are referred to the Causeway Hospital and, at times, to Altnagelvin. We need that hospital there as much as the people in the Causeway area need it there. It is vital.

I can remember when the argument started about building the hospital in Ballymena or where it is today. Some people seem to be bringing that argument back again, and I do not think that it is relevant. We must look at keeping the services that we have. We have an excellent service in Coleraine, we have an excellent working staff, and we have an excellent everything there.

Another thing is that the Causeway Hospital is one of the main places for special needs children, and, when they are statemented, they go there for their yearly reviews and everything. The consistency of special needs provision has been overlooked.

One of the things that the trust is peddling to councils is community plans. Minister, I would like you to tell the Assembly tonight when those community plans will come

out. It is my belief that there will not be legislation for community plans until 2015, which is well —

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

Mr McMullan: — which is well after the plan that the trust is peddling to councils.

I support everything that has been said here. We should retain the hospital.

Mr D McIlveen: I am conscious of time, so I will try to get straight to the point and not labour it unnecessarily. One thing that I have learned quite quickly in my short time in the Assembly is that civil servants have a remarkable ability to get a spreadsheet to say what they want it to say. I mean no disrespect to them when I say that. I would be devastated — I think that that is probably the only word that I can use — if that were allowed to happen in discussions on the Causeway Hospital.

In addition to the permanent population base around the Causeway Hospital, 750,000 people a year come to north Antrim to visit two of our tourist attractions: the Giant's Causeway and Carrick-a-Rede. Tens of thousands of people also holiday there. We have to be careful that we do not base our consideration of the Causeway Hospital just on the static population around it. Doing so would tell only a very small part of the story of what the Causeway Hospital does and of the large number of people it serves. Tribute has been paid to the staff, and we have to echo that.

I am not suggesting that we do not listen to civil servants, but I suggest that we listen to the medics, doctors and people on the ground at the Causeway Hospital, who know exactly what is going on with that hospital's needs. Dr John Robb, a retired surgeon, said:

"Getting rid of the A&E at the Causeway Hospital would be catastrophic".

Dr Owen Finnegan, a retired consultant, said:

"Without these services in Causeway, the local population would be put at significant health risk and the service in Antrim Hospital would be unable to cope".

We must take note of those statements.

I have spoken to medics. One accident and emergency doctor I spoke to said that, if a patient were transferred from the Causeway Hospital to Antrim Area Hospital in a blue-light ambulance, which happens from time to time, it would be difficult and a challenge for even the most gifted of our doctors to keep that patient alive in the circumstances, given the state of the road between Ballymoney and Ballymena. I saw the Minister for Regional Development in here a few moments ago. I am sorry that he has left, because I would like him to give some indication of whether a conversation has even taken place about that infrastructure. I fear that, if it remains as it is and we realise Sean Donaghy's ambition of moving A&E to Antrim Area Hospital between midnight and 7.00 am, when someone takes ill, it will be like playing a game of Russian roulette. We cannot afford to do that with the health of the people whom we represent. If you get sick before midnight, you are safe.

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

Mr D McIlveen: If you get sick after midnight, you are playing a very dangerous game, given the current infrastructure. I commend the Adjournment topic.

Mr Storey: I agree with most of the sentiments expressed. However, I dispute what the Member for South Antrim said about the previous Health Minister where local hospitals are concerned. I remind him that the previous Health Minister said:

"We can't sustain local hospitals with acute services in situations where it is virtually impossible to recruit."

Turning to the issue that is before us, I think that we need to remember what Bill Tweed, the former chief executive of the Northern Trust, said when the Causeway Hospital was opened in 2001:

"I am confident that this hospital will serve the Causeway residents and its many visitors well into the next millennium."

I have lived in north Antrim all my life and live in the town of Ballymoney, so let me say this: we heard all these arguments before in relation to the closure of the Route Hospital and the Mary Rankin Hospital. The Civil Service gave us all the same arguments and all the same rhetoric. Now, we are back in the same position. In fact, we are almost in a worse position. Here we have a trust telling us, "By the way, we will give you a golden apple. We will tell you that what you need is a brand new hospital in Ballymena costing £500 million". I have to ask the Minister and the other Executive Ministers whether we really have control over senior civil servants who come out with that sort of nonsense. In times when we are being challenged in relation to the economy, they put out an options paper and then go round councils in north Antrim and try to sell that paper, saying, "Here is what you could have. You could have a brand new hospital, but the cost is £500 million".

Let me make it clear that the people of Ballymoney reluctantly gave up the Route Hospital. I pay tribute to Dr John Robb, who is with us today and who coined the phrase "democratisation of the health service". Men such as John Robb, Owen Finnegan and others have given us a service in Ballymoney and subsequently in the Causeway Hospital that we have bought into and look on as our local service. It is our local hospital. This is not a campaign of sentimentality; it is about securing a service that provides for the people of north Antrim, east Londonderry and further afield.

I congratulate the Minister on the stance that he has taken. I congratulate him on the correspondence that he sent to me in October 2011, in which he said that the Causeway was here to stay. Let us be very clear that that will happen, because the message needs to go out to the Civil Service.

In my closing remarks, I want to pay tribute to the clinicians and consultants who are currently at the Causeway Hospital. It is because of them that we still have a service there. It is because of them and the dedication that they have shown, and many of us have spoken to those who are currently there and those who have retired.

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

Mr Storey: My message to the Northern Health and Social Care Trust is this: do the same as the Southern Health and Social Care Trust. Go on a recruitment campaign, not a rationalisation campaign, and that will ultimately mean the preservation of the Causeway Hospital.

Mr Allister: One need only look at the unremitting chaos in Antrim Area Hospital over the past winter and on previous occasions to see why it would be the height of utter folly to consider adding to that chaos by closing the Causeway Hospital. Within the Northern Trust area, we have two acute hospitals. Antrim cannot cope with what it has got — pure and simple. The Hinds report and the Rutter report add to the devastating picture in Antrim. Yet, there are those in the trust who say that the answer, nonetheless, is to take the one acute hospital that is functioning and meeting its targets and in which you do not have to lie on a trolley or wait for interminable hours and close its acute services and put them elsewhere, where they already cannot cope. That is absolute madness. For a Minister to have allowed it to get to that point is, I think, very regrettable. To have a trust that has run away with itself with plans of that nature shows that it is out of control.

This morning, there were indications from some of the things that the Minister said that perhaps he is back-peddalling from his wholesale commitment to Compton. It is Compton that has put us in this position. The Minister needs to do more than back-pedal: he needs to say — I trust that he will take the opportunity to do so today before the trust meets on 22 June — that there will be no closure of acute services in Coleraine. It is not enough to say that Coleraine hospital is here to stay; it must be that Coleraine hospital as an acute hospital with accident and emergency has to be here to stay. It is up to the Minister to say so, and I trust that he will take the opportunity today to say to the board that, whatever it comes up with on 22 June, it cannot be the running down of A&E at Causeway.

If that is what he is saying, he will have a welcome from all sides of the House.

5.00 pm

I think it is quite appalling that, from within the trust and from others, there has been a rolling campaign to talk down the Causeway, to badmouth it and to say that you cannot get staff. The one way to make sure that you will not get staff is to talk it down. That is a strategy of closure by stealth, and that is what I fear we are seeing: those with an agenda to try to get to the point where they would say that they are terribly sorry, they did not want it to end up like this, but they have no option. We saw that in the City Hospital's A&E and the supposed temporary closure. Now I see the same trend in relation to the Causeway Hospital. I want to say on behalf of my constituents in the upper part of North Antrim that they cannot and will not put up with that. We have a hospital that is valued and necessary and that must be retained.

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

Mr Allister: The message to the trust and to the Minister is: hands off the A&E in the Causeway.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I welcome the opportunity to respond to the debate today, and thank Members for their contributions.

Most have been very sensible and rational, and most have been non-political, with the odd exception, but we will learn to excuse those people. I know that the subject of the Causeway Hospital has been a matter of some concern and media speculation of late, and, in particular, the issue of the emergency department has been raised recently in the House. I will try to respond to as many points as I can.

I want to start by commending the work of all the staff at the Causeway Hospital. I am very much aware of the pressures on our health and social care services and the dedication and diligence of the workforce in the Causeway Hospital in ensuring that the treatment and care of patients is of the highest order. The review of health and social care services in Northern Ireland and the subsequent 'Transforming Your Care' report have made it clear that significant changes will be required to the HSC in Northern Ireland. I support the vast majority of the recommendations in the 'Transforming Your Care' report. It is too soon to say exactly what those changes will mean for the future configuration of services or the implications for individual hospitals, but our aim must be, as I have said many times, to have safe, resilient and sustainable services, with the focus on the individual as opposed to the institution.

A key driver for the HSC review was the very real concern that the system as it stands was not sustainable and that, without change, we could not continue to meet the growing demands on health and social care, with potential consequences for quality of care and, more importantly, patient safety. Those concerns have been borne out by the review, and what we must now do is ensure that we address those issues in a focused, far-sighted and thoughtful way. I have said before that a whole-systems approach is necessary if we are to provide safe and sustainable services in the longer term, not just for the people in the Causeway area but for the entire population of Northern Ireland.

Designing and delivering a new model for health and social care services, one that is built around patient needs, will require engagement with patients. Front line providers and local commissioning groups will play a key role in that by identifying and determining local health needs and ensuring that those are provided for in the most efficient and effective manner. We have recently had a petition handed to the Assembly and the Speaker through Mr McQuillan, gathered by the Unite union. That is certainly a very clear demonstration of where local people's views are about the service that is required in the Causeway Hospital. It is not something that one would lightly ignore.

A key proposal within Transforming Your Care was the development of population plans to identify the projected needs in an area and how best to meet those needs, consistent with the principles of the 'Transforming Your Care' report. The population plans that are being worked up by the trusts and the commissioning bodies are an essential first step in identifying what our services should look like for the future, and it is particularly important that they consider what is sustainable in the longer term. The HSC review is not prescriptive about the service configuration in hospital facilities. However, it sets out expectations of what should be included and what a major acute hospital must be capable of sustaining. In implementing Transforming Your Care, my priorities are safety and quality of service provision.

I am aware that Members have concerns about the continuation of acute services including an emergency department at the Causeway Hospital. It is important to emphasise at this point that no decisions have been made. It is not helpful for speculation to precede the proper process that I have approved to ensure that the future configuration of acute hospital care services is safe, sustainable and resilient. We have to see what the population plans tell us about the provision of health and social care services in the Northern local commissioning group (LCG) area and what current and, importantly, future needs will look like.

As the process of identifying and assessing options has not been completed, no one can yet say what the full range of options that will be assessed in any part of Northern Ireland will be. However, there will be proper, open and formal consultation on the way ahead that I will propose when I have assessed all the population plans. No decision on major service reconfiguration will be made before that process has been completed.

A key feature in service configuration will be the need to ensure a staffing profile with the necessary and appropriate skills base to deal with the eventualities that will arise. We cannot, for example, support a service where junior doctors deal with life-critical issues. We need to make sure that we have doctors who have the requisite skills to deal with the particular problems that come to an emergency department. Conversely, we cannot overload other emergency departments with large numbers of patients, as that could lead to unacceptable levels of service and staff working under extreme pressure.

It is important that there is engagement at local level in any consideration of services. I want to ensure that people are fully informed and have the opportunity to contribute to the future delivery of services in their areas. I have stressed this point to local representatives to ensure that they participate in the process that is under way to develop a population plan for the Northern LCG area.

I want to see services becoming more accessible to people in their communities and closer to their homes. This will mean changes to how health professionals work together to break down the barriers and blockages that can adversely affect how health and social care are provided. I also want to make sure that, by moving services closer to home where it is safe and appropriate to do so, we ensure that our hospitals are configured to deal with those who need them most, while those who can be safely cared for in the community are discharged as soon as their health and social care needs permit.

The configuration of our hospital system must reflect and be responsive to the needs of our population. That is why population plans are so important and why we have to get them right. I will be quite happy to challenge the proposals where I do not think that they will meet the needs of the population covered by the Northern Trust. That is why it is crucial that any redesign of the service is done not through a top-down approach but one that involves local populations and professionals working within clear parameters.

As part of the development of a population plan in the Northern Trust area, a number of professional advisory groups, comprising local consultants, GPs, nurses and

allied health professional staff from across the Northern LCG area, have been established to work through the issues and identify possible solutions. These groups have identified a number of options, including a reconfiguration of hospital services in the Northern Trust area, which may have implications for the Causeway Hospital. I expect that, as they evolve, the forthcoming population plans will provide further proposals and details on what Transforming Your Care will mean for local areas.

As I said, however, no decisions have yet been made about future hospital services in the Northern Trust area. A range of engagement activities is under way with councils and community groups across the area, and discussion of the options and the future role of the Causeway Hospital is part of the debate in the workshops and meetings. Difficult decisions may have to be made in the future, but our aim at all times will be to ensure that patients are put first and that we have in place a safe and sustainable service that meets the needs of the population it serves.

To that end, the future services of the Causeway Hospital are very much in the hands of the local management and clinicians. The proposals that they produce need to be safe, sustainable, resilient and, dare I say, innovative. I have, at no point, expressed any desire to remove services from the Causeway Hospital. If I do not receive a safe, sustainable and resilient proposal, there is a serious risk of the withdrawal of services in an unplanned way by the Royal Colleges, which will not allow their members to be compromised by delivering an unsafe service.

We will have the formal consultation processes, which will recognise the significant changes across the system to the services. Key stakeholders and the wider public will have their say. I encourage the local community to engage fully, as it and many of the local MLAs and MPs have been doing, with the development of the population plan. I trust that, as we reach a conclusion on the matter in due course, after giving it all the appropriate attention, detail and thought, we will arrive at the right decision for the Northern Ireland health service and for the people who live in the catchment area of the Causeway Hospital. To that end, we will have to wait until we hear all the relevant information before we can make those decisions. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak.

Adjourned at 5.11 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 11 June 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Lord Morrow: Mr Speaker, if it is in order, may I move the suspension of Standing Orders to permit the House to sit after the normal sitting time?

Mr Speaker: Let us, Lord Morrow, come on to that issue. First, I have some information for the House, and I want to deal with that.

Executive Committee Business

Pensions Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform Members that the Pensions Bill has received Royal Assent. The Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2012 became law on 1 June 2012.

Assembly Business

Resignation: Ms Martina Anderson

Mr Speaker: I advise the House that I have received a letter from Ms Martina Anderson giving me notice that she has resigned as a Member of the Assembly with effect from noon today, 11 June 2012. I have notified the Chief Electoral Officer in accordance with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Extension of Sitting

Mr Speaker: I have been given notice by members of the Business Committee of a motion to extend today's sitting beyond 7.00 pm. Under Standing Order 10(3A), the Question on the motion will be put without debate.

Lord Morrow: I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 11 June 2012 be extended to no later than 7.30 pm.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 11 June 2012 be extended to no later than 7.30 pm.

Mr Speaker: The motion has been agreed, and the House may sit until 7.30 pm if necessary.

Ministerial Statement

Pathways to Success: Strategy for Young People not in Education, Employment or Training

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I am very grateful for the opportunity to make the statement today about Pathways to Success, which is the Executive's strategy for young people who are not in employment, education or training, and its integrated action plan. The strategy builds on the Programme for Government and the Executive's economic strategy. It is important that we enable every person in this society to develop to their full potential and that our economy utilises fully the productive human resources available to it.

Although my Department led on the development of the strategy, it is a cross-departmental initiative. It is a further demonstration of the commitment of the Executive to young people and to addressing particularly the challenge of young people who are not in education, employment or training — the so-called NEETs.

The strategy has been significantly informed by the inquiry by the previous mandate's Committee for Employment and Learning into young people not in education, employment or training, by ongoing discussions with the current Committee and by debates in the Assembly. The Committee's thoughts have been reflected throughout the document, and a list of its recommendations and a description of how they are to be taken forward is provided at annex B. The strategy has also been informed by the findings of a detailed consultation exercise with stakeholders, which included direct engagement with young people.

The Pathways to Success strategy will put a particular emphasis on young people, specifically those who are furthest from the labour market and face barriers to participation in learning and employment.

The number of young people here who are NEET was already rising before the recession. That challenge has obviously been exacerbated by the recession, during which the number of young people becoming unemployed has risen substantially. However, it is important to recognise the difference between youth unemployment in general and the issue of young people who are NEET and face barriers to re-engagement.

Many young people have high-level qualifications and skills and are well placed to take up employment as the economy improves: they merely lack the opportunities. Some will require minimal help to secure employment and some will just need the chance to gain experience. There are others who are much further from the labour market and require much more intensive support and more tailored interventions to overcome their barriers. Those young people are the main focus of the strategy.

The NEETs issue is a major social problem which, if not tackled, will result in young people facing a lifetime of limited opportunity, characterised by worklessness, poverty and ill health, and passing severely reduced life chances from generation to generation. It is also an economic problem. There are major costs to the public purse from young people remaining persistently trapped in the NEET

category over the course of their lives. We cannot afford that haemorrhaging of vital resource to continue any longer.

Tackling the root of the issue is not the job of a single Department or organisation, as the Executive have recognised. It requires a cross-departmental approach. The Department for Learning and Employment (DEL) will take the lead, but the issue cannot be just a school, health, welfare or employer strategy: it truly belongs to everyone in our society. Indeed, a clear message of Pathways to Success is that young people have a stake and are part of the solution.

In taking forward the strategy, we want to continue to work with young people and their representatives, and add their voice to the process of delivery and implementation. That is not just my commitment, it is the Executive's. The strategy will be a key plank of the Delivering Social Change framework to achieve a sustained, long-term reduction in poverty and an improvement in children and young people's health, well-being and life opportunities.

The strategy's overall aspiration is that, by 2020:

"Every young person will not only have an opportunity to access education, training or other preparation for employment but, to the extent that they are able, they will also avail of that opportunity."

The strategy will deliver that vision through a three-tier package of measures aimed at preventing young people from missing opportunities for education and training and/or becoming unemployed; helping young people aged 16 to 18, especially those facing barriers; and assisting unemployed young people aged 18 to 24 more generally.

To deliver that package, the strategy contains measures to improve leadership and co-ordination, preventative measures being taken across Departments, measures to re-engage 16- to 18-year-olds; measures to re-engage 18- to 24-year-olds; and further supporting measures to be taken across Departments. It also sets out a number of key supporting measures to ensure that we can identify our young people's needs and match them with opportunities to meet those needs.

I will now outline a number of the main measures, for which I am directly responsible, that will contribute significantly towards the achievement of this vision. I have recognised that the Careers Service has a key role to play in supporting young people to develop effective career plans and signposting them to provision that meets their needs. To that end the Careers Service, using information available from schools, colleges, Training for Success providers and other training programmes, will case manage those young people aged 16 and 17 who drop out of provision or do not have a positive destination when they leave school. In addition, work is under way to improve the flow of information between schools and the Careers Service to help identify young people at an early age who are at risk of becoming NEET.

There is also a clear need to develop an identification and tracking system. DEL has already commissioned research to scope the potential for a Northern Ireland tracking system for young people who are in or who might enter the NEET category. I intend to have a tracking system in place by 2014. Such a system will track a young person's progress and interactions with various Departments and

agencies. It will allow all stakeholders to learn more about their particular client group and will have benefits for all concerned.

We will ensure significantly better co-ordination than there has been, and we will work to identify and meet the needs of young people as early as possible. Early interventions also involve a range of other Government services. Education is obviously one key component in ensuring that young people progress and engage further in education, employment or training. Early years provision, measures to improve educational attainment and literacy and numeracy, and raising standards in schools are of particular importance in addressing the needs of such young people.

The further development and implementation of a number of cross-departmental strategies and initiatives designed to address the needs of vulnerable children and young people and tackle barriers associated with their health and general well-being are also important. I plan to introduce a new community family support programme, which will focus on the needs of the most disadvantaged families to enable young people to re-engage with education, training or employment.

I envisage that the programme will provide support including: tackling family issues such as support for parenting and role models; support for needs that children may have and working with schools; social and economic issues, including debt management, essential skills in literacy, numeracy and ICT, money management and how to look for work; health and housing issues such as alcohol or drug abuse, co-working with health agencies, and issues around accommodation; helping those who are in work to stay in work and helping those not in work to develop skills to find work, such as writing CVs, preparation for jobs, timekeeping, and developing problem-solving skills; and identifying suitable employment opportunities.

Such a programme will require involvement from a range of Departments, including the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department for Social Development, the Department of Education (DE) and the Department for Employment and Learning. The objective is to pilot it in 2013 and, subject to evaluation and resources, to mainstream it thereafter. This initiative would support the development of hubs for resources for the child and family and the introduction of family support nurses. This work is also being taken forward under the Delivering Social Change children and young people programme.

I will now turn to measures specifically for 16- to 18-year-olds. Although it is clear that current DEL and DE provision is comprehensive and the overall level of activity is demand led, current provision may not fully meet the needs of some of our most vulnerable young people. The consultation exercise and the Committee for Employment and Learning's inquiry highlighted in particular the importance of effective signposting and the key difference that a mentoring approach could make in ensuring that young people become and remain engaged throughout the progression from education to employment and training.

12.15 pm

Although much of what follows is intended to be additional to existing provision, many programmes and strategies, such as essential skills provision, the Training for Success

programme and courses at further education colleges are also highly relevant, in addition to the role of the Careers Service, as I mentioned.

The programme envisaged will consist of four key new measures to assist those young people with barriers who are furthest away from the labour market. Those are a community-based access programme; further promoting the development of individual action plans; the introduction of a training allowance for young people participating on existing European social fund programmes targeted at those who are NEET; and the development of an innovation fund to test new approaches based on sound evidence.

The community-based access programme will engage and mentor young people using community and voluntary sector organisations. The organisations will provide continuity of support for young people to engage or re-engage with learning and to progress through mainstream training provision into employment. Individual action plans will be introduced for 16- to 18-year-olds participating in the community-based access programme. That will mean that a young person can have a personalised plan that identifies his or her individual starting point and needs, and can plot a pathway through education or training to employment.

During the consultation period and thereafter, concern was expressed, including during a debate in this House, at the lack of access to educational maintenance allowance by young people participating on certain programmes targeted at the hardest to reach, when there are allowance schemes for young people at school, in further education and on Training for Success. I considered that issue, and I plan to introduce a training allowance for 16- and 17-year-olds participating on existing programmes funded by the European social fund and targeted at those who are NEET. That allowance will be designed to ensure that there are effective incentives in place for young people to progress from provision that re-engages them with learning to education and training programmes that provide the skills and qualifications to support moving into, and success in, work.

An innovation fund to test new approaches based on sound evidence would be aimed at piloting a range of other approaches to re-engage those young people in the NEET category. That could facilitate further testing of approaches, such as a work-based mentoring service, primarily with small employers, aimed at disengaged 16- to 17-year-olds not participating in Training for Success.

Turning to the interventions planned for 18- to 24-year-olds, the specific aim is to help that group to gain work experience, develop additional skills and achieve recognised relevant qualifications needed by those sectors that have the potential for further growth with regard to jobs and gross value added growth. The focus is on early intervention for those young people who have reached the age where they may be eligible for social security benefits. Members will be aware that a separate package of measures that I put forward to address youth unemployment was accepted by the Executive. Those measures are reflected in the NEET strategy.

The core elements of any new youth unemployment programme will include early intensive diagnosis of employability skills; opportunities for taster work experience

for clients while on benefits; individual skills and career-focused assessments; sector-based work experience and training in areas of skills shortage; a new employer subsidy for up to one year; a new emphasis on continuing skills development and growth; and a range of new measures to help young people not in education, employment or training.

Those measures will be additional to existing provision by being targeted at skills development for economic growth. It is important to acknowledge that the measures are informed by local needs and circumstances as well as best practice from other jurisdictions, including Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. The measures will mean that due to earlier intervention than is currently offered, skills development can begin after 13 weeks of a benefit claim rather than at 26 weeks, which is the current mandatory trigger for entry to Steps to Work for 18- to 24-year-olds.

The new measures will make provision for job-ready young people who, but for the current economic situation, would be in work and for those who are some distance from the labour market and require considerable support to address their barriers. I am also planning to include what I will refer to as a skills premium for employers: a training grant of up to £750 to assist employers offering full-time jobs with formal training costs or £300 for shorter training on accredited courses.

I have been engaging with the Finance Minister on resourcing the new initiatives. It is important to stress that, whether the additional resources are for the specific youth unemployment measures for Northern Ireland or other elements in the NEET strategy, the necessary financing decisions are matters for the Finance Minister to recommend and for the Executive to agree. Once the resourcing for the new youth unemployment measures has been agreed and the policy subsequently finalised, I will make a fuller statement to the Assembly on these particular matters.

In conclusion, we are not starting afresh in tackling these issues. All Departments already have strategies and policies in place or are working on their development, which have as their focus improving the life chances of individuals who are faced with disadvantage or barriers that prevent them from leading productive lives or from reaching their full potential. This strategy brings added value. First, it will better co-ordinate the existing and future actions of Departments. Secondly, it includes a number of new initiatives, which I have just outlined.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his statement on this very important issue. Minister, you mentioned that effective incentives for young people will be in place. Can you outline what incentives will be in place for employers to facilitate the training of these young people? Can you elaborate on your desire for in-house training schemes supported by your Department? Those would free employers to not necessarily be committed to an alliance with colleges, which they currently have?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. He raises a number of issues. First, we are focusing on getting people re-engaged and, potentially, going into the world of work with particular incentives. I draw particular attention to the training allowance. That has been raised by a number of Members, and we have responded to that and plan to

proceed. It is also about working with young people to give them a sense of understanding of the opportunities that are available to them and to encourage them to engage with the existing provision or some of the new projects that I outlined.

Employers recognise the importance of including young people, and, indeed, as many people as possible in the labour market. We all have self-interest in ensuring that we are maximising the human resources available to our economy. Businesses understand that as well as anyone else. Particularly in the new youth unemployment measures that we are hopefully going to proceed with, there will be a number of incentives for employers, including for some resources up front to help with things such as uniforms and what may be quite significant employer subsidies to encourage them to take people on. Often, employers will say that they are considering taking someone on but that it is sometimes too much of a financial risk to do so. We hope to break that vicious circle by providing that employer with a subsidy.

Finally, the Member mentioned training. We are very open to whether the training takes place off site or on site, and the key issue is that it should be accredited to give people some record of achievement and something that can be transferred. We are happy to work with people in whatever setting is most appropriate for them.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement, because the issue has exercised the time and mind of the Employment and Learning Committee for a long time. The Minister referred to the introduction of a new, community family support programme. What extent of contact is there already on this between the various Departments, including the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department for Social Development, the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning? The Minister said that it will require involvement from those Departments, but can he give a sense of the extent of contact already between those Departments? How much, typically, will a training allowance for 16- to 18-year-olds amount to?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his welcome. There already is good collaboration between Departments, and we all recognise that. However, equally, we recognise that we can do more, and we are forever striving for better joined-up government. I believe that people are committed to that.

I draw attention to work that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will do on child poverty, which will dovetail very well with this. A lot of what we are doing will sit very neatly with the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people and is part of that wider delivering social change architecture, which my Department and all the other Departments are very freely engaging with.

The Member asked about the level of the training allowance. At this stage, subject to resourcing, we anticipate that it will be somewhere in the range of £20 to £25 a week, and the rationale for that is to create an incentive for progression. We will want people to access the European social fund programmes and maximise participation, and we also want to make sure that that is not the end point for people and that they can move on to engage with other programmes,

achieve higher-level qualifications and move up that skills ladder to maximise their chances of getting into work and finding secure and sustainable employment.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his statement, which is a very welcome indication of the Executive's focus on NEETs. As a former member of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I recognise how important that is. Can the Minister outline how the strategy will be financed? Has he submitted a business case to the Minister of Finance and Personnel? What is the likely time frame for that?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her question and her welcome of the strategy. It very much is a cross-Executive strategy, and it certainly is a priority for the Executive, just as it is a priority for the whole Assembly.

We are very mindful of the need for resources where we need resources, but, before going into the detail of that, I stress that, in some respects, this may facilitate better working without the influx of a lot of new resources. We also need to be conscious of using what we have much more efficiently and effectively, and a strategy such as this can bring real added value. We have submitted a full business case on youth unemployment and on aspects of NEETs to the Minister of Finance. Obviously, it is up to him to deliberate on that and make recommendations to the Executive. Once they are approved by the Executive and announced, potentially as part of a monitoring round, I will come back to the House and make a fuller statement on exactly how the resources will impact on our ability to move ahead with the specific NEET issues and the youth unemployment measures in a more general sense.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for bringing forward the NEETs strategy today; it is welcome. I commend the Minister. It has taken a long time for the Executive to come forward with that.

The Minister said that the tracking system will be in place by 2014. It is over two years since the Committee for Employment and Learning carried out a very exhaustive inquiry, one of the key elements of which was the deliberation on that, and everybody who participated in the consultation clearly stated that there has to be a tracking mechanism in place. Why has it taken another three years to put in place a tracking mechanism to show where our young people are going? There is a lot of emigration, and it is necessary, Minister, for you to look at this again. It is far too long down the line.

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Ramsey for his general welcome of the strategy. We are committed to introducing a tracking system. There is no ambiguity with that: it will happen.

12.30 pm

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

There are various bureaucratic issues around data sharing to be overcome, such as how we get around interpretations of data protection. As well as that, there are, potentially, some legislative issues that we may need to explore. That is the creation of the formal tracking system. Separate from that, of course, there is scope for the exchange of information between Departments and agencies without the formal tracking system being fully operational. That

can happen in any event and will be accelerated from now. Members should be in no doubt that this will happen and will be in place by 2014 or sooner, if we can do that.

Mr Lyttle: I also welcome the statement and the strategic and practical response that it lays out to one of the key challenges that we face in getting education, training and employment opportunities for our young people at this challenging time. I particularly welcome the additional training allowance for the hardest-to-reach young people. I know that that will be welcomed by many people across organisations that work in this area. Given that one of the Committee inquiry's key recommendations was that the strategy had to be cross-departmental and that OFMDFM, therefore, should have a significant involvement, how has OFMDFM, in its correspondence, suggested taking this forward in the absence of a Department for Employment and Learning?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his general welcome and for throwing me that ever-so-subtle curve ball. There are a number of things to say. First, on the status quo of the Departments, my Department, as is, is very happy to lead on this and will continue to do so. However, it will also be placed in the context of the wider architecture that exists, including the Executive subcommittee on children and young people. It is also very much part of the wider Delivering Social Change agenda, as put forward by OFMDFM. Essentially, OFMDFM is a co-ordinating Department rather than a main delivery Department. However, it is important that we avail ourselves of existing ministerial subcommittees to ensure that all Ministers are actively engaged in implementing the strategy and are sitting round the table to hold each other to account for the delivery of the various targets.

Looking to the future, it is important that we appreciate that dealing with NEETs is both an economic and a social issue and that it primarily applies to over-16s. So, we need to take some care in ensuring that there is a proper, dedicated focus on the issue. Regardless of whether departmental structures are subject to minor reforms or more widespread reforms down the line, we must ensure that we have that clear focus on what is a very important issue for this society.

Mr Ross: I am sure that most Members will agree that prevention is better than cure. To that extent, early identification and intervention, with a focus on early years education, are extremely important.

I return to the tracking system. The Minister mentioned some of the concerns that there may be around data protection and things like that. How does the Minister envisage it working? What practical interventions does he believe could be made, once it is established which young people are at risk of going into the NEET category?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his questions. He, rightly, referred to the importance of prevention and early intervention. In the earliest sense, you can apply that to what happens in the education system and to what we do when people leave school at 16. That is why we put so much emphasis on how we can use a strengthened careers service to engage with young people; how we can put mentoring and family support in place; and how we can take through the signposting. We are also talking about individual

careers advisers staying with the same young person from the ages of 16 to 17 to provide that continuity in support.

The Member also mentioned tracking, which is absolutely central to moving this forward. Data will come from a number of sources. Essentially, we want to match that data so that we can see someone moving through the system from early years to post-16 provision. At present, primary-school pupils get a particular identification number. That number does not stay with them when they move into post-16 training, so we end up with a wholly new set of records. We are trying to integrate the records between the different levels of intervention so that we can properly map how someone's life and life chances evolve over time.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. I also welcome the extension of EMA, which many have called for for quite a while.

Page 5 of the Minister's statement refers to "a community based access programme" and:

"promoting the development of individual action plans".

As the Minister is aware, a substantial number of people have been bypassed at community level. There are neighbourhood renewal partnerships spread across the region. How will they be dealt with? Will they be used as levers to try to encourage people to take part in the new system?

I will get another one in. Will there be any financial enhancement for 18-year-olds to 24-year-olds to take part in the schemes?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his questions, and I will try to remember all three. First, to be clear, this is not, strictly speaking, an extension of EMA. If Members recall, we had a debate in the Assembly on EMA, during which Members called for its extension. During that debate, I said that there would be legal difficulties in extending EMA away from what it was originally designed for, to support people in schools and FE colleges, to encompass a range of purposes. I also said that we would potentially look at trying to find equivalent support through other means. This is a training allowance, and it is important that we do not cross the line and call it EMA. For example, it will not be part of the future review of the EMA policy, which my Department and the Department of Education will take forward. It is entirely separate.

We recognise that the community is often better placed than the state to deal with some of these issues. The state will have a comprehensive range of programmes, but there will be gaps, and the community is often better placed to engage with people. The precise provision may have to be decided through procurement exercises. Obviously, things become a bit more bureaucratic with that approach, but, to be fair to everyone, we may need to go down that route. It is about trying to be as hands-on with young people as possible by using those who are best placed to interact with them.

Finally, I think that many young people are extremely eager to engage in work experience. They know that the employability skills that that experience will bring are vital to their competitiveness in a very difficult job market. Many

young people are trapped: they cannot get a job without experience, and they cannot get experience without a job. This is there to break that cycle. Young people will remain on benefits while they participate in the programme, but there will be incentives for employers to take people on.

I would stress that this is not the same as the scheme in England, about which there were many headlines and much controversy earlier this year. It is entirely different and qualitatively different. Furthermore, no sanctions will be applied to young people if they fail to participate in the programme. It is designed to be purely voluntary.

At the top of the scale, we anticipate about 6,000 placements over the next number of years. Regrettably, I imagine that the demand in this society will probably outstretch the supply that we will be able to put in place. However, there is a commitment from me and, hopefully, in due course from the Executive to push as many opportunities in front of young people as we can within the available resources.

Mr Douglas: I also welcome the statement and thank the Minister for it. In the past, the Minister has mentioned the role of the community and voluntary sector. He has also paid tribute to that sector as he did again today. The Minister also mentioned incentives for businesses. What incentives has he in mind to involve the community and voluntary sector? I am thinking along the lines of what happened in the past, when the Step Ahead and Steps to Work programmes, for example, placed some of the young people in community and voluntary organisations.

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. Resources will be available for this, but their scope is still to be determined. I referred to the potential for public procurement around all of this. It is important that we all understand the need for incentives and for a sense of responsibility. Everyone, whether in the community or in business, must appreciate the importance of investing in our young people. The economic cost of not doing that is considerable. If someone gets trapped in unemployment, even for a couple of years, their risk of being unemployed for most of their life is significantly increased. That creates a cost for society in additional benefits and support services. As a Government, we have an incentive to get this right, as does the community sector. Business has an incentive to cater to the future needs of our economy and make sure that we have a skilled workforce that can take up the jobs that will come along. So, certainly, we envisage a partnership approach, and structures will be put in place to implement the strategy and bring together all the sectors in an advisory group for the NEETs strategy.

Mr McCarthy: I also thank the Minister for bringing this important subject, the NEETs strategy, to the Assembly. Let me say how disgusted I am that, because of a cynical political carve-up by OFMDFM, this important Department will be abolished. It is a shame and disgrace that this young, energetic and progressive Minister will be denied the opportunity to see this strategy through to a successful conclusion.*[Interruption.]* If some people feel guilty, so be it.

Minister, how do the present divisions in society impact on the problem of young people not in education, employment or training?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question and introduction — I assure the House that I had no hand in writing it.

Obviously, the nature of our society, particularly the divisions in it, impacts on people's life chances. It impacts on the number affected and the nature of our NEETs problem. There are clear linkages between deprivation and the nature of the divisions on the ground. I hope that the parallel efforts that the Executive can take forward will help in some of those respects. Equally, we recognise that division is a factor historically and currently in creating the context for the problem that we are dealing with in Northern Ireland. NEETS is also a global problem, and we can learn lessons from how other jurisdictions have dealt with it. In due course, there may be lessons that others want to learn from us, if we get the strategy right and roll it out effectively.

Mr Allister: Given that, today, four Sinn Féin MPs announced that they are resigning from the Assembly, I was tempted to ask the Minister whether he had any measures in mind for those at a loose end who refuse to go to the place of employment available to them.

On that theme, there are many incentives — many carrots — in this package, and that is good. However, is there any stick to deal with those who may be recalcitrant or reluctant to engage and may be looking for the handout, if we can call it that, but unwilling to make the return? Is there any stick at all in the package?

12.45 pm

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Allister for his question. I will pass over his introduction. I stress that we are going for a sanctions-light or nil-sanctions approach in this or indeed any other context.

Earlier this year, there was a lot of controversy around sanctions in some of the programmes in England, and that detracted enormously from the importance of the schemes. Whether it was eventually government or businesses, the sanctions were a major distraction. I have no doubt whatsoever that a voluntary scheme, with an incentive for people to go on to it, will be effective, and that is all that we need. Some people may be trapped in benefits, and some of the more positive aspects of universal credit will address some of that. Most young people want to have opportunities. For whatever reason, whether it is a lack of opportunities, barriers that have been thrown up in their life or barriers that they face for other reasons, they have been prevented from availing themselves of those opportunities. I hope that the NEETs strategy will unlock those doors and ensure that the young people will be able to have a more productive life and live up to their potential and that society will benefit from their contribution to the economy.

Mr Copeland: I, too, welcome the Minister's acknowledgement that we have a situation. He repeatedly used the word "problem", which I have a difficulty with, as it impugns the young people involved by implying that they are a problem. It is not that they are a problem; it is the damnable situation that they find themselves in. He has, at least, tried to address it. Will he elaborate, if at all possible, on the pilot scheme that he sees as a necessary part of this? I seek an assurance that the pilot scheme will be based in areas where it is most likely to be of use. That, in my view, is in urban areas of Belfast, particularly

east Belfast, where these difficulties affect young people of a certain age, regardless of race, religion, colour, creed or gender. I draw to the Minister's attention the magnificent work being done by the Gerry Rogan Initiative Trust and the Bytes project at its locations in the Short Strand district of east Belfast and the Tullycarnet area of Castlereagh.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think that the Member has asked the question.

Mr Copeland: That was the question. Can the Minister elaborate and assure me that the pilot project will be focused where there are areas of need and where most work needs to be done?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Copeland for his question. I stress that, in so far as we use the word "problem", we are talking about a problem in the wider sense — a problem for society, rather than the young people themselves being the problem. I alluded to that, to an extent, in my answer to Mr Allister.

With regard to pilots, I note the pitch that the Member made for his constituency. I do not want to give him any direct commitments, because I fear that some of our colleagues from more rural areas will also make a pitch for some of their particular context. However, it is a general rule in government that there is little point running a pilot in an easy area. The results that you gain from that may not necessarily translate across to the more difficult areas for the design of the more mainstream project. Therefore, if we are to have effective mainstream policy, it makes much more sense to pilot those in some of the more difficult and challenging circumstances to ensure that we know that whatever we mainstream will be fit for purpose.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Minister for his statement. Given the fact that there are well over 40,000 young people not in education, employment or training, what specific targets will he introduce to try to reduce that figure?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. At this stage, we are not setting a precise figure for the reduction in NEETs. Members will appreciate that it is a multifaceted problem. Much of it will reflect the flow of our labour market and levels of unemployment, which reflect the demand side of our economy. I stress that our overall figures for unemployment in Northern Ireland have been stabilising over the past number of years and, in particular, the past year and that our situation is moving in a more benign direction than that in other parts of the UK. So, things are turning around. That is not to underestimate, in any sense, the scale of the problem that we have in Northern Ireland with NEETs. Our baseline for NEETs is much higher than in virtually any other part of the UK. I think that Wales has a higher baseline problem than we have, but, historically, it has been a significant issue for us.

I stress that this is a priority for the Executive and the Assembly. We are taking this extremely seriously, and the strategy is an indication of that. Ultimately, it will not be a document that sits on a shelf. The strategy will be actively pursued, whether that is by me or somebody else, over the months and years to come.

Executive Committee Business

Financial Services Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

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

That this Assembly agrees that the provisions in Part 3 of the Financial Services Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons on 10 May 2012, dealing with the transfer of functions in relation to mutual societies should be considered by the UK Parliament.

We are here again today to consider the ongoing reform of the Northern Ireland credit unions. Members will recall that I addressed the House very recently on the issue, which is of key importance to individuals and communities across Northern Ireland. The enthusiasm and support from my fellow Members for continued reform of the sector was very evident on that occasion. Like the rest of my colleagues, I am keen that the reform process continues and credit unions are able to fulfil their potential.

Following on from all the good work carried out to date, the next immediate step in the reform programme will be to permit the transfer of the registration of credit unions from my Department to the Financial Services Authority (FSA) or its successor body. One recommendation of the 2009 ETI Committee report on the reform of credit unions was that registration of Northern Ireland credit unions should remain in DETI. However, in discussions on the progress of credit union reform between my Department, Her Majesty's Treasury and the FSA, it became increasingly evident that no tangible benefits would result from registration remaining with my Department and that a possible move of Great Britain registration from the FSA could lead to the further division of responsibilities. In essence, registration is administrative in nature, and, in practice, a separate Northern Ireland-specific registrar would be unlikely to have any role or power that could be exercised independently of the regulator in Great Britain. Any benefits of maintaining registration in Northern Ireland are largely perceived rather than actual and are outweighed by the associated administrative costs and confusion that the arrangements could cause for our local credit unions.

In March 2010, a joint HM Treasury/DETI consultation considered the transfer of regulation and registration from Northern Ireland to Great Britain. Following that consultation, I wrote to the Chairperson of the ETI Committee to advise him that it would be in the best interests of the Northern Ireland credit union movement as a whole if responsibility for registration and regulation were transferred to the FSA or its successor. Following agreement from the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, draft relevant Northern Ireland clauses were included in the Financial Services Bill, which is currently making its passage through the House of Lords. The proposed Northern Ireland-specific clauses will allow HM Treasury, by order, to enable the transfer of the function of registrar of Northern Ireland credit unions to one or more of the successor bodies of the FSA.

As Members are aware, I very much recognise the importance of a thriving and growing credit union sector. Recent reforms have placed credit unions in Northern Ireland on a more secure footing. I intend to build on the

good work already done and continue the reform process by introducing a Northern Ireland Bill that will remove restrictions on Northern Ireland credit unions, permitting them to expand their range of activities and reach out to new groups. Therefore, I now seek the Assembly's consent to Parliament legislating for the transfer of the registrar of credit unions from my Department to the appropriate UK authority. If the opportunity to avail ourselves of the provisions in the Financial Services Bill is missed, there may be a negative impact on the ongoing reform of our local credit unions, subjecting the sector to uncertainty and creating duplication.

I must make it clear that the Northern Ireland provisions in the UK Financial Services Bill will facilitate the transfer of Northern Ireland credit union registration. The actual transfer of the function of registrar will be completed by way of a Westminster order in due course.

I am confident that the step of facilitating the transfer of registration of credit unions to the appropriate UK authority, following the successful transfer of regulation, is a logical step in the reform process and will help to ensure that the local sector is best placed to benefit from future reforms. Passing this legislative consent motion, therefore, will send a signal to our local credit unions that the Assembly is committed to completing the reform process in as timely and efficient a manner as possible.

Mr A Maginness (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I welcome the motion, which is timely and helpful in continuing the process of reforming credit unions in Northern Ireland. It is another step on the journey to permitting credit unions in Northern Ireland to expand their range of services to their clients throughout Northern Ireland in a fashion similar to that of credit unions in Britain and the Irish Republic. As Chair of the Committee, I welcome the motion and hope that it will pass without any difficulty.

Following the inquiry into credit unions by the previous Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department and the Treasury agreed to reform credit unions in Northern Ireland to enable them to provide a similar range of services to their counterparts in Britain. The transfer of functions will be the first step in enabling the recommendations from that inquiry to be implemented. The previous Committee and the current Committee, which I chair, have closely followed and scrutinised developments as progress has been made. The Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee is very supportive of the process of reform of the credit unions.

The Irish League of Credit Unions and the Ulster Federation of Credit Unions had concerns about a number of proposals originally brought forward by the Treasury. However, in her statement to the Assembly on 22 May, the Minister outlined how many of the concerns of the Committee and the credit union representative bodies had been addressed. She also outlined a package of financial support to assist the credit union movement through the transition from regulation by DETI to regulation by the Financial Services Authority. That is to be welcomed. I know that the credit unions are pleased with that progress.

There remains one outstanding issue to be addressed. The previous Committee recommended that credit unions

be permitted to reinvest a proportion of their assets in community development projects. The Minister has advised the Committee that legal intervention at Northern Ireland level, along with the prior consent of the FSA, would be required in order to implement that recommendation.

The Committee agreed to receive oral evidence from the Financial Services Authority, the Irish League of Credit Unions and the Ulster Federation of Credit Unions after the summer recess to scrutinise the implementation of the new arrangements and to explore options to permit the reinvestment of credit union assets in community development projects through the proposed Northern Ireland credit union Bill. We look forward to a provision in the Bill that would address that issue.

Having carefully considered the options for extending the range of services offered by Northern Ireland credit unions and the proposals from the Treasury in London, the Committee is of the view that the legislative consent motion, coupled with the forthcoming Northern Ireland credit union Bill, is the best available means of enabling Northern Ireland credit unions to extend their range of services in line with the recommendations from the inquiry of the previous Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

The Committee, therefore, supports DETI in seeking the Assembly's endorsement of the legislative consent motion.

1.00 pm

Mr Newton: Like the Chairman of the Committee, I support the motion. I declare an interest as a long-term member of a credit union. Recent experiences of mutual societies, at least in part, brought the necessity for this legislation to a head, but, in many ways, the experience of credit unions has been such that many of them had already recognised the need for change.

In my experience of talking to members or officers of credit unions, I have found that they recognise the potential of credit unions. The legislation and the way that the Minister has handled it also recognises that potential and shows that the Minister wishes to provide opportunities for credit unions in the future. It is true to say that the Minister picked up on the matters that arose with a great deal of diligence and hard work. As the Chairman said, as the evidence was being sought and witnesses were coming forward, every member of the Committee began to realise the seriousness of the situation and the need to bring about change.

I am extremely pleased that the Minister has recognised that there is a need to do away with or minimise the amount of bureaucracy. Allowing the registration to be with the FSA rather than with her Department will lead to a smoother and more professional relationship than if there were two bodies involved. I am sure that the Minister hopes that that will not mean that her Department will step back completely; there may be some advice, at least, from her officials as we go through this area of change. The Minister recognised the important role of the FSA. The general credit union movement recognises the role of the FSA and the need to address all the problems that have occurred in the past.

I welcome the motion and welcome the steps that the Minister is taking to minimise what might have been a more bureaucratic approach. As the credit unions develop their expertise, the valuable work that is done by the credit union

movement and its members will benefit the entire Northern Ireland community. I welcome the legislation.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, welcome today's motion. Hopefully, it is another step towards credit unions providing a wider range of financial services for customers. We have been debating the issue since about 2008, so it is good to see it moving forward. When most people here talk about credit unions, they say that they are community based and have the potential to help hard-pressed families and businesses that would not normally have access to finance from services such as banks or other financial institutions. Therefore, the new proposals allow for community organisations and groups to be members. I particularly welcome the fact that businesses from the social economy sector will also, hopefully, be allowed to become members. That will make a positive contribution not just to the economy but to areas in need of regeneration.

I know that this has already been mentioned, but the credit unions had concerns about a number of areas when this first came through. The main concerns were about the limits on the investment period, the provision for bad debt and the need for measures to help with the additional management and the administrative burden. I know that the Committee raised those issues and that my colleague Pat Doherty raised them with the British Treasury. It is good to see this moving on and some of those concerns being listened to.

As has been said, the ability to reinvest in local community development and community enterprises is very important for credit unions. I know that the Minister said in a statement here a few weeks ago that she will take that concern on board. Although there is support for the motion today, I ask the Minister to ensure that credit union reform is progressed as quickly as possible and that reinvestment in community projects is looked at and progressed as well.

Mrs Overend: I also welcome the opportunity to support the motion. The Financial Services Bill had its first reading in the House of Commons on 10 May 2012. The general purpose of the Bill is to make amendments to the Bank of England Act 1998, the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, and the Banking Act 2009, as well as to make various other provisions regarding the financial services, markets, building societies and other mutual societies.

Part 3 of the Bill is what is important to us today, as it deals with mutual societies and, specifically, the transfer of functions, with credit unions here now coming under the regulation of the Financial Services Authority. The Minister has stated previously in the House that the relevant Northern Ireland clauses in the Financial Services Bill would permit Her Majesty's Treasury, by order, to enable the transfer of the function of registrar of credit unions for Northern Ireland to one or more of the successor bodies to the Financial Services Authority. It is important that those clauses be included in the Bill, and the motion is fundamental in that regard.

The House has spoken before of the benefits of FSA regulation for local credit unions. They play an important role for many in Northern Ireland, and it is essential that they be given the most appropriate legislative framework. I commend the Minister for the work she has undertaken in

the reform of credit unions to date. For the reasons outlined, I support the motion.

Mr Dickson: The Alliance Party also supports the motion, but we have some sympathy with credit unions, which will find some of these changes very difficult. However, in light of the situation with the Presbyterian Mutual Society, we can see the need for greater protection for investors and welcome the protection that this change will bring.

With regard to protection for investors, all credit unions must have in place a business plan, policies and procedures manuals, a documentation system of control, a liquidity management policy statement and a lending policy statement. In addition, version 2 credit unions must have in place financial risk management policy statements that are tailored to the credit union's circumstances and the specific risks that it faces. That will enable investors to have clear information on the institutions in which they are placing their money.

We note that Northern Ireland credit unions have until January 2013 to produce those documents, and we welcome that lead-in time. It is important that credit unions be given support during the transition phase, particularly smaller, local credit unions that may initially find the greater level of bureaucracy and rules overbearing and difficult to cope with. I trust that the Minister will ensure that there is no hesitation in providing the necessary support until January 2013.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for the detail that she presented before us and, indeed, for her efforts on behalf of credit unions, through her input to the legislation.

In this, the United Nations International Year of Cooperatives, mutual societies should have something to celebrate. However, there is a concern — this has been reflected in the debate so far — about the rapid and widespread change that the sector is being put through. There is little doubt that the regulatory framework needed reform. Indeed, the collapse of the Presbyterian Mutual Society stands out as an example of the failure of light-touch regulation under the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. The UK Parliament's Treasury Committee was severely critical of the Department's failure to identify the problem sooner and its failure to take preventative action.

The reality now is that, having rescued the majority of the finances required for the PMS rescue fund, albeit mostly in the form of a loan under the reinvestment and reform initiative, the UK Treasury has taken responsibility for the regulation of mutual societies in Northern Ireland away from the registry of credit unions under the Department and placed it with the Financial Services Authority. That process was completed on 31 March 2012. A few months later the regulatory framework is being altered again. A further consolidation Bill is planned, bringing together a series of nearly 20 Bills or Acts of Parliament relating to co-operatives and mutual societies.

The Financial Services Bill seeks to replace the previous regulatory framework across the entire financial services industry, not just mutual societies. The previous tripartite structure was put in place by the Labour Government and failed to properly regulate the industry. It, too, clearly needed

to be reformed. The Bill will abolish the FSA and create three new bodies to regulate financial services: the financial policy committee, the prudential regulation authority within the Bank of England and the financial conduct authority.

The Bill is now nearing completion of its detailed passage through the UK Parliament. It has been the subject of much debate and attempted amendments during that journey. It has been criticised by the Treasury Select Committee as defective, in particular in regard to the accountability of the new supervisory authorities. My party colleague the Member of Parliament for Foyle, Mark Durkan, has been actively involved in constructive criticism of the Bill in both the Treasury Committee and the Commons debates. He has pointed out in those debates that in the credit union movement in Northern Ireland, there is some disappointment about the impact of the new regulations. Those are seen as a backward step that restricts existing credit union capacity to make sound investment choices.

Credit unions may look forward to being able to offer a wider and better range of services, but they are somewhat disappointed that the price of the new regulatory system is that they will be restricted in making the kind of sensible investment decisions for their members that they have a strong and very successful track record of making. It is well established here in Northern Ireland that credit unions have that record.

Additionally, included in the Financial Services Bill is a clause that states:

"The Treasury may by order amend the legislation relating to mutual societies for any of the relevant purposes."

Credit unions and other mutual societies would be right to be concerned at such permissive legislation. The Bill's explanatory note adds:

"Orders may also provide for functions of a Northern Ireland department and of the Registrar of Credit Unions under the Industrial and Provident Societies Act (Northern Ireland) 1969 and the Credit Unions (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 to be transferred to the FCA".

Having relinquished responsibility for the regulation of mutual societies, there seems little to be gained now by parties pretending to object to the UK Parliament's consideration of the reform proposals in the Financial Services Bill. The time to object was during the negotiations with the UK Treasury. However, the SDLP looks forward to a time when we all have the confidence in the Executive and the Assembly to deal with these matters ourselves, but we welcome the proposals being brought forward today by the Minister.

Mr Agnew: I declare an interest as a member of my local credit union. I support the legislative consent motion. We are well aware of the importance of credit unions, particularly now, given the reaction to the irresponsible lending by banks. This is a responsible model of lending, which benefits the community rather than the profits of shareholders.

I welcome the work of the Minister and her Department in raising the various concerns that our local credit unions had about the original proposals in the Bill, her engagement with the credit union movement and her representations

to the UK Government. Indeed, as the Chair outlined, the Committee has also made written representations to the Government, and we have seen substantial changes made, and that is to be welcomed.

1.15 pm

Others have expressed concern about the potential difficulties for local credit unions in coming to terms with the new regulatory framework. The Minister is obviously well aware of those concerns. I think I am right in saying that she is considering financial support for our credit unions. That support is currently absent — they do not receive the support that is available in GB. I urge the Minister to do what she can to give financial support to our credit unions. I am well aware that the Department is engaging with credit unions to help give them direct training and support in coming to terms with the new regulations. Like others, I look forward to the forthcoming credit unions Bill. I hope it will ensure that our legislation will be up to date and up to speed subsequent to the UK Parliament's regulations.

For the Minister and the House's information: the all-party group on co-operatives and mutuals, of which I am chair, will meet in September to discuss the co-operative and mutual models of finance. I invite all those who are interested to attend that meeting, the details of which will be passed on when finalised.

Mrs Foster: I thank all the Members who spoke to and supported the motion today. I specifically thank my colleagues in the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Business Committee for their consideration of the matter in such a timely fashion, which has allowed for the motion to be on the Order Paper today. I appreciate the positive manner in which the issue has been dealt with and the agreement from all sides of the House.

I will address the points that were raised. The Chair of the Committee indicated that this was another step on the journey of credit union reform. That is exactly what it is. It will allow us to move on to the next step, which will happen in this House. He suggested allowing credit unions to reinvest a proportion of their assets, as did Ms McCann. That issue will be included in the statutory consultation that will inform the Bill for Northern Ireland that will come before this House for consideration. We talked about the timescales during my statement on 22 May, and it is my hope that we can move as quickly as possible to bring that Bill forward. We have to go through the appropriate statutory consultation, and that sometimes holds things back a little.

Mr Newton referred to recent experiences in relation to mutual societies. Mr Dickson mentioned the PMS by name, and Mr McGlone also talked about the Presbyterian Mutual Society. It is important to make this differentiation: before 31 March 2012, credit unions were registered and regulated by the Department. When the legislation came through at the end of March, regulation transferred to GB. The purpose behind this legislative consent motion is to transfer the registration of credit unions as well, because we want to keep both elements together.

DETI had the registration function for the PMS in the past, but it did not have a regulation function. That is where the whole debate and confusion about registration and regulation has come from. In fact, I think that, if anything, the PMS situation points to the fact that registration and

regulation should be together to avoid any confusion for those organisations that are subject to registration and regulation. That will help to minimise bureaucracy, as Mr Newton said, and it is absolutely key, particularly for small credit unions, that we cut down on the amount of bureaucracy that they have to contend with. That will also help to avoid duplication.

The Department and officials are standing ready to help credit unions that may need to avail themselves of that help. I recognise, as I said in my statement on 22 May, that there will be an increase in the workload for credit unions over the next while. That is why — to respond to Mr Agnew's point — we announced on 22 May that we will provide financial support for both the Irish League and the Ulster Federation on the condition that they help independent credit unions to come up to the mark in relation to registration and regulation.

I think that those are all the points that were raised by Members. Officials met both the Irish League and the Ulster Federation just last week. They are content with the way in which we are progressing, particularly in relation to the legislative consent motion. They are thankful for the finance that we have put in place to assist them. The continued development of the Northern Ireland credit union sector is a key objective for me and the Department. Passing the legislative consent motion today will highlight the importance that the Assembly places on the credit union sector. I commend the motion to the Assembly and thank Members from across the House for their support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly agrees that the provisions in Part 3 of the Financial Services Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons on 10 May 2012, dealing with the transfer of functions in relation to mutual societies should be considered by the UK Parliament.

Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) (Exemption) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): I beg to move

That the draft Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) (Exemption) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

In the North, there are approximately 2,200 operators licensed to carry goods for hire or reward using vehicles of more than 3.5 tons gross plated weight. They are already captured under regulations for the licensing of operators. Own-account operators — those who carry their own goods in the course of their business or trade, as opposed to hire or reward operators — make up around three quarters of the industry but presently are not required to be licensed. There are arguably up to 10,000 such operators in Northern Ireland who are currently not required to be licensed.

Over many years, the need for change to road freight operating licensing in the North has been raised by the freight industry, public representatives and consumer organisations who are dissatisfied with the way in which freight services are delivered under existing policy and legislation. My understanding of their concerns is, first, that they feel that the burden of regulation falls on one side of the freight industry, namely the 2,200 operators who carry goods for hire or reward. Their second concern is about the extent of potential illegal operations. Thirdly, there are concerns about the poor standard of vehicle maintenance and, fourthly, that there should be more and better enforcement.

The Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Act (Northern Ireland) 2010, which was passed by this House and received Royal Assent in January 2010, provides my Department with the powers to address those concerns and bring the operator licensing system into line with that in Britain. It will require everyone who uses a goods vehicle above 3.5 tons in the course of their business, whether for hire or reward or as an own-account operator, to have an operator's license.

In this calendar year, there will be arguably the greatest deployment of regulation around road users and road vehicles in a generation. That is seen in today's regulations, forthcoming taxi regulation, heavy goods regulations, issues around city tour operators, and so on and so forth. The intention of all of those is that, by improving regulation, you improve safety and that, by improving safety, you help business and people generally.

The vehicles in scope for standard national and international licences — that is, the hire and reward sectors — are determined at EU level, so there is no option to vary the requirement. That is already the law. Those vehicles are currently licensed in Northern Ireland, and vehicles and combinations of vehicles and trailers exceeding 3.5 tons used for hire or reward will continue to require a licence under the new Act. There is no change to those categories currently requiring a licence or to those having requirements in future to have a licence.

This legislation, however, allows the scope to be limited to certain combinations of own-account vehicles, and for

exemptions to be made for certain classes of vehicle. The Department has endeavoured to simplify the subordinate legislation to make it clear which vehicles and combinations are in or out of scope owing to their weight and which vehicles are exempt as a result of their construction or function. In that regard, what we propose in the regulations is a simpler and more understandable version of exemptions than that which currently prevails in Britain.

My Department is keen to ensure licensing of Northern Ireland's goods vehicles without creating an unnecessary burden for small businesses. Therefore, the statutory rule that is before the Assembly for affirmation provides that, for the own-account sector, vehicles, excluding any trailer that they may pull, will be deemed to be outside the scope of the requirements of the Act if they are of a maximum authorised weight of no more than 3.5 tons.

Other exemptions from operating licensing have been drawn up to cover emergency situations and those vehicles used for activities that fall outside the licensing regime. There is a category of 15 or 16 such exemptions. Existing exemptions from the legislation for the hire or reward sector in Northern Ireland were drawn up in 1968 and, like exemptions in Britain, are outdated, extremely complex and open to widespread abuse. The statutory rule before us includes a simplified list of exemptions from operator licensing that aims to apply the legislation to appropriate vehicles and to avoid affecting more people than is necessary.

My Department consulted informally in the first instance with various industry representative bodies in drawing up the list, and, in the second instance, formal consultation took place from 15 October 2010 until 7 January 2011. The views expressed largely supported the proposals. In addition to providing exemption for emergency functions, a number of specific exemptions have been included. Those include exemptions for agricultural vehicles used solely for agriculture, horticulture and forestry purposes; for vehicles being used to recover disabled vehicles from the roadside; and for vehicles such as a tower wagon, where the only goods carried are required for the operation of the machine.

In conclusion, I believe that the introduction of the Goods Vehicles Act and its associated regulations will have a positive impact on road safety, tackling organised crime, the environment and fair competition in the freight industry in the North. It is important that all those who need a licence get one and that it is clear for operators and enforcement agencies which vehicles and functions do not need a licence. That is why I propose that the statutory rule be affirmed.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): The Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Act 2010 received Royal Assent on 22 January 2010, some considerable time after the previous Environment Committee reported on the Bill in December 2008.

During the Bill's Committee Stage, the previous Committee heard evidence from the two main haulage organisations and was left in no doubt that the introduction through the legislation of own-account operator licensing was wanted by the vast majority of those involved in the freight sector. However, the Committee also heard from the agriculture and horticulture sectors, which were concerned that, as proposed, the legislation would have a detrimental impact

on their industries. As such, they made a case for their vehicles to be exempt from operating licensing.

The Committee accepted their argument and urged the Department to urgently address the issue of which vehicles should be included within the scope of the Act and which should be exempt. The Department was unable to produce a proposed list of exemptions while the Bill was at Committee Stage, but it insisted that the principles on which it would consider exemptions will be along the lines that are currently applied in Great Britain. It was based on the use of a vehicle rather than the vehicle type. For example, a tractor being used to haul a silage wagon would be exempt, but the same tractor being used to haul building materials would not. The Committee accepted that principle, but members were subsequently concerned to learn that the GB exemption list was in the process of being reviewed. At that stage, some 60% of current exemptions had been identified for removal.

1.30 pm

In the absence of a definitive list being available at the time and the fact that the benchmarks list across the water was in a state of flux, the previous Committee felt that it was necessary that the highest level of Assembly control be retained over the subsequent relevant subordinate legislation. Thus, the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) (Exemption) Regulations (NI) 2012 are subject to the Assembly's approval today.

At its meeting on 29 March 2012, the Committee considered proposals for seven items of secondary legislation that would complete the implementation of the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Act. Six of the statutory rules were due to come into force automatically, and the Committee agreed that their introduction would bring Northern Ireland into line with GB and would result in improvements in road safety, organised crime detection, commercial fairness and environmental standards, and would improve the Northern Ireland freight industry's image.

However, the Committee was keen to ensure that the Department had taken on board the concerns of stakeholders in relation to exemptions, and sought the views of those who had contributed at Committee Stage. In response, the freight industry urged against any further delay to the introduction of the legislation and reminded the Committee of how long it had taken the Department to reach that stage. It stressed that the legislation is critical for road safety and to ensure a fairer operating environment, and it strongly recommended that no changes be permitted at that late stage.

In comparison, the agricultural sector expressed disappointment with the proposals. It noted that it had participated in the consultation on exemptions, which had taken place well over a year ago, but felt that a number of the key concerns had not been taken into consideration by the Department of the Environment. Although the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) agreed with the proposed exemptions for agricultural and limited-use vehicles, such as tractors and loaders, it stressed that other agricultural vehicles should be exempt, particularly lorries used very occasionally to transport livestock or goods to market or for processing. It suggested that those could be excluded from the regulations on the grounds of limited mileage or by being linked to an agricultural business or farming. It also

stressed that failure to exempt vehicles of that kind is likely to lead to an increase in tractors on the road as farmers will revert to that method of transport rather than facing the expense and bureaucracy of meeting the requirements of the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) legislation for rarely used lorries.

The Department assured the Committee that it had worked closely with industry representative bodies, including the Ulster Farmers' Union and the Horticulture Forum for Northern Ireland, throughout the consultation process to develop a list of exemptions that would be clear and acceptable to the industry. In addition, the Department said that it will publish guidance to explain the exemptions and minimise misunderstanding in the industry.

The Department argued that the agriculture industry's suggestions were neither fair nor feasible. Limited mileage could apply to many vehicles and not just those associated with agriculture and horticulture. Alternatively, linking an exemption to a business or person would contradict the principle, which was established from the outset by the Department, of basing exemptions on vehicle use. The Department also noted that the enforcement of such exemptions would prove difficult, if not impossible, and would be costly. However, it acknowledged that there might be a resultant increase in the number of tractors on the roads at certain times of the year as a result of the exclusion of agricultural lorries from the exemption list.

The Committee accepted the Department's rationale for not including farm lorries on the list of exemptions, and, when it considered the draft rule again on 17 May 2012, was content that I recommend to the Assembly today that it be approved. However, I must stress that Committee members remain concerned about any consequential impact on road safety. I urge the Department to monitor this as the regulations are brought into effect and revisit it, if necessary, in due course. On this basis, on behalf of the Committee for the Environment, I support the motion.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá. I want to say a few words about the exemptions, which, on behalf of Sinn Féin, I support. However, I want to put them in the context of where we started in this process and the distance that we have come.

Obviously, the Committee supported the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Act 2010, which was about getting proper regulation and road safety measures in place. Sadly, the North has a somewhat poor goods vehicles record, as does the rest of this island, and we wanted to put something in place that would address the issues. However, we also wanted to support the haulage industry, which believed that a small proportion of it was incurring all the costs of dealing with proper enforcement. Although we support the measures in the regulations, we must also remember that we need to put robust measures in place. Although there is a need for exemptions, and I support these ones, we must be careful that, when we introduce legislation, we do not leave it open with so many exemptions that we go back to a situation in which a small proportion of the industry supports the industry itself.

We should also address the issue of the agriculture and horticulture industries, which raised some concerns. I

support the Minister's proposals, but in view of those concerns, I ask that his Department monitor the regulations over the next couple of years and, if need be, review them. With that in mind, I support the regulations.

Mr Elliott: There is, obviously, general support for the regulations, alongside some notable concerns. I listened carefully to the Minister and to the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, who outlined many of the issues very effectively. Following up on Mr Boylan's comments about the agriculture and horticulture industries, I will touch briefly on one or two issues.

The Ulster Farmers' Union was very proactive and positive about the matter and worked constructively with the Department. The union has a concern about lorries and other vehicles used for agricultural use only. I would like the Minister to assure us that he will keep that issue under scrutiny and, if required, bring additional information back at some stage. The agricultural industry has a huge concern because those vehicles are used for very limited purposes for the transport of agricultural goods for a particular farm. That means they are used only very occasionally. They are used purely for that farm and not for hire or to draw or transport goods for other farmers, which means that their use is very limited.

Paragraph 18 of the schedule mentions:

"A limited use vehicle which is used solely for the purposes relating to agriculture, horticulture or forestry".

Sub-paragraph (b) specifies that:

"the distance it travels on public roads in passing between any two such areas does not exceed 1.5 km."

That is a very short distance, particularly in today's agriculture and horticulture. Many businesses are split up by a much greater distance. That could conflict with some of the other exemptions. I would like some clarity on that and maybe even see that changed at some stage or have that 1.5 km increased. I ask the Minister to look carefully at that issue.

Paragraph 15 of the schedule concerns:

"A showman's goods vehicle and any trailer drawn thereby."

That could include quite a lot of organisations and groups. I know that a lot of people would maybe classify themselves as showmen — or show women, actually. I do want to sound sexist but we need to be realistic. A lot of organisations could fall into that category, and maybe a wee bit more clarity on that would be helpful.

Mr Dallat: I support the business in front of us. In many respects, we are discussing the history of transport. My first lesson on that was the Red Flag Act, when somebody had to walk in front of a steam engine, which could not do more than 4 mph. I am old enough to remember farmer Brown in his wee Fergie, which probably did 10 mph and could draw maybe a ton or, at most, two tons. Today, we have tractors that are monsters that can do 50 mph or more and, of course, are drawing diggers and things like that of huge dimensions.

The Red Flag Act was about road safety. What we are discussing today is road safety as well. We have made progress, and I agree with Tom Elliott that this needs to be constantly monitored and certainly not left for 40 years before it is looked at again, not that I am suggesting that I would be here in 40 years. However, 1968 was the last time it was looked at seriously.

I have had many meetings with transport operators, whom I commend and who warned us and told us repeatedly that too many vehicles on the road are not roadworthy. We need to take that seriously. We do not want to rest on our laurels, but we should take some satisfaction that the number of people killed on the roads has vastly diminished. Any new legislation that encourages that and keeps in front of people the absolute need to put road safety at the top of everything is important. I share some of the disappointments of the agricultural sector but they themselves know that safety on the farm and the road is of paramount importance. Hopefully, they will accept that these regulations will reduce any confusion.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I do not want to give you a history lesson but there was a time when Land Rovers were exempt if they were for agricultural use. That led to an interesting Budget debate in the Assembly in 1972, the last Budget before the collapse of the old Stormont, when there was total confusion as to what constituted a Land Rover that was used for agricultural use. We certainly do not want to get involved again in a debate about whether or not a vehicle is a tow hitch. Generally speaking, I found the debate in the Committee to be extremely interesting, and I support the Minister's recommendations.

1.45 pm

Mr Attwood: I thank all Members who contributed to the debate. The Chair of the Committee captured the character of this issue when she said that the issue of goods vehicle licensing has now stretched over a considerable period: the lifetime of two mandates. It was necessary to create certainty, avoid doubt and be decisive, which is why I wish to introduce these regulations. As I indicated in my opening remarks, that is the mindset that I will bring in respect of regulation of vehicles and control of issues around roads. We need to have wise and proportionate regulation of all vehicles that are on the road and regulation and licensing of all those who use the roads. That is necessary to bear down on illegality, improve road safety, create better driver performance, potentially reduce insurance premiums and, ultimately, secure the welfare of those on the road and in vehicles, and maintain our economy efficiently and effectively. As a part of that narrative, these regulations are important.

I note what the Chair and other Members said about the control, regulation and licensing of agricultural vehicles. Mr Boylan captured the sense that it is very important that, in introducing exemptions to goods licensing, those exemptions are not of such breadth that the purpose of having licensing is contradicted. I refer Members to the schedule to the regulations where the 15 exemptions are outlined, including, as Mr Elliott mentioned:

"A showman's goods vehicle and any trailer drawn thereby".

For the purpose of shaping exemptions in the first instance, those are wise, exhaustive and proportionate. If we were to go further than that, I would be concerned, as Mr Boylan said, that you may defeat the purpose and ambition of the regulations by having exemptions that, in the first instance, are extensive to the point of defeating the spirit if not the letter of the law.

That said, I reassure Mr Elliott that, over the next period, as the new regime rolls out and as the exemptions begin to apply, the Department will keep under review how these matters are impacting, not least upon our single biggest industry in the North: agriculture. If there is good evidence and a good argument for a need to revisit the exemptions as currently drafted to make them somewhat more expansive, the Department will consider that and, if necessary, consult further with the Committee and other third parties as appropriate.

I confirm that the Department will publish guidance to help understanding of the exemptions, including the one that Mr Elliott referred to. The response to that is that showman's goods vehicles are already heavily regulated. I am not sure what is meant by specialist vehicles, for example, roundabouts, but if there is any further clarity that I need, I will share that with Mr Elliott in the fullness of time.

I confirm that there were conversations with the agriculture industry about the exemptions for agricultural vehicles. The Department consulted the UFU and the National Horticulture Forum and, as I indicated, considered, in the first instance, a limited number of exemptions for certain vehicles used solely for agricultural, horticultural and forestry purposes where appropriate. I have to make clear that the exempted vehicles are those generally designed for off-road use and agricultural machines or vehicles that are taxed in a limited use class. However, given the rigour and vigour of the agriculture lobby, if it feels that the exemptions so far shaped need to be broadened, I have no doubt that it will bring that to the attention of the Department, Members and the Committee sooner rather than later.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) (Exemption) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2012

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

That the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

The uprating order is an annual order that sets out the rates of contributory and non-contributory benefits, together with the various allowances and premiums that make up the income-related benefits. In general, the new amounts from April 2012 are based on the increase in the general level of prices over the 12 months ending in September 2011. That is measured using the consumer price index (CPI), which is the measure of price inflation considered most appropriate for that purpose by the coalition Government.

I am sure that Members will join me in welcoming the increase of 5.2% from April this year. The increase comes at a time when inflation has just fallen to 3%, the lowest since February 2010, and is predicted to fall further. This uprating, therefore, represents a welcome increase in real terms for many people and puts much needed extra money into their pockets.

As a result of the uprating order, we will spend an additional £265 million on social security in 2012-13, and that money will go into the local economy. The basic state pension, which for many is the foundation of income in retirement, is increased to £107.45 for a single person, which is an increase of £5.30 a week and is the biggest ever cash increase in the basic state pension. From April, the increases in state pension credit mean that no single pensioner will have to live on less than £142.70 a week and no couple on less than £217.90 a week. The above-earnings increase in the pension credit guarantee, together with the efforts my Department is making to increase benefit take-up through, for example, the recent Make the Call campaign, underlines the continuing commitment to tackling pensioner poverty.

I am sure that all Members will wish to ensure that people in Northern Ireland, including some of the most vulnerable in our society, can continue to receive those new rates of benefit and will, therefore, join me in supporting the order.

Mr A Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I apologise for not being in the Chamber as the Minister rose to propose the motion. I was engaged with the Bahraini delegation. I apologise for my delay.

The Minister has outlined the primary purpose of the regulation. The Committee for Social Development gave its approval to the SL1 pertaining to the legislation at its meeting on 23 February. As the Minister is likely to have indicated, that rule came into operation in April, and we are simply being asked to confirm the regulation.

I would make the point that, in discussion on this regulation and other matters related to the welfare reform agenda, a number of Members expressed their concern about moving the link of the uplift in the rate away from the retail price index (RPI) to the CPI. Again, most Members have accepted both that this is an issue of parity and that this is not the time or place to raise the more substantive issue of the

link to CPI. I just wanted to put that point on the record for a number of Committee members who expressed concern about this issue. However, the Committee was content to support the regulation that is before the House

Mr Copeland: I, too, support the Minister in his proposition. In 2011, inflation on the coalition Government's preferred measure of CPI stood, as has been said, at a record 5.2%. The rate was driven by increases in the price of fuel, food, drink and transport. Many of the most vulnerable who will be affected by this receive some form of social security payments, and this 5.2% rise will no doubt be a welcome boost to their incomes.

The rates of benefit up-lifting need to reflect the price increases to enable recipients to maintain a survivable standard of living. Although it seem high, 5.2% will not leave everyone better off or even rewarded enough to meet increases in their current costs. Analyses of these figures show that for low income families with children, inflation in the year to September 2011 was about 0.5% higher than the headline CPI rate, which would put it at 5.7% as opposed to 5.2%. Therefore, perhaps the issue is not as clear as it at first appears.

Indeed, the Institute for Fiscal Studies said that there were concerns about the change from RPI to CPI, which is a done deal, and that that change may, in future, be a principal driver in increasing rates of child poverty and fuel poverty. That is something that we may have to deal with at some stage.

Nevertheless, it has to be said that the cost of this uprating will bring into the Northern Ireland economy an additional £265 million. That is not an insignificant amount, and it will go to families that suffer a degree of need. The thing to remember is that that will not be spent largely on imported or foreign goods; it will be spent on food, transport and in local shops. As such, this measure must be welcomed and, at this stage, it enjoys the support that I have indicated.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I have just a couple of things to say. The RPI-to-CPI argument has been well rehearsed. The Minister mentioned that the rise in pension will take a single person's pension to £142.70. I would make the point that, even at that level, the basic state pension here and in Britain is the meanest in the developed world. It is also worth pointing out that previous reports from British Governments have stated that the minimum needed for a pensioner to live on is approximately £170. So we are still far short of that. Obviously the move from RPI to CPI is a different argument, and parity is another issue that needs to be resolved. The Committee supported this SL1 back in February, so I support the motion.

Mr McCausland: I am pleased with the consensus of support across the Assembly for this uprating order. I thank the Social Development Committee for the positive way in which it has dealt with this matter. I am certain that we all welcome the significant increases to benefits made by the uprating order, and I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

2.00 pm

Committee Business

Economy: Innovation, Research and Development

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for the debate. The proposer will have 15 minutes to propose the motion and 15 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

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

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment on its inquiry into developing the Northern Ireland economy through innovation, research and development; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in conjunction with her Executive colleagues, to implement, as applicable, the recommendations contained therein.

Mr Deputy Speaker, could some time be given for colleagues to arrive? There seems to be a dearth of colleagues in the House. I think that the time has caught them out.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Standing Orders state that we must carry on unless we go below a certain threshold in the Chamber. I do not think that we have reached it, so we must continue.

Mr A Maginness: I am happy to do so. I am honoured to propose the motion and to present the report from the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee to the House. The document is good and, in many respects, exciting, and it highlights the very serious issue of research and development and innovation in our economy in Northern Ireland.

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

First, I thank colleagues on the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee for their co-operation and hard work and for the consensus achieved on the report. In particular, I thank the Committee staff, who worked tremendously hard to compile the report over the past nine months. I also want to thank, in particular, Mr Robin Newton, who was asked to take on and accepted the position of rapporteur for the report. Unfortunately, due to illness, he was unable to fully discharge his responsibilities in that regard. However, I thank him for his work and encouragement on the report.

If we are to rebalance our economy, we have to be innovative. To be innovative, we need strong research and development in our economy and our businesses. That is the lifeblood of innovation, and if we do not have it we will not succeed in rebalancing our economy. Innovation and research and development play an essential role in developing new and improved products and services, in providing high-value, well-paid jobs and in creating and developing successful businesses. If we do not provide at least the same level and quality of support for innovation and research and development as is provided in other regions and countries, we will miss opportunities for

investment, fail to grow our economy and rapidly fall further behind our competitors.

Given the range of programmes available to support research, levels of innovation and R&D in Northern Ireland are much lower than should be expected. The Barnett review found that in 2009, and the Treasury report of March 2011, which consulted on the rebalancing of the Northern Ireland economy, also noted low levels of R&D. We are not providing as high a level or quality of support as other regions and countries. It is essential that the opportunities to invest in innovation and R&D are fully exploited. It was for that reason that the Committee agreed to undertake the inquiry. During the inquiry, the Committee found that there was a wide range of opportunities available, from the complex EU framework programme 7 to the opportunities provided at a local level by district councils.

Evidence to the inquiry was mostly supportive of the available programmes and the work done by Invest Northern Ireland representatives on the ground. Most of the concerns expressed relate to the structures and processes that are in place to support research and development. They relate to the way programmes are integrated, managed, communicated and administered. Organisations, business and academic, face many barriers to becoming involved in research and development. Many companies, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), are not aware of the support that is available and do not know whether they are eligible for opportunities or how to access them. Some companies may not even be sure whether the work that they do constitutes research and development.

The Committee found that, although many organisations may have good innovative ideas, they lack the capacity and capability to become involved in R&D. Many lack the people, skills, time and finances needed to avail themselves of opportunities. There was general agreement across government, business and academia that the commercialisation of research is where the long-term benefits will be realised. However, many correspondents believe that there must be more opportunities for business-led research and more support for the commercialisation of research and development.

The Committee was informed that more needs to be done to help companies to manage the risks associated with research and protect intellectual property rights. More needs to be done to help organisations to navigate the complex bureaucracy associated with funding processes and, specifically, to help SMEs and microbusinesses.

The Committee could have looked at the issues and provided the Department with a report listing things that needed to be improved in the current structures, but the problem is much wider than that. The issues identified by the Committee will not be resolved by adding to the current structures and processes and continuing as before. If Northern Ireland business and academia are successfully to exploit the current and future opportunities for innovation in R&D and achieve a competitive advantage in an increasingly global marketplace, an entirely new way of thinking is required. Many businesses, both universities and a number of FE colleges and research institutes are doing excellent work to drive the innovation and R&D agenda, but the current structures and processes being deployed to support R&D were designed for a different

time and purpose. Innovation and R&D have now come to the forefront as key drivers for rebuilding and rebalancing the economy. As far as the current delivery structures for R&D are concerned, we are living in the golden age of steam, when what we need is a high-speed, high-capacity link straight to the heart of Europe and beyond. To achieve this, there must be an integrated and holistic approach to supporting innovation and R&D. It should be all-inclusive and must be designed to meet the needs of large businesses, SMEs and microbusinesses. It must take full account of the contributions that could be made from government and academia at all levels. The approach should be underpinned by a clear vision and must include policies, strategies, structures and processes designed specifically to meet the long-term challenge of maximising the potential for Northern Ireland businesses and academia to take advantage of existing and future opportunities for innovation.

The Committee has recommended two structures that will be key to long-term success. The first is a high-level steering group, comprising government, business and academia to advise on policy and oversee the integration and co-ordination of R&D activity. There is already a high-level steering group in existence for framework programme 7; therefore, the bones of a steering group for all R&D activity may already be in place. The second structure that the Committee has recommended is a single unit to integrate and co-ordinate all innovation and R&D activity. The unit should have responsibility for improving knowledge of and information on R&D; developing programmes and processes to meet the needs of business and academia; implementing support, including promotion, education, mentoring and providing practical support; and, importantly, developing and supporting a culture of innovation and R&D across government, business and academia. R&D should be as familiar to all businesses as sales and marketing. Those two structures will help to raise Northern Ireland to a new level of achievement in research and development. They will provide a sound and lasting platform from which to implement many of the other recommendations in the report.

The opportunities for research and development will grow. The next EU framework programme for research and development, Horizon 2020, will be launched in 2014, just 18 short months from now. That will provide €80 billion across Europe for R&D projects. We are told that it will be much more suited to the needs of SMEs than its predecessor and that it will be much less bureaucratic and easier to manage. A guarantee on that was provided by EU Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, when she visited the Assembly last week. She also said that much R&D in Europe is being commercialised elsewhere and that Horizon 2020 will provide support for R&D almost to market. She said that Horizon 2020 will be about future-proofing our economy. We must ensure that Northern Ireland is well prepared to avail itself of the opportunities and challenges that Horizon 2020 will bring.

Although the opportunities will grow, the challenges will also grow, and so will the competition for research projects. The Committee has been told that the success rate for Northern Ireland applications to the current framework programme is around 20%, with the costs of going through the process being measured in the tens of thousands of pounds. If businesses are to be encouraged to become involved in

Horizon 2020, we must work to increase significantly the success rate of applications. That means much more shared learning across government and more hands-on support for businesses.

It is not only for Horizon 2020 that support is required; help must be provided to support small mature companies, new and growing companies and other innovative companies. Invest NI's innovation escalator approach is designed to remove companies from a short-term, market-led approach to innovation to a long-term, technology-led approach. Why does that have to start at the level of Invest Northern Ireland? Surely the Federation of Small Businesses, the Institute of Directors and local enterprise agencies can be involved to stimulate and capture the imagination of businesses that may not yet have considered innovation.

Those structures are important, but they will take time to establish, and the Department cannot afford to wait to implement the other recommendations in the report. A start must be made now to improve our knowledge and information, to review and improve our programmes, to provide more hands-on practical support and to develop a culture of R&D. Many businesses do not know where to turn or how to get support on issues such as building capacity and capability, intellectual property rights, consortia building to support R&D and support for the development of ideas. We must have a culture in place where the answers to those questions are readily accessible or, more appropriately, where all businesses have the answers to hand.

One of the most frustrating issues for both business and academia is the high level of bureaucracy associated with R&D. There must be improved support for organisations to cope with the bureaucracy involved, and there must be increased efforts to reduce the bureaucracy required.

I draw attention to some of the short-term measures recommended by the Committee. It recommended that Invest Northern Ireland should consider how to open up its mentoring schemes to wider participation. It currently undertakes mentoring for framework 7, but many smaller organisations would benefit from mentoring for some of the smaller programmes on offer. As everybody knows, businesses are struggling for finance, and cash flow is a real issue for many of them. It is difficult for businesses to invest in long-term R&D projects that divert funds from day-to-day operations. Having to wait 90 days for a grant to be awarded could be crippling, and that delay should be reduced. Surely 30 days would be more than sufficient.

2.15 pm

The small business research initiative (SBRI) is a UK-wide initiative that engages companies in competitions for ideas that result in short-term development contracts. Northern Ireland companies punch well above their weight in securing contracts in Britain. However, SBRI is not used in Northern Ireland. That is a missed opportunity. The Department of Finance and Personnel should take steps to introduce and promote the SBRI. Venture capital should be encouraged. We should appoint a chief scientific officer and establish a science steering committee.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr A Maginness: Overall, the recommendations in the Committee's report represent a holistic approach to

supporting innovation across all levels and, if implemented in an integrated and co-ordinated fashion, can only result, in the long term, —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr A Maginness: — in putting Northern Ireland at the forefront of innovation and research and development. I commend the report to the House and seek its support for the motion.

Mr Moutray: As a member of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee, I support the motion. Back in March, in the debate on the draft economic strategy, I made the point that we must improve in areas such as research and development, innovation, creativity and skills. Today's debate and, indeed, the report before us will further reinforce that point. Many of us in the House have personal experience of running a business or, if we do not, know others who do. If we have our ear to the ground, as we ought to, we will be very aware of the pressures and constraints under which those businesses operate in the current economic climate. The years of the Troubles, coupled with the past few years of financial crises and recession, have not exactly created a climate in which businesses, especially smaller businesses, are willing to invest in innovation or research and development.

Just after the Assembly elections, this time last year, it became clear to our Committee that levels of innovation and R&D were not what they should be. We decided that it would be worthwhile to spend some time and effort on an assessment of where things stood. As we did so, we were concerned by some of the evidence we uncovered. Of course, we were required to do more than merely investigate. Having considered all the evidence presented to us, we have made a series of important recommendations, which are contained in the report before the House.

In Northern Ireland, expenditure on R&D is somewhat behind the rest of the UK and Europe. Over the past five years, the amount invested by business here has averaged at 0.69% of GVA. That is almost half the figure for the UK as a whole. The scale of the problem becomes even more stark when you realise that most of the expenditure on R&D in Northern Ireland is focused on a small number of companies, mainly externally owned firms and large enterprises. In 2009, just 10 companies were responsible for over half of all investment in R&D. Although foreign direct investment has long been part of the business and industrial landscape of Northern Ireland and we welcome such investment, the fact remains that the backbone of our economy has always been the smaller, local, often family-run businesses. It is here that the main problems in relation to innovation and R&D are to be found. In the present climate, SMEs often struggle just to keep their head above water and maintain a meaningful profit margin. They are living almost day to day and are reluctant to take the risk of investing time and money in research and development. They might be unaware of the support and opportunities available to them or, if they are aware, are perhaps not sure whether it is relevant to them or that they would even qualify.

A further problem for SMEs — to me, it is a major problem — is the fact that they are faced with high and unacceptable levels of red tape when they get involved in R&D programmes. That is especially the case with the range

of EU-funded R&D programmes. It is hard enough for bigger companies to make their way through all the paperwork and form filling; just think what it is like for a small family firm.

It must be recognised that many of the key agencies are working hard to address some of the issues and encourage businesses to take up any opportunity to engage in R&D. We appreciate all that has been done. The Committee was encouraged by respondents who spoke about the positive and helpful role of Invest NI. Invest NI has played a major part in the efforts to reduce bureaucracy, and we are grateful to it. DETI itself is very aware of the importance of R&D and the need to continue to attract high value-added FDI to ensure sustained and meaningful economic growth. However, as our report states:

“While much is being done at a strategic level there is also evidence that there is considerable disconnection between programmes, between Government, business and academia and within each of the three sectors.”

Perhaps that is the hub of the problem. Valiant efforts are being made at various levels, and we are encouraged by some of the evidence presented to us, but, as in so many areas of public life, a joined-up, cross-cutting and holistic approach will enable us to maximise the impact and effect of all the good work that has been done. That is why we recommend the creation of a high-level steering group to oversee, co-ordinate, direct and promote R&D across the three sectors. We feel that such a body would go a long way towards creating a real culture of innovation and R&D. It has the potential to offer real help and encouragement and to advise businesses. It must be effective and efficient, and it must deliver.

I have spoken about the dangers of red tape and bureaucracy. We must, therefore, be careful to ensure that any new steering group —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr Moutray: — that is set up does not itself become part of the bureaucracy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Daithí McKay.

Mr McKay: A LeasCheann Comhairle, I am winding on the debate.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mrs Sandra Overend.

Mrs Overend: I welcome very much the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee's inquiry into developing the Northern Ireland economy through innovation, research and development. I thank the Committee staff and the Committee Clerk for the hard work that they have undertaken in compiling this comprehensive report. I also thank the very many stakeholders who contributed to and shaped the inquiry.

In these difficult economic times, it is imperative that we utilise all opportunities available to us that will assist the Northern Ireland economy to grow. A vital component of that will be Northern Ireland fully drawing down as much research and innovation funding as it can from the variety of opportunities and programmes that are available. To achieve that goal, the Ulster Unionist Party welcomes the recommendations set out in the Committee inquiry report.

They will allow Northern Ireland to maximise the potential for businesses and academia at all levels to take advantage of existing and future opportunities for innovation, research and development. In particular, it is essential that we increase uptake from the European funding streams that are available.

Europe 2020 is a 10-year strategy that was proposed by the European Commission in March 2010 for reviving the economy of the European Union. It aims at smart, sustainable, inclusive growth, with greater co-ordination of national and European policy. One of the five main aims of that strategy is to achieve the target of investing 3% of GDP in R&D. Northern Ireland lags far behind that, with business expenditure in R&D over the past five years averaging at only 0.69%. Currently, the main stream of research and innovation funding from the EU is FP7, which is worth almost €50 billion. However, from 2014 to 2020, that will be replaced by a new funding stream known as Horizon 2020, which will be worth almost €80 billion. It will be the largest research and innovation funding stream anywhere in the world, and it is the EU's new programme for research and innovation. It will form part of the drive to create new jobs and growth in Europe.

With that in mind, I was delighted to have the opportunity to discuss the new programme with the Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, on her recent visit to Northern Ireland. In order to maximise the full potential of the forthcoming programme, it is essential that Northern Ireland works towards overcoming many of the barriers outlined in the Committee's report and implements its recommendations to ensure that we do not end up in a situation where we lag behind other member states in the drawdown of funding, as has traditionally happened in the past. The opportunities must be promoted to all the businesses and organisations across Northern Ireland that are eligible. That must be followed up with structured support and assistance, particularly during the application process, to ensure research and innovation funding is drawn down.

The Ulster Unionist Party has continually highlighted the potential European funding available for research and innovation, particularly through our MEP, Jim Nicholson. As the Ulster Unionist Party's economy spokesperson, I was particularly concerned to learn that many of the barriers facing organisations that were trying to get involved in research and development related to the sheer complexity of the application process and the unnecessary bureaucracy that seems to exist around research and innovation funding, particularly where Europe is involved. I was, therefore, pleased to learn that Horizon 2020 will provide a major simplification of the rules from those set for previous funding programmes.

The Committee's report recommends that preparation for Horizon 2020 should commence immediately, including an assessment of what Northern Ireland can offer in business and academia to funding opportunities that will be available through Horizon 2020. That must also be implemented alongside a long-term strategy and implementation plan, developed with appropriate resources for the promotion of opportunities for R&D, education and mentoring, practical support through projects and awareness programmes. In addition, Northern Ireland must ensure that the focus of much of the support is directed towards our SMEs and

microbusinesses, which have, for too long, missed out on the opportunities that research and innovation funding can provide. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment heard that just 10 companies accounted for around 57% of all businesses' R&D investment in 2009. It is essential that we endeavour to reduce the time between applications being made and the receipt of funding.

The Committee heard from many stakeholders of the great benefits of research and innovation and how it is necessary to improve and develop business opportunities. I refer also to a visit to the InnoTech Centre in my constituency of Mid Ulster. I will conclude there, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Judith Cochrane.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 13 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

Renewable Energy: Cross-departmental Working

1. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline how her Department is working on a cross-departmental basis to promote renewable energy generation. (AQO 2106/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is well recognised that the agriculture and forestry sectors have a key role to play in the development of sustainable and renewable energy. My Department is represented on the sustainable energy interdepartmental working group, which was established in January 2009 with the aim of ensuring a co-ordinated approach across the Executive to the promotion of sustainable energy. The group's objective is to enable Departments to ensure that energy-related policies and practices are in concert with one another, with the aim of maximising the use of public funding and delivering value for money. The working group has four subgroups: bio-energy; sustainable communications; economic opportunities; and energy efficiency. My Department is represented on all those subgroups, with the exception of the sustainable communications group.

Looking forward, my Department, working with others, will attempt to ensure that the renewables sector has access to the €80 billion innovation and research funding on offer between 2014 and 2020 through the new European Horizon 2020 programme.

Mr Dickson: The Minister may be aware that Northern Ireland Water is the largest consumer of electricity in Northern Ireland and that it leases land on a long-term basis to the Forest Service. There are opportunities to develop wind energy generation on that land. Minister, will you assure us that your officials will work with Northern Ireland Water to ensure that wind turbines can be placed as economically as possible on the land and that there will be full co-operation between Departments to allow that to happen?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said in my answer, I am committed to the promotion of renewable energy by looking at all avenues and potential areas. The Department has a renewable energy action plan that looks at how we can work co-operatively with other Departments and agencies. I do not have a problem in working with any agency to promote renewable energy.

Mr Hussey: Northern Ireland's agrifood industry has become one of the foremost innovative industries here, and my party has no doubt that that industry will be able to diversify into

the renewable energy market very effectively. Is the Minister aware that farmers in some areas of Northern Ireland are facing significant challenges arising from competition for grasslands with the proprietors of anaerobic digesters? What advice can she offer farmers in such circumstances?

Mrs O'Neill: I agree with the Member's point about the agrifood industry and its performance. The availability of grasslands will always be an issue, given that there is a growing world population and a growing demand for food, which means that our farmers will have to produce more. The availability of land is obviously a considerable issue that needs to be taken into account.

As regards working with farmers, if farmers have any concerns, there are many avenues they can go down, not least visiting any DARD Direct office across the North or going directly to the Department, and I encourage them to do that. The Department works very closely with the two educational colleges to promote renewable energy and to help farmers diversify and look at the challenges they face. This is just another area in which the Department is involved.

Mr A Maginness: I do not detect any great enthusiasm or energy — if I can use that word — in the Minister's approach. Will she reassure the House that she will, in fact, act as a champion in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and in the Executive by encouraging renewable energy on farmland across Northern Ireland?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not agree with the Member's assertion that I am not energetic, particularly on renewable energy. There is an Executive commitment to increase renewable energy, and DARD has such a policy and a renewable energy action plan. DARD also holds practical on-farm renewable energy events at Greenmount in Enniskillen. Again, this is about getting information to farmers and letting them see what is available and what support is there for them to look at renewable energy as a way forward. Those seminars and workshops are ongoing year on year. I think that farmers are very keen to learn more about renewable energy. There is a lot of potential, particularly if farmers collaborate. Sometimes, they cannot produce enough energy on their own farms, but by working together, the potential is massive.

Fisheries: Whitefish By-catch

2. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, further to the December Fisheries Council meeting, for an update on the work being carried out to identify technology to reduce the whitefish by-catch. (AQO 2107/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: At the last December Fisheries Council, I committed to an objective for the Irish Sea that, by 1 July 2012, the nephrops fleet would fish with gears that would enable it to secure exemption from the effort regime as laid down in article 11 of the cod plan. The commitment is to use measures that result in a catch of less than 1·5% cod and not only a general reduction in whitefish by-catch. A selective gear trial project has been established, led by the Sea Fish Industry Authority and involving industry, net makers, scientists, gear technologists and officials from my Department. Trials involving four different gears began at the beginning of April and finished last week.

Work is now urgently under way to analyse the results and produce findings of the report. Early indications are that, as expected, grid-type gears are very efficient at separating prawns from whitefish but do not appear suitable for all fishing vessels or all fishing grounds. In particular, they are prone to clogging by seaweed and other debris. The most promising gear tested uses a large square mesh panel in a modified cod end and additional trials were carried out to improve that design further. I am expecting a final report to be available later this week.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she acknowledge that there is considerable frustration within the fishing community at the slowness in introducing better mechanisms for minimising fish by-catch? Is she aware of the concern of the fishing community that there are already indications from officials, through the Environment Committee, that it could be further adversely affected by the maritime Bill as presently constituted?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for the question. In December last year, the Commission had moved to impose a Swedish grid on the industry. That would have been devastating, because the industry does not believe that the Swedish grid is appropriate for all fishing grounds in the Irish Sea. In conjunction with the industry, and after talking to it at some length, I went to Brussels and put a proposal to the Commission, which the Commission accepted. The proposal was that we would trial our own gear; a gear that is acceptable to and suitable for our industry. That is the position that we are in. That is something that we have done along with industry, and we will continue to do so.

As I said, I will get a report later this week, but we hope to be on target to meet what we promised to the Commission, which was actually very positive for the industry, in that it exempted us from the days-at-sea cuts that would have been forced upon us if we were not able to get to that position.

The maritime Bill is Department of the Environment legislation, and I will always make sure, through the Department, that the needs of the fishing industry will be taken into account as all policy is developed.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for her answers around this very important issue for the fishing and trawler industries. We are aware that the trials have taken place and the findings are due to be published soon. What can the Minister tell us at this time, before the report is published? Is she hopeful that there are answers to be found within the trials that would help to end the days-at-sea dilemma for our fishing industry?

Mrs O'Neill: I think it is fair to say that we have made very good progress so far. The fact that we have worked with the industry in developing a gear that is acceptable to it — the industry has trialled it and knows that it works — has been key to us arriving at the position that we are in. As I said, I hope to have details of the final report by the end of the week. Also key to that has been keeping the Commission on board and informed about what we are doing. When we get the report at the end of the week, I will obviously have to discuss that with the Commission, but, at this stage, things seem to be relatively positive. We have trialled everything successfully and we are meeting the needs of our industry.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. When will the cod recovery plan be reviewed?

Mrs O'Neill: I think everyone would agree that the cod recovery plan has not worked. The Commission had promised a review at the start of 2012, but the timetable for that seems to have slipped. There are some technical amendments coming forward later in the year, but as for when the Commission officially plans to review the cod recovery plan, we will have to keep that under review.

Mrs McKeivitt: What progress has been made towards bringing forward proposals for the regionalisation of quota allocations and other measures that would pump-prime the fishing industry in south Down?

Mrs O'Neill: I am going to Luxembourg tomorrow for discussions on the common fisheries policy. We hope that it may be the end of the negotiations. Tomorrow will probably be a very important day in meeting the needs of our fishing industry. Regionalisation is a key part of the common fisheries policy. We have argued strongly all along that we need to be able to suit the needs of our industry, not to have one blanket approach across Europe that does not impact positively on us at times. The key is regionalisation. It is about flexibility and suiting the needs of our industry.

Mental Health: Rural Areas

3. **Mr McGimpsey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the discussions she has had with her Executive colleagues in relation to addressing the mental health needs of people living in rural areas.

(AQO 2108/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Ensuring proper services to address mental health issues in rural areas is a high priority of mine. As you are aware, the Department of Health is the lead Department with regards to mental health provision. However, it can be a particular issue in rural areas due to their somewhat remote and isolated nature. Also, the stigma attached to mental health means that sometimes it is not openly discussed.

Earlier today I met the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to discuss how our respective Departments could work together to better address suicide and mental health issues. Naturally, my aim is to maximise awareness and support to rural dwellers regarding this emotive subject.

As part of the rural White Paper action plan, I met Minister Poots to discuss a range of measures to support the health and well-being of rural dwellers. Following this meeting, my officials have been working closely with Public Health Agency officials to bring forward health checks for rural communities. Part of this initiative will involve a signposting service to mental health support services. I am delighted to announce that the Executive approved the rural White Paper action plan on 31 May. That is a key document in ensuring that we have cross-departmental support to tackle all the issues that are relevant to the people we represent.

I also discussed the maximising access in rural areas project with Minister Poots. DARD and the Public Health Agency are working collaboratively on this to ensure that those who are most vulnerable in society are accessing what they are entitled to. The project is an initiative based on the premise that visiting people in their own homes encourages them to avail themselves of services and grants that they would not otherwise have known about.

While identifying the issues that exist in rural areas, DARD worked in tandem with a number of Departments and agencies to support rural dwellers, with householders completing a health and well-being assessment and receiving advice on the available local and regional services. Trained enablers who have received certified training in safeTALK, which is a suicide-awareness programme, and in safeguarding vulnerable adults carry out this service and bring any concerns to the attention of the local social services department.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank the Minister for her very comprehensive answer. She will be aware that mental ill health is often a consequence of the stress associated with financial difficulties. Bearing in mind the financial challenges that are facing society in general, what steps does she believe her Department can take to ease the process of payments made by the Department through, for example, single farm payments, to take some of the stress out of the difficulties faced by many farmers?

Mrs O'Neill: As the Member will be aware, I think it is key that Departments work together, because suicide prevention and good mental health is not just the job of the Department of Health. Some areas of work that I talked about earlier in which Departments are collaborating are key in tackling social isolation and lack of access to services, as well as making sure that we are targeting those people who feel vulnerable.

I take my responsibility around financial difficulties very seriously, as that can often be a factor in people's mental health and how they are feeling in general. I fund a number of initiatives, including the rural support helpline, Rural Connect. I encourage people to use those phone lines to get in touch with the Department if they are having difficulties.

My Department has targets for processing payments, and it is a key aim to meet those and to get payments out to people as soon as possible. It is true that payments were slower in getting to some people this year. We have reached our targets, but a small number of people, approximately 1,000, still need to be paid, and I think it is key to get those payments out. I have listened directly to people and their stories of how that impacts financially and the stress that that brings, so my aim is to ensure that those payments are made as quickly as possible.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her responses so far. She mentioned a number of Departments, including Health and Culture, Arts and Leisure, but she has not mentioned the Department for Regional Development (DRD), which is responsible for community rural transport.

Its budget has been cut, and the effects have transferred right down to the community. Fewer and fewer people are able to avail themselves of DRD services to get to hospitals. In my constituency, that could be from the tip of the peninsula to the proposed Lagan Valley hospital for mental health. Will the Minister advise whether she will be in touch with her DRD counterpart to try to overcome the problems that we have in rural areas?

2.45 pm

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. Absolutely. I will continue to engage with all Departments, including DRD. As I said, the Executive agreed the rural White Paper action plan, which looks at the rights of people in rural areas and the issues that they face, particularly transport issues. My Department's 'Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Framework', which I launched recently, is looking at working with DRD to fund some rural transport, which is a very worthy initiative. I come from a rural area, so I know how difficult it can be for people to access public transport. That is a practical example of how I am working with DRD. I will continue to work with DRD through the rural White Paper action plan.

Mr Campbell: The Minister will be aware, as I have written to her about it, of the issue of adults with learning difficulties and how they access services in rural areas. Does she agree that those in the community and voluntary sector who open up offices in rural areas for people with learning difficulties, including mental health difficulties, should operate from premises that are accessible to all sections of the community and that there should be nothing in or on those offices that might deter people from accessing those services?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. As he said, he wrote to me on this issue. I absolutely agree with you about the value of the work that the community and voluntary sector does in supporting vulnerable people; it is second to none. Quite often, that sector is filling the gaps and doing things that should be done by the Department but are not. That sector is key to moving forward. Accessibility is a very simple, plain issue. Everywhere should be open for everybody to be able to access, regardless of whether they are able-bodied or not.

Theft: Rural Areas

4. **Mr S Anderson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the action being taken to help farmers and rural dwellers to reduce the risk of theft.
(AQO 2109/11-15)

15. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what measures she has taken to combat the theft of agricultural machinery in rural communities.
(AQO 2120/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 4 and 15 together.

I am very aware of the increasing number of thefts on farms. I have met the Minister of Justice and the Chief Constable to highlight the increase in rural crime and the concern that it is causing in the farming community. A further meeting with the Chief Constable is planned for later in the month, at which I plan to review progress with him. I will continue to work closely with the Minister of Justice on raising awareness of rural crime. I welcome local initiatives brought forward by community safety partnerships to prevent rural crime, such as trailer marking and the forensic marking of sheep. I am encouraging farmers to participate in those initiatives and to continue to ensure that they secure their properties by taking steps to minimise the risk of theft from their farms.

I was pleased to take part in the launch of the Farmwatch scheme in County Fermanagh in April. That scheme was developed by one of the neighbourhood policy teams in Fermanagh and uses funds from the assets recovery incentivisation scheme. It has a number of strands, including sheep retina scanning; the forensic marking of machinery; recording of assets on a police database; and a texting service to alert participants to any suspicious activity in an area. Every participant receives a personal visit by the neighbourhood policing team to discuss farm security. I am pleased that the scheme has been very well received, and there are plans to roll it out to other policing areas. In my meeting with the Chief Constable, I will encourage him to make that scheme widely available.

My departmental officials are also working closely with the PSNI and an Garda Síochána in relation to the theft of livestock and related crimes. That has included the training of police officers in livestock identification and movement controls, and the establishment of round-the-clock communication channels. My officials have also been involved in joint investigation visits with the PSNI, which has led to the recovery of stolen livestock.

Mr S Anderson: I thank the Minister for her very comprehensive answer. I and my colleague Stephen Moutray met the local PSNI this morning. One of the issues discussed was rural crime and the effect that it is having on the rural community. The Minister has had many meetings with the Minister of Justice, the police, and so on. Would she support the formation of a task force, comprising the police, rural watch groups, insurance companies, farmers, and suchlike, to get something off the ground? I know that there is an idea in the local community to make better contact and to see what positive results could be achieved from having such a grouping.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. He will be aware that responsibility for rural crime rests with the PSNI and the Department of Justice. However, were a task force to be formed, I would not have a problem with getting involved with it via the Department. Some of the initiatives on the ground are very positive, and if we could get them rolled out right across the North, that would be significant. Some of the things demonstrated at the Crimewatch scheme that I was involved in launching in Fermanagh were spectacular — sheep are even able to be identified through retina scanning. I will raise the Member's issue with the Chief Constable when I meet him in the near future.

Mr Craig: I thank the Minister for her initial comprehensive answer. It is quite interesting to hear of all the PSNI initiatives that are going on. Will the Minister assure the House that a number of those initiatives will be rolled out? One of the most beneficial is vehicle identification, but I will not go into the details of it, because we do not want some people to know about it. If any financial assistance could be given to ensuring the roll-out of that initiative right across Northern Ireland, that would be preferential, because it is very effective in the recovery of stolen assets.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his contribution. When I meet the Chief Constable, I will be happy to raise the issues that have come up in today's questions. As you say, some very positive initiatives are already happening, and it is key that they are rolled out. It is the Chief Constable's responsibility, and I think that of the Policing Board, to

ensure that the programmes are rolled out right across the North, but I will certainly be impressing on the Chief Constable that that would be beneficial.

Ms Boyle: I thank the Minister for her answers. What measures are in place to support victims in the aftermath of crime, particularly farmers and rural dwellers?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for picking up on the issue of victims, who are those people targeted by rural crime. The Department of Justice (DOJ) funds Victim Support, which supports victims of crime. Recent research from Victim Support indicates that victims of crime from rural areas are much less likely to seek support from it and use its services. That is concerning, given that many rural dwellers wrestle with the issue of isolation, and that often exacerbates the impact of crime. Therefore, the Department is working with Victim Support to see how we can get a better response to its services and actively encourage people to seek support if they are victims of crime.

Mr Cree: I have no doubt that the Minister is concerned about the current spate of thefts across the rural community. However, it was the same last year and indeed the year before, and the Minister today has outlined the steps that are being taken. At the risk of sounding repetitive, those steps were mentioned before, going back two years. Is there anything that can be done or any urgency that can be applied to the whole issue now to make a difference to the number of thefts?

Mrs O'Neill: I am absolutely aware that the levels of rural crime have increased over the past number of years. There are emerging technologies, and some of those that I mentioned earlier are helpful, but I think that the responsibility for combating rural crime lies with the police and the Department of Justice, and I will continue to work with them to ensure that I do my bit to support rural dwellers and farmers.

The Department of Justice is responsible for collating the statistics from the past number of years, and I refer you to it for a look at the figures. However, as I say, some innovative technologies are coming forward to help to tackle rural crime, and I will continue to work with the police and the Department of Justice.

Mr McGlone: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire chomh maith. There is a very worrying trend of violent crime, particularly in some of our more isolated rural areas. The Minister and I share a constituency, and there has been one particular instance of violent crime in recent times, the detail of which we obviously cannot get into today because of ongoing investigations.

Will the Minister give us a steadfast assurance that, in the various pilot schemes that are being conducted throughout the North and through the collaboration that should occur between the likes of DOJ and the PSNI, good practice will be replicated right across the North? Good things often happen in certain areas that are not shared with other areas. Will the Minister please assure us that that will be done?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the Minister got the gist of that question.

Mrs O'Neill: I have absolute sympathy with the family about whom the Member spoke. There is a difference between

agricrime and rural crime, and they have to be addressed separately. Agricrime was what I referred to earlier when I mentioned the theft of machinery and cattle. Rural crime is very different, and I know that that is what you were referring to. When I meet the Chief Constable, Matt Baggott, the two topics discussed are agricrime and rural crime. I absolutely condemn those actions, particularly the case that you spoke about, which was a vile, violent attack on a young man. I will raise the issue with the Chief Constable when I meet him in a few weeks' time.

Bovine Viral Diarrhoea

5. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action her Department is taking to tackle bovine viral diarrhoea.

(AQO 2110/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) is not a statutory disease. Its impacts are primarily felt at farm level, so it is for the industry to take the lead in any initiative to deal with it. Therefore, I welcome the fact that there is an increasing desire in the industry to tackle BVD and other conditions that are not subject to statutory control programmes.

Last month, I met industry representatives to discuss their plans for an industry-led organisation to develop and promote control programmes to tackle diseases such as BVD. As experience elsewhere has shown, a commitment from industry to funding such initiatives on production diseases will be critical to their sustained success. I was, therefore, encouraged to hear that the group is securing private investment to support the new approach. I was also pleased to hear about the plans to establish formal collaborative links with industry in the South, as taking an all-island approach will definitely help trade right across the island. There is real potential to improve the competitiveness of the sector through tackling these diseases, so I am very keen to get the initiative off the ground as soon as possible. At last month's meeting, I agreed, in principle, to match financial contributions committed by industry stakeholders. Obviously, those will have to be subject to an economic appraisal, but, in principle, I absolutely agree with match contributions.

My officials have been working closely with industry on the initiative and providing advice. We are also considering whether support could be provided under the training measures in the rural development programme. That would help to make farmers aware of the steps that they can take to tackle BVD and the advantages of doing so. The Department is also supporting an industry-led BVD research project through the research challenge fund aimed at determining the prevalence of the virus. I look forward to hearing how the initiative progresses, and the Department will continue to work with the industry.

Mr Swann: Minister, the Scottish authorities are proposing a ban on the sale, or even movement, of persistently infected animals. What is your assessment of that proposal? Would you consider bringing in such a ban in Northern Ireland to support the industry?

Mrs O'Neill: There has been no call for a ban from the industry, which wants to tackle production diseases and BVD. The working group has done a lot of work over the past number of months. The economic benefits of dealing with

BVD speak for themselves, and farmers are aware of them. Farmers would very quickly receive payback for the small amount that it would cost for testing. If we were able to eradicate BVD and take the infected cattle out of the farms, the economic benefits would speak for themselves. As I said, there has been no call for a ban. The industry wants to tackle the issue and believes that we can do so in a short time frame. This is not a long-term plan; we can tackle it quite quickly.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for her answers. Does she accept that the Department needs to lead very strongly on the eradication of bovine TB? It is crucial that Northern Ireland achieves the disease-free status that Scotland has had for many years. We have spent an awful lot of millions on a scheme to eradicate TB that has not yet realised its potential.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his comments. Tackling TB and brucellosis (BR) are key issues in the Department. We have a target of 2014 for eradicating BR, and we hope to be able to deliver on that. The Member will be aware that TB is an emotive issue and a complex disease. There is no simple solution or quick fix. If there was, we would apply it. We are working with the industry and have some proposals coming forward to tackle TB. A £4 million TB research and wildlife programme is ongoing, and I hope to introduce further initiatives in the near future.

3.00 pm

Education

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 9 has been withdrawn and a written answer is required.

Schools: Homophobic Bullying

1. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the prevalence of homophobic bullying in Northern Ireland in light of 'The Teachers' Report', which identified homophobic bullying in Great Britain as being three times more prevalent than bullying on the grounds of religion or race. (AQO 2121/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): The Stonewall teachers' report deals specifically with homophobic bullying and teaching about sexual orientation. It reports the views of staff from primary and secondary schools across Great Britain. There is no equivalent report on the views of staff here. However, every five years, we seek the views of pupils and staff about the nature and extent of bullying in our schools. The sample that is used is representative of the primary and secondary sectors.

Some 120 schools are involved and the views of more than 2,000 pupils from years 6 and 9 and around 200 school staff are sought. Pupils' views are sought using a questionnaire on bullying developed by Dan Olweus. This is an internationally recognised and widely used measuring tool. By using the Olweus questionnaire, we can compare the findings with previous studies and with the position in other countries.

The most recent research was published in October 2011. Overall, the most common form of bullying reported by

39% of pupils was being called mean and hurtful names or being made fun of or teased in a hurtful way. The Olweus questionnaire includes a question for year 9 pupils about being bullied with names, comments or rude gestures with a sexual meaning. Around 14% of pupils reported being bullied in this way. Clearly, bullying of this type includes homophobic bullying, and it is the sixth most common form of bullying. Bullying, for whatever reason and in whatever form, is unacceptable, and I am committed to working with schools vigorously to tackle it.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his answer. I notice that the data on which he relies for his answer are based on sample questionnaires that do not involve all the young people. Will he commit to having a much more robust data collection mechanism, and will he then outline what strategy he is putting in place to deal with homophobic bullying?

Mr O'Dowd: The data collection is based on sound principles. There are thousands of young people in our school system, and I am not sure how practical it would be to question all those children, or indeed, the several thousands of staff who work in our schools. Let us be clear, there is a duty on schools to tackle homophobic bullying, as there is on society. I believe that we have the practices and policies in place that can do that.

Bullying in schools comes in many different forms, and there is a legal duty on schools to have policies in place to tackle bullying. Those policies should be drawn up in consultation with parents, pupils and guardians, and they should be robust enough to deal with all forms of bullying, regardless of their nature, including homophobic bullying, which is completely wrong.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What legal protections are in place to protect people from becoming victims of bullying, including homophobic bullying?

Mr O'Dowd: All grant-aided schools are required by law to have measures in place to prevent all forms of bullying. Schools, as I said in my answer to Mrs Kelly's supplementary question, must consult with parents and pupils about these measures, after which it is a matter for the board of governors of a school to draw up a policy. The Department of Education also issues guidance to schools on these matters.

I have also visited a number of schools where the measures that have been put in place provide fine examples. For instance, school councils have been very successful in creating self-disciplinary policies, with agreement among all pupils and staff on how to regulate behaviour in the classroom and in the playground at school. There is a school project, which, I believe, is called Unite, which encourages unity between all staff and pupils on how to deal with disciplinary matters in school. It also tackles all forms of bullying. I was very impressed when I met the school council that was in charge of the discipline in the school, which helped to eradicate bullying, including homophobic bullying. There are many different measures. We need legislation, but we need the participation of young people and staff in those measures as well.

Ms Lo: A recent report by the Rainbow Project showed that 84% of pupils who were being bullied because they were perceived to be lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) had suicidal

thoughts, and 35% of LGB-perceived pupils who were being bullied have attempted suicide. What action is the Minister taking to combat homophobia-related suicide in schools?

Mr O'Dowd: The measures I outlined to the Members who asked questions previously included those against homophobic bullying in schools. The attitudes in our schools are often a reflection of the attitudes in our broader society. There is a responsibility on communities and families to ensure that homophobic bullying is totally unacceptable. There is a responsibility to ensure that we do not use language or involve ourselves in actions that will encourage such homophobic bullying or, for that matter, any form of bullying.

I believe that the measures we have in place are robust. I constantly review all my policies. I engaged with the Rainbow Project on several occasions with regard to these matters, and will continue to do so. If there are other measures that we can take to help to eradicate bullying, we shall do so. However, we also have to eradicate the attitudes that promote and allow homophobic bullying to take place.

Preschool Provision

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Ms Michelle Gildernew for a question.

Ms Gildernew: My supplementary is on question —. Sorry. Go raibh maith agat. Gabh mo leithscéal, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Question 2, please.

2. **Ms Gildernew** asked the Minister of Education for an update on his Department's efforts to ensure adequate provision of preschool places. (AQO 2122/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Every effort is being made by my officials and the education and library boards to ensure adequate provision of preschool places across the North and to meet the Programme for Government commitment of ensuring that at least one year of preschool education is available to every family who wants it. Over 22,500 children have secured a preschool place for September 2012. Of the children whose parents applied at stage 2 of the process, only 24 remain unplaced. I expect that number to fall further in the coming weeks.

Although a number of parents did not apply at stage 2 of the process, places do remain in the system if they wish to reconsider. They may find that additional places have become available, which will allow them to consider other options. I cannot stress enough the importance of parents continuing to work with the education and library boards as every effort will continue to be made to find places for eligible children.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Ms Gildernew for a supplementary.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Well, everybody knows now why they are getting rid of me. [Laughter.]

I thank the Minister for his answer and welcome his confirmation that the vast majority of children have been placed. Will he reiterate why priority is given to children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds?

Mr O'Dowd: I am sure that nobody believes that we are getting rid of you. I take this opportunity to thank Michelle and her colleagues Paul, Conor and Pat for all their assistance down through the years, and wish them all the best in their new venture, which is very important with regards to representation.

Why do we positively discriminate for children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds? It is because all the evidence points to the fact that children who come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds face the greatest challenges when it comes to education. If we as a society are serious about breaking the generational cycle of disadvantage within many communities, we have to start in early years. That is what all the research shows us is the best thing to do. It may be 10, 20 or 30 years before we see the full positive impacts of this policy, but I believe it is the right policy.

Mr Copeland: I am sure the Minister will be aware from correspondence of the difficulty that is encountered by folk in getting their children placed in nursery schools. There appear to be patches or areas where that is more difficult. Is the Minister content that everything that could have been done to avoid that problem was done?

Mr O'Dowd: I am more content than I was six weeks, 12 weeks or three months ago. I believe we made significant progress over the latter period, but it also has to be remembered that 22,500 children have been placed in preschool and nursery settings, and that has to be welcomed. The education boards and my departmental officials have worked intensely over the past number of weeks to ensure that those children and parents who applied at stage 2 of the process have been placed. We are now down to 24. I will not be satisfied until we have those 24 children placed, and I am continuing to approve new preschool settings on a regular basis in areas where they are required.

We are not yet satisfied that we have this absolutely correct and we will continue to implement the workings of the review. I have recently signed off on paperwork to go to the Education Committee regarding the end of the July and August birthday criterion. I will continue to implement the outworkings of the review that I announced to the Assembly in January of this year. A lot of good work has been completed, and there is more work to be done.

Mr Storey: Although the Minister has made much of the 24 places that are left to be allocated, what about the 400 who, in the second round, decided not to bother with the process and have now disappeared into the system? What steps will the Minister take to look at the issue in a way that means that working parents who deserve to have a place will get one? How will he deal with the 400 parents who made a decision that the process is so inadequate that they will give it a bye?

Mr O'Dowd: I am not sure whether the Member has had an opportunity to speak to all of those 400 parents and so can speak on their behalf on why the process is inadequate.

Mr Storey: I do not need to.

Mr O'Dowd: He does not need to. In that case, he is a mind reader in addition to all the other talents that I know he has.

The fact of the matter is that 600 parents, minus 24, who applied to stage 2 have had their children placed. Parents did not enter the second stage for a variety of reasons. It might well be the case that parents were disappointed that they did not get their first choice, and I accept the Member's point on that. We cannot set up a system where all parents will be able to get into their first preference. We have a proven and tested formula that works, and I encourage those parents who did not apply to stage 2 to go back to their education and library boards and seek information on whether there are settings available in their area that would suit them. I am continuing to approve additional settings. My officials are continuing to work with the board in the preschool education advisory groups to see where additional places are required, and that work will continue. I certainly cannot accept that the 400 parents withdrew themselves from the system because they found it to be unacceptable. There are a variety of reasons why parents did not come back to the system. My duty of care was to the parents of the 600 children who did come back into the system.

Mr McDevitt: I note the positive change that the Minister has made on July and August birthdays. Can he clarify to the House why he thinks that it is possible to perpetuate a policy that supports one section of the community while clearly discriminating against another section of the community? When will he realise and accept that the only fair and equitable way of addressing the needs of this group of young children is through the statutory right to a preschool or nursery place at age three?

Mr O'Dowd: The Member never ceases to amaze me. A member of the Social Democratic and Labour Party is criticising me for having in place positive discrimination that benefits children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Is it now the policy of the Social Democratic and Labour Party —

Mr McDevitt: [Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Please let the Minister answer.

Mr O'Dowd: — that you will criticise policies that benefit children from socially deprived areas? All the evidence points to the fact that if you make early interventions in the lives of people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, you not only give that individual a chance in life but you allow that individual to become a valuable member of society who can contribute to it. I will not apologise for the measure. In fact, we should be proud of the measure. As part of the review, when the full implications of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 become clear, we will widen the criteria to include those families from low-income backgrounds who are out working. That is the next measure in this. In this instance, the policy of positive discrimination is a good policy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that it is not the convention in the House to interrupt a Minister when he is answering. The next time that it happens, I will simply move on.

Education: All-island Working

3. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the work that he is undertaking on an all-island basis in conjunction with his counterpart in the Dublin Government.

(AQO 2123/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Through the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC), I am working to progress a wide range of educational issues. Ministers agreed at the most recent North/South Ministerial Council, held on 1 February, to proceed with a joint survey to inform cross-border pupil movement and school planning. The survey is scheduled to be conducted in the autumn of 2012, and I hope that it can generate widespread participation. The future approach to service delivery at the Middletown Centre for Autism will be discussed at the NSMC meeting this Friday, 15 June. Other work includes the educational underachievement and literacy and numeracy working group, the inclusion and diversity service, the working group on teacher qualifications and the dissolving boundaries programme.

3.15 pm

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. Will he give an update on the proposals to offer the teachers' Irish language requirement in higher education institutions here in the North?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes. We are continuing to work on that proposal. It is an important development in allowing teachers to work on either side of the border, given the differing qualifications required. We have set a mechanism that will ensure that trainee and qualified teachers in this jurisdiction can achieve a qualification to allow them to work in either jurisdiction.

Mr Campbell: The Minister mentioned the NSMC. If he is in attendance at the next British-Irish Council meeting, will he ensure that his counterparts throughout the length and breadth of the rest of United Kingdom are aware of the excellent education system that we have in Northern Ireland and the fact that we intend to make it better for every child?

Mr O'Dowd: I have no difficulty in engaging with my colleagues in other jurisdictions. In fact, I have recently corresponded with Michael Gove, the Education Minister in England, and with the Education Ministers in Wales and Scotland. I am happy to report that the Education Ministers in Wales and Scotland have agreed to meet me to discuss recent announcements made by Minister Gove about A levels and GCSEs. I am happy to discuss with them the qualities and challenges in our education system, because the Member is perfectly correct: we have to make our education system excellent for everyone.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire chomh maith as ucht a chuid freagraí go nuige. Could the Minister provide us with some detail on what discussions have taken place between departmental officials and the Central Applications Office on making third-level courses more accessible to students from the North?

Mr O'Dowd: That is more of a question for Minister Farry as it is about third-level education, and I am sure that he would be happy to respond to it.

Mr Allister: It may be of no concern to the Minister but, from the perspective of the hard-pressed taxpayer, will he take any steps to ensure that the Republic of Ireland's Government pay for the 400-plus pupils from the Republic who enjoy free education in Northern Ireland schools?

Mr O'Dowd: As a hard-pressed taxpayer, I can assure the Member that central to the delivery of all my policies is an assurance that the taxpayer gets value for money and that all taxpayers are treated equitably. We have an agreement in place with my counterpart in Dublin to ensure that the costs of pupils who travel in either direction are covered. I assure the Member that, as a result of the continuing work of the North/South Ministerial Council, it is recognised that co-operation across the border is a more effective and efficient way of running government than ignoring each other.

Mr Kinahan: Does the Minister have the results of the survey on parental opinion on cross-border education that were promised a few months ago?

Mr O'Dowd: I will clarify that for the Member: the survey will hopefully be agreed at this week's meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in education format, and the actual survey will be conducted over the autumn. The results will not be available until January 2013.

Education and Skills Authority Bill

4. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister of Education when he will introduce the Education and Skills Authority Bill.

(AQO 2124/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Bill is being finalised for approval by the Executive. I hope to introduce it shortly, with the aim that it will complete its Second Stage before the summer recess. That timescale is later than I had hoped, but it leaves time for careful scrutiny by the Education Committee in the autumn and for the Bill to become law before 1 April 2013. The Programme for Government commitment for the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) remains on course.

Mr Swann: Can the Minister detail what plans he has to retain regional bodies that will either represent or respect the regional needs of schools?

Mr O'Dowd: ESA will be the education body. However, the Member raises an important point. There will be local contact with ESA; it will be not a centralised service. I want to ensure that local connections between councils, schools and education facilities remain. I have not finalised any proposals for where offices — there will be offices — will be located, but that work will continue in my Department.

However, the clear message that I want to get out is that although it will be a single educational authority, ESA will be representative on the ground and available to schools, and it will be based in localities rather than in a central office in a particular area.

Mr G Robinson: If approved, how will the Bill benefit the controlled sector?

Mr O'Dowd: The Bill, if approved, will benefit all sectors because, at its heart, the Bill is about running a more efficient and effective management system that is fit for the 21st century. The education and library boards have served their purpose, as have other bodies. We are ensuring that we have a single education authority that will help raise educational standards across all sectors. The Education and Skills Authority Bill will also introduce a controlled education sector support body, which, for the first time, will

work directly with controlled schools and give them a voice in education.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I look forward the Bill coming before the Committee. How will the controlled, maintained, integrated and Irish-medium sectors and the wider community be represented on the ESA board?

Mr O'Dowd: The First Minister and the deputy First Minister have reached heads of agreement on, and the Bill will provide for how, the body will be made up. The transferors and trustees of maintained schools will retain their established legal right to membership and have four members each. The eight political members will be nominated under the d'Hondt mechanism, which will ensure local democratic accountability. Others will be chosen for their skills and competence to represent the community. I assure Members that I want to see a representative body at the head of education to ensure that all voices are heard for the benefit of education.

Mr Rogers: Thus far, how much has been spent on ESA?

Mr O'Dowd: I do not have the exact figures in front of me, but a significant period of planning has been put into ESA. It is regrettable that ESA has been delayed on several occasions. However, we must now focus on ensuring that we bring forward ESA, which is a Programme for Government commitment, and that we establish and have it in place to ensure an effective and efficient management system for the delivery of a public service.

Schools: Bullying

5. **Mr A Maskey** asked the Minister of Education how his Department's anti-bullying policies compare with those in the Irish Republic and Britain. (AQO 2125/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The policy position here, in the South and in Britain is that bullying behaviour is unacceptable. Bullying behaviour, for any reason and in every form, has no place in schools. All schools have a role to play in teaching respect for diversity and should support pupils who have been subjected to bullying.

Although the underpinning policy is the same, the approach used across Britain, in the South and here does vary. All grant-aided schools here are required by law to include, in their discipline policy, measures to prevent all forms of bullying among pupils. It is a matter for schools to determine, in consultation with pupils and parents, the details of their policy. The publication 'Pastoral Care in Schools: Promoting Positive Behaviour' offers detailed guidance on tackling bullying. This guidance is intended to stimulate discussion in a school around the issue of bullying. It is intended to encourage collective ownership of the issue and the actions to be taken to counter it.

The position is similar in other jurisdictions in the South and in Britain. In Wales, schools must, by law, have a specific policy on bullying. Schools in England and in the South must have a behaviour policy that includes the prevention of bullying. In Scotland, schools are not legally obliged to have an anti-bullying policy, but it is recommended as good practice.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for that response. Will he outline any specific assistance that the Department here will give schools to help them to tackle and eradicate bullying?

Mr O'Dowd: As I said in relation to a previous matter, advice and guidance is available from education and library boards and from the Anti-Bullying Forum, the website of which I revisited just before coming to Question Time. That website is a useful tool to assist parents, pupils, elected representatives and schools' boards of governors in tackling bullying. Each board has a designated officer who assists in the development of whole-school policies and who supports individual pupils who have been victims of bullying. In-service teacher training is provided by each of the five education and library boards. Nominated teachers are provided with enhanced training to recognise and support young people in crisis, including those who have been subjected to bullying.

As I mentioned in response to a previous question, the examples I have seen of school councils and pupils taking ownership of the issue and dealing with it have been very positive. I think that it strengthens and builds the character of pupils as individuals and collectively when they are entrusted and charged with dealing with such issues. I also think that it helps to eradicate bullying much more quickly than any legislative process.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Members, there is too much talking in class. I need to hear what the Minister and other Members say. Otherwise, Members may complain.

Mr Elliott: Cyberbullying and social network bullying are more recent concepts in schools. Has any new guidance been given by the Department to schools, education and library boards or administrative bodies on how to deal more effectively with those forms of bullying?

Mr O'Dowd: There has. If my memory serves me correctly, last year's anti-bullying week focused on cyberbullying and the use of new technologies in bullying. Advice was given to parents, pupils and teachers on how to assist in the eradication of such matters.

Regardless of the format of bullying or whether it takes place in the playground, the classroom or outside school, it is wrong. It is based on power and someone wishing to impose their power on someone else, and it should be resisted and eradicated at all times. As elected representatives, we have a role to play in ensuring that the message goes out that bullying is wrong, and parents, families and communities have a similar role to play.

On the issue of cyberbullying and how parents can reassure themselves that their children are not subject to bullying through electronic equipment, I would again point Members to the Anti-Bullying Forum's website. It has a specific web page that will give great assistance to everyone and help to ensure that we eradicate cyberbullying.

Mr Byrne: I welcome what the Minister has said about the development of an anti-bullying strategy. Does the Minister accept that cyberbullying causes great havoc and pain to students and teachers? Will the Minister detail how many teachers have been on sick leave as a result of cyberbullying?

Mr O'Dowd: I do not have those figures in front of me. The Member touched on the important point that cyberbullying can not only affect the work and lives of pupils but can be used to abuse teachers. There have been a number of examples in the local and broader media of teachers being subjected to such abuse, and there is a responsibility on those who provide internet sites to ensure that they are managed properly and are used for the proper purposes. The other effect of cyberbullying is that it can deter young people in particular from getting the full benefits of ICT. I reiterate the simple message that any form of bullying is wrong.

Early Years (0-6) Strategy

6. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the implementation of the early years (0-6) strategy.

(AQO 2126/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The analysis of the consultation process is complete. I need to decide on the best approach to revisiting the draft early years (0-6) strategy in light of that analysis, taking into consideration the lapse in time from the original development of the strategy and the current context. I am committed to working with ministerial colleagues to enhance the delivery of a range of early years and early intervention services. Those must be balanced against the pressing need to deliver much-needed and sustainable improvements in early education.

A number of issues need to be addressed to strengthen the position of early education and its contribution to improved outcomes. Those require urgent attention. I am still reflecting on how I want to reshape the strategy, and I will publish the outcome of the consultation and set out the way forward when I am in a position to do so.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Minister for his response. In response to an earlier question, the Minister highlighted the importance of preschool education. Is the Minister aware of the concerns expressed by many that the draft strategy is more of a three-to-six-years strategy and of the growing body of opinion that more of an emphasis on the years nought to three is important?

Mr O'Dowd: Those concerns were clearly raised as part of the response to the draft early years (0-6) strategy. I agree with the concerns in one sense. All the time, we are improving our knowledge about years nought to three and the importance of intervention at that stage. I have had some useful discussions with the Health Minister about that matter, and I believe that he and I are on the same page about how both Departments can assist each other in improving the lives of our young people, their parents and, therefore, the community.

The 0-6 strategy was first developed in 2006. It went out to consultation, and there were several thousand respondents. As the consultation was ongoing, none of the Departments in the Executive stood still. We all moved forward with the knowledge that we had on how we would improve young people's lives and make positive interventions as early a stage as possible. I want to take all those measures into account before I move on. I have asked my officials to engage with officials in the Health Department with regard to how we can best move forward together on early years.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes Question Time.

3.30 pm

Committee Business

Economy: Innovation, Research and Development

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment on its inquiry into developing the Northern Ireland economy through innovation, research and development; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in conjunction with her Executive colleagues, to implement, as applicable, the recommendations contained therein. — [Mr A Maginness (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment).]

Mrs Cochrane: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the report and will make a few brief comments on its content.

Let me make it clear at the outset that, in considering our local economy, we must avoid viewing it through the prism of a post-Troubles haze, seeing it simply as a peripheral issue. It is not simply an optional add-on to the peace process. A fully functional economy complements and is complemented by a fully functioning society. If we seriously wish to tackle key issues such as division, poverty and unemployment, we must strive to develop an economy that generates jobs and prosperity.

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

One of the key challenges outlined in the report is the danger of a top-heavy focus on technical research and development in favour of an emphasis on commercial endeavours. The universities are perhaps warranted in their view that they could be better utilised, yet there is a real risk that the discussion will turn solely to product innovation, to the detriment of other areas.

Also in the report is a challenge to the risk-averse nature of government, particularly the fear of the scrutiny that could subsequently arise from ventures judged not to have been successful. One area that has suffered as a result of that inherent risk aversion is the green economy, embodied by the green new deal. It appears that fear of the unknown is a key factor in how the green new deal has been received. It now seems impossible for us to promote innovation and research and development when we fear the repercussions from those waiting in the wings. Our bureaucracy remains focused on process and not on outcomes.

A major shortcoming in the report is the absence of focus on exports. If we genuinely wish to develop an innovative and competitive economy, fundamentally, there needs to be an enhanced emphasis on researching and developing goods and services that people outside Northern Ireland are willing to purchase. In many ways, such a solution would begin to address some of the questions I raised previously about the areas in which local research and development should be focused; ideally, in exportable sectors.

The overarching focus and the sentiments underlying the report are worthy of merit, and it is on those principles that I support the motion. As we move forward, we must remain vigilant about the significance of the economy in all the decisions we make, as well as giving the necessary consideration to proposed reforms and placing a renewed and concerted focus on defining and developing our exportable sectors.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment's important report on developing the economy through innovation, research and development. I commend the work carried out by all those involved in this lengthy process, including the Committee and all who contributed from outside: industry, universities, colleges and other organisations.

The Committee endeavoured to find out why the uptake of European funding through framework programme 7 was so very low and why business expenditure on R&D in Northern Ireland was heavily focused on a small number of companies, with just 10 companies accounting for 57% of business in R&D in 2009. During the Committee's evidence sessions, it was clear that a lot of good work has been done by universities, colleges and local councils, working alongside large businesses and SMEs, through programmes and in collaboration in order to develop access to funding through European framework programme 7. A lot of good work is ongoing, but there is a clear risk of duplication of providers. There is a definite need for more consistency in research and development funding.

Unfortunately, organisations face many barriers. There is a lack of awareness of the opportunities that are available, and SMEs, especially, are not aware of their eligibility to avail themselves of them. Some do not recognise that the work that they do is part of R&D. Many companies, including some larger companies that we visited, do not access European funding as they do not have the resources, such as personnel, time and finances, available to dedicate to R&D. Others do not have the knowledge and skills available to go through the application process for R&D projects. There is also clear reluctance among some businesses to get involved in R&D because of the risk of committing resources to where there is no certainty of success. Today, many companies cannot afford to take such risks. Intellectual property risks were also recognised as a barrier. Many companies see collaboration with other firms as a risk: often, they could end up as competitors in the same marketplace.

Having to work through the unnecessary and repetitive bureaucracy involved in the programmes and related administration was often flagged up as a concern. The need for collaboration with partners doing similar work throughout Europe was a major stumbling block, although some SMEs had assistance, which was fully recognised, from Invest NI and Queen's University, often through partnerships in the Republic of Ireland. One company that we heard evidence from spoke of its work on framework programme 7 and told how the lead-in time for the development of the project was up to four years, which was far too long for a small business trying to compete and survive in these tough economic times. The cost to that company of completing its proposals was £35,000, which is a huge outlay for an SME, especially as it could take at least four years before it saw any real return. The risk is too high for such small businesses.

DETI recognises that R&D will play an important role in attracting FDI to Northern Ireland. More needs to be done to co-ordinate all the key players who are in place to support businesses. We need a more holistic approach and to establish a high-level group to co-ordinate, gather knowledge, benchmark and get strategic direction for all R&D activity. A clear and consistent approach must be put in place across government, business and academia in Northern Ireland. The new programme of European support, Horizon 2020, must be much more responsive to the needs of businesses in Northern Ireland. A smarter system must be put in place to allow businesses to maximise funding opportunities through R&D. I support the motion.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Committee staff, the Chair and the rapporteur who carried out many hours of good work on the inquiry. The debate can tend to be arduous and boring because nobody speaks against the motion, so I will not speak for too long.

Research and development is an interesting and important area of work for our economy. If we can manage it correctly, it will be a massive area of growth, particularly in two of our most important sectors: energy and agrifood. Right across the European Union, there is huge potential for R&D and a huge proposed change in how it will be managed and funded. So we need a lot more flexibility from government here, from local government and at European level, as well as our private sector. It should be a two-way process in which companies are enabled to be more flexible, and they are willing to be more flexible and to adapt much more quickly to the changes in the pipeline.

Many Members who spoke previously focused on the challenges that SMEs face. SMEs find it tough to benefit from and set aside the resources to invest in R&D. The figures that we received as part of our initial research showed that the vast majority of R&D expenditure was down to a very small number of very large companies. The Executive and the Assembly should try to change that. I am glad that the Minister is here, and I encourage her to accept the report's recommendations. If she does, her Department and the private sector will have the support of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the House as a whole.

Mr Nesbitt: I welcome the report and the motion. I praise the Chairman and his Committee, in particular Robin Newton, who acted as rapporteur during the process.

Every now and then, we, as mankind, as it were, invent new ways of conducting business. Sometimes it is giving up bartering and inventing money, shops, town centres, out-of-town shopping centres and the internet as a vehicle for conducting commerce. So it is timely that we debate the report.

I open my remarks with a little context for change, innovation and the need for research and development. It was around 100 years ago that we saw the emergence of what we would now consider to be the first set of multinational companies: the likes of Procter and Gamble and Shell, to name two familiar names. A few years ago, a British economic historian by the name of Leslie Hannah compiled a list of the global top 100 companies of 1912, a century ago. By 1995, which is effectively within a lifetime,

48% of those companies — nearly half — had disappeared. Of the 100, 29 had gone bankrupt, and only 19 were still in the global top 100. There was no Microsoft, no Apple. In 1995, W F Woolworth was king of the high street. Not much sign of Woolies today. On the theme of the commercial high street, the Independent Retail Trade Association says that we are losing 1,000 small shops a year in Northern Ireland as we again change the way that we do business. The bottom line is that most things eventually fail. We need to understand that fact and ensure that we constantly change and evolve the dynamic through innovation and research and development.

Invention is, in some areas, in our DNA; for example, engineering. I understand that one Bombardier aircraft takes off somewhere on planet earth every three seconds. Nobody makes aeroplane wings like Bombardier in Belfast: we are a world leader in that regard and are constantly striving to innovate. In agrifood, perhaps the most impressive fact is that we now process and export the potato back to the United States, from whence it came a few centuries ago. We have, then, the exemplars and the mentors. We have access to finance through the European framework programme 7 and the forthcoming Horizon 2020. We have the capacity of our universities. In organisations such as Invest NI and InterTradelreland, we have the matchmakers who can go and seek that European finance. The incentives, the support and the confidence are, I believe, all there.

I finish with a personal experience, although it is backed by similar stories from many others I have spoken to who share a sense of frustration at how we sometimes treat intellectual property. I am interested to hear the Minister's thoughts on this narrative. Some years ago, I believed that I had an innovative service in the general area of communications. This was at the time of the US/NI investment conference, which was held, very successfully, in April 2008. You will remember that that conference attracted many high-powered US business executives but, inevitably, saw many others left at home, even though they desired to be there. I had an idea that I felt could max out the opportunity of those three days. I took my idea to Invest Northern Ireland, not for a development grant but as a service that I believed would have been of benefit to its operation, particularly beginning with the investment conference. I took a business proposition, ready to negotiate. The response began very positively: Invest Northern Ireland liked the idea. However, when we got down to the nitty-gritty, I was told that Invest NI actually contracted out all its communications to a third party and felt that it would perhaps need to give the idea to that third party to exercise, which it realised was not really an option. The only other option was to put it out to tender. Of course, to draw up a tender document would have forced Invest NI to disclose my intellectual property. So, in fact, we went nowhere.

I hope that we can use the publication of the report to spur us on to think imaginatively about how to max out the potential for innovation to be the growth engine for the private sector and, perhaps —

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

Mr Nesbitt: — a catalyst for a new spirit of entrepreneurship in the public sector.

3.45 pm

Mr Newton: In supporting the motion, I, first, pay tribute to the work that has been done in this area by the Minister, her team and Invest Northern Ireland. The fact that it has been realised and that work has been going on in this important area gave the Committee some confidence to try to take it a stage further. I also pay tribute to Jim McManus and his team for putting the report together. It is an extremely professional report that was done succinctly and in a manner that encapsulated all the points that the research brought to the Committee. I also want to say a special thank you to Fergal Campbell, a young man who is with us as a graduate placement. He did the hard slog that was necessary in putting the report together.

I want to say only two things about the report; others have spoken widely about it. The report and the Committee recognise the importance of the manufacturing sector to the Northern Ireland economy. The Programme for Government recognises the need for the manufacturing sector to be expanded. However, we can expand only from the base that we have, recognising that low-cost products are no longer going to be manufactured in this part of the world and will be manufactured in an area that has a low-cost manufacturing base. In recognising that, there is only one way to go, and that is for the manufacturing base to look at high-technology products, which are high value-added products. High value-added and high-tech products require research and development and innovation.

I have already recognised that good work has been done, so how do we go or where do we go? The report has suggested to the Minister a pathway that can be followed and recognised as sensible. I want to speak about one area of the report. Recommendation 4 is that a mechanism should be put in place and resources allocated to support and improve the capacity and capability of organisations at all levels to participate in innovation and R&D. That encapsulates the ethos and culture of the report. In recognising that, it says two things to government and to industry. It says that we need to develop a culture of research and development. Companies, even SMEs, think about the manufacturing strategy, the marketing strategy or the finance strategy but ignore a strategy for research and development or innovation. In many cases, such companies believe that that is not applicable to them, when, in fact, their ethos and culture should be just as strong in their thinking on innovation and research as it is in their finance and marketing. The report highlights the need to take a strategic approach in Northern Ireland and says that a culture of R&D should be embedded in our companies, regardless of their size. There are ways of doing that.

The report highlights the need to make greater use of our universities. I recognise the capabilities and the good work of the University of Ulster and Queen's University, but there is more to be done, and I think both universities recognise that. There is also an opportunity for us to use the higher education colleges, as they have a contribution to make.

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

Mr Newton: Reference was made to the work of the Ulster Unionist MEP Diane Dodds did a good piece of work last week in announcing at a business breakfast a directory of support within FP7 and Wider Horizons, and I commend that to complement this work.

Mr Agnew: Like others, I support the motion and thank the Committee staff, the Chair and our rapporteur for their work on the report. Throughout the inquiry, there was consensus that R&D is of the utmost importance to the development of the Northern Ireland economy. The difficulties for companies engaging in R&D were continually highlighted, particularly by SMEs. Difficulties in securing funding and the high risk nature of R&D were highlighted. The particularly bureaucratic nature of the EU framework programme 7 was probably the most common cause for complaint.

Last week, we heard encouraging words from EU Commissioner for research and development, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, when she suggested that the processes for Horizon 2020 would be streamlined. We cannot be complacent, as there will be little point in complaining that the structures are inefficient and bureaucratic after they have been set up. We must be in there at the outset working to ensure that Horizon 2020 is designed in a way that meets the needs of our SMEs and addresses the challenges that have been highlighted in the report.

There is also work that we can do locally to promote that culture of R&D, and Robin Newton has just referred to it. Among the report's key recommendations is the need for a high-level steering group on research and development and the need for a single unit to integrate and co-ordinate R&D.

Another key recommendation, which has been referred to a number of times by various businesses, is the need for a quicker turnover of grant funding and the target for 30-day grant funding. By their nature, government processes can be slow and cautious, whereas the private sector is fast paced and must be risk-taking. We need to ensure that, in ensuring the best use of public funds, we do not overscrutinise our processes and negate the benefits that public spending seeks to achieve.

As I said, I support the motion and the report, but there was one area where I differed from the rest of the Committee and from some of the comments of the report, and that was in the purported link between the promotion of R&D and a low corporation tax rate. Countries that consistently lead on innovation have not followed that approach. In countries such as Finland, Sweden and Denmark, the public sector has led the way, and each of those countries spends around 1% of its GDP on R&D. If you compare that to Northern Ireland, you will see our combined public and private sector spend on R&D equates to around 0.7% of GDP. It is worth noting that the EU target is 3%. Finland, Denmark and Sweden are all consistently high achievers on innovation. They all have corporation tax levels in and around the mid-20s. They have not sought the low tax approach but have been judged to produce the best results. We are being asked to spend like Sweden but cut taxes like Ireland. In an ideal world, that would be a great approach, but, in the reality of our straitened financial times, that is not a viable way forward. Professor Steve Smith from Exeter University states:

"All the international and UK evidence points to one inescapable conclusion: in R&D, it is governmental spending that leverages out private sector spending and is a magnet for private investment and, for inward investment."

The Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee recently visited the Northern Ireland Advanced Composites and Engineering Centre. One member, the owner of a local company, stated that, if we did not start to produce more PhD students in engineering, his company would have to go elsewhere. That highlights the seriousness and the nature of the challenge we face. We must invest in human capital if we are to achieve success and innovation, and we cannot do that if we drastically cut public spending due to a reduction in corporation tax.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. The area of innovation, research and development will become an increasingly important driver in our local economy in the years ahead; that is widely accepted. At present, it is widely considered to be the case that we do not perform to our potential in the innovation, research and development sector. Last week, colleagues and I were particularly glad to welcome EU Commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, who sat with and listened to us. Mrs Overend mentioned that as well. Some of her comments during the meeting were refreshing to hear. More on that later.

It is clear from the work of the ETI Committee that there is support for companies wishing to invest in innovation, research and development through a number of programmes and sources of funding. Companies that are already engaging with such support mechanisms value them and recognise the benefits they provide. It is also clear that there are problems. Although there has been a recent increase in R&D expenditure, it is still comparatively low. Also, that expenditure is heavily focused on a small number of companies, with just 10 companies accounting for around 57% of business R&D investment in 2009.

The bureaucracy associated with the administrative process was highlighted as an area of concern. It was particularly refreshing to hear Commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, because she grasped the detail and understood the complexities and the difficulties that people face when trying to cut through red tape. You were there, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Indeed, the illustrative example she gave of her staff presenting the detail and complexities to the higher levels of the European Union was refreshing to hear. We hope that progress will be made on the back of that.

The current economic climate is an additional restricting factor for companies that are weary of the perceived risks of becoming involved in innovation and R&D programmes. There is a lack of understanding and experience of managing that risk. There is also a lack of awareness of the opportunities and support available for innovation and R&D. That is a particular problem for small and medium-sized enterprises. I think that it is widely accepted that we expect a lot of the growth to come from those small and medium-sized enterprises, many of which are based and grounded in local communities. That is where the stability of business is: businesses rooted in local communities. Indeed, the Minister has been out and about visiting local firms, and I have criss-crossed with her on a number of occasions. Those people have a grasp of the local economy, and they need support, particularly in research and development.

There is also a shortage of available venture capital. However, we should note that there are good programmes for businesses and academia investing in innovation and

R&D, and the participants are largely supportive of those programmes. They include international R&D programmes and EU programmes such as framework programme 7. There are UK-wide programmes, ones specific to Northern Ireland for which Invest NI has responsibility, and all-Ireland programmes through InterTradeIreland. Some local councils have also put in place programmes. Universities and colleges are working well with businesses across many areas. However, many respondents made a repeated call for a more integrated and better co-ordinated and planned holistic approach. In particular, they called for an access point for information about what programmes and resources are available. That seemed to be a common theme, especially among small and medium-sized enterprises, the local firms that are trying their best to maintain their business at the current level but could do with a bit more specialist advice about accessing the funding and resources they require to do it a bit better and to expand as a result.

There is a disconnect between and within the various sectors. That is where a high-level steering group comprising government, business and academia would provide a valuable role in providing advice on policy and overseeing the integration and co-ordination of all R&D activity.

We must be careful not to undermine the existing support programmes as we develop our approach. There must be continuing consultation with business and academia to ensure that everyone is fully convinced that we are taking the correct path. It is vital that we get this right. We need a clear vision of how we intend to develop and support innovation and R&D. The Committee's report is a good start. Hopefully, the Minister and the Executive will now take it forward. Go raibh maith agat.

4.00 pm

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I welcome the publication of the report by the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and join the Chair and others in thanking all of the staff involved in its preparation. I want to echo the Chair's words of thanks to the Committee rapporteur, Robin Newton, who was very enthusiastic. I remember being delighted when he told me that he had been appointed rapporteur. Then, unfortunately, ill health intervened. I am sure that the whole House is delighted that Robin is back with us and on the Committee again.

I do not intend to respond in detail to all the specifics in the report. I will, of course, give it my detailed consideration and respond more fully to the Committee request on its recommendations in the near future. However, on a general note, it is reassuring to see the clear synergies between the Committee's recommendations and what the Executive are doing now and plan to do in innovation and research and development. There is clear cross-party agreement on the important role that innovation and R&D must play in rebuilding and rebalancing our economy. That is reflected in the economic strategy that we launched just three months ago.

The underpinning theme of the strategy is the need to stimulate innovation, R&D and creativity. Innovation is not an economic priority because it is a nice thing to do; it is the key driver of productivity and economic growth. In the economic strategy, we set out some very clear actions

and what we propose to do to support Northern Ireland companies to invest further in innovation and research and development. Although research and development is, of course, essential to growing the economy, we must recognise the importance of wider aspects of innovation in driving productivity and economic growth.

Mr Nesbitt mentioned the retail sector, which does not automatically come to mind as one that would invest in research and development. Frankly, however, one of the most innovative schemes that I have come across recently is a Bangor retail company's bricks-and-clicks scheme. The company encourages people to visit its shop through its presence on the internet. It uses new technology as a way of drawing people into its retail business.

Research undertaken by NESTA reinforces the importance of innovation as being responsible for 63% of growth in productivity. Although we tend to concentrate on research and development, innovation is also key in moving our economy forward. It is also worth noting that investments in research and development made up just under 20% of innovation activities. I want more companies to invest in research and development. I want even more companies to innovate, whether through training, design or, as in the bricks-and-clicks example, the adoption of new technologies and improved processes. Such innovation is critical if we are to improve our overall levels of productivity, particularly in areas such as retail, tourism and services.

The Committee rightly highlighted that the annual expenditure on research and development in Northern Ireland has not been as high as it should have been and that the level of innovation activity in our firms has been very low. I accept that. However, it is important to point out that we are beginning to make progress. Mrs Overend was absolutely right to point out that business expenditure on research and development is very low. However, another statistic shows that it has improved by 95% over the past five years. As is always the case, you pick your statistic. It is important that we reflect that there is much more to do, but progress is being made.

Time prevents me from addressing all the recommendations, but I want to comment on a few of the most pertinent. The first is the Committee's recommendation that there should be a clear vision for innovation and research and development in Northern Ireland. I welcome this and can confirm that we have put the first stage of that in place through the economic strategy's prioritisation of innovation, creativity and R&D as its key underpinning theme. As Members will be aware, the economic strategy will be supplemented by an innovation strategy and accompanying action plan, which will be published later this year. The Committee's report is, therefore, very timely in informing the development of that draft strategy, and I will welcome further engagement with the Committee as the innovation strategy is developed over the coming months.

An innovation strategy and vision without ownership across stakeholders and leadership to drive implementation would accomplish very little, it has to be said. Therefore, I welcome the Committee's recommendation for the establishment of a high-level steering group, something that was mentioned by a number of Members, which will comprise representatives of business, academia and government to oversee and co-ordinate innovation and R&D policy.

In the economic strategy, we undertook to examine the need for the establishment of an innovation council to ensure that we had an operational example of the classic innovation triple helix at the highest level, with the Executive, academia and business working together to fully encourage greater innovation across the Northern Ireland economy. We have drawn heavily on best practice from other countries such as Finland, and the scope and remit for an innovation council will be developed further as part of the innovation strategy. A key strand of the work of the innovation council will be to ensure that there is a genuine culture of innovation and research and development across government, business and academia in Northern Ireland, and to help us to forge partnerships outside our region.

The Committee's recognition of the importance of collaboration between stakeholders here in Northern Ireland and further afield is, therefore, very welcome. In working to encourage partnerships across borders, I am pleased to see that the Committee has placed particular emphasis on the need to increase drawdown of R&D funding under programmes such as FP7. I wholeheartedly agree with this. That is why, over the past 18 months, my Department has taken the lead in strengthening support mechanisms for firms and research organisations to participate in the framework programme and, perhaps just as importantly, to ensure that we in Northern Ireland are better placed to influence decisions on the development of Horizon 2020. As part of this, the Department will shortly appoint a Horizon 2020 manager whose task will be to ensure better co-ordination across the public and private sectors to help Northern Ireland capture a greater share of the £80 billion-plus that will be available through that scheme.

As part of the ongoing efforts to encourage a greater share of the European Union R&D funding, I was delighted last week to have the opportunity again to welcome Commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn to open a major conference aimed at helping firms and researchers to apply for European Union support, and to attend the Executive's economic subcommittee. I know that she also met colleagues in the Northern Ireland Assembly and Business Trust.

We have engaged with Máire Geoghegan-Quinn on a number of occasions, at the North/South Ministerial Council and here in Belfast. The very clear message was that she was listening to all the information that she had been given in relation to SMEs and the fact that they found it so incredibly difficult to get through the bureaucracy of European Union funding. Her key messages were about communication and simplification; she wants to see a more simplified process used because she has seen for herself the difficulties that companies have encountered. She also feels, and this point was raised by the Chair of the Committee today, that we need to communicate in a much more effective way to small companies that they may be able to be assisted in what they do through a European Union grant.

One key issue that she mentioned, which, again, has been mentioned by many Members today, was the balance of risk. She reflected that there is tension between, on the one hand, the Public Accounts Committee in relation to the accountability of how people use funding, whether that is here at a regional level or at European Union level with the Court of Auditors, and, on the other hand, allowing people to take risks to try to find the next big thing.

One point about research and development is that it is not always successful. There will be failures when one carries out research and development, so the same rules should not apply as apply to other funding streams. I discussed that with the Committee on one of my first visits to it back in 2008, but we in this House still need to get to grips with that point about funding for R&D.

On the issue of the bureaucracy surrounding European Union funding — and I know it was acknowledged by some Members — the innovation voucher that is used by Invest Northern Ireland is a hugely successful mechanism because the bureaucracy associated with FP7 and the other European funding streams is not associated with it. Indeed, to take up Mr Newton's point, it can be used for further and higher education colleges as well as universities. So, it is a very important part of what we are trying to do to encourage more people to get involved in innovation.

I am determined to see more Northern Ireland firms, researchers and government play an even greater part in moving innovation forward. I am very pleased that the Technology Strategy Board's chief executive, Iain Gray, was with us recently. He had a very productive meeting with the Committee Chair. Through the Technology Strategy Board, we want to build up what we are doing on knowledge transfer partnerships and the small business research initiative, both of which have been highlighted in the Committee report. The knowledge transfer partnership has been a genuine success story, with Northern Ireland research institutions and companies helping us to be the top performing region in the UK in that excellent programme. That is something that we should celebrate.

As the Committee highlighted, our companies have also been highly successful in competing in the small business research initiative. Northern Ireland firms make up three per cent of applicants to that innovative procurement scheme but have won 11% of the contracts and 12% of the money drawn down, which is an excellent performance.

The challenge that the Committee has highlighted is to ensure that we, as an Executive, also play our role as the biggest procurer of goods and services in Northern Ireland. I am pleased to report that we have already made progress in that: in 2010, we were the first devolved Administration to run an SBRI competition for tourism apps. However, we recognise that we must do more. DETI and the Central Procurement Directorate have been working closely on that topic, and a policy paper on innovative procurement has been endorsed by the procurement board. I can also confirm that innovative procurement, including SBRI, will feature strongly in the forthcoming innovation strategy.

I have covered most of the points raised by Members. Clearly, bureaucracy comes up time and time again, and Members are rightly saying that they want to see outputs measured as opposed to the processes that people have to go through. I mentioned growing our innovation culture in Northern Ireland, and Members all have a role to play on that issue in their own constituencies.

In closing, once more I thank the Committee and the Members who have contributed to this debate. Building our innovation and research capacity as a region is a long-term project. I accept that. We have made good progress to date, but I am confident that the Committee's report has made

a valuable contribution to the agenda, and I look forward to working with the Committee over the coming months as we develop the new innovation strategy.

Mr McKay (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. As Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I restate the Committee's appreciation to everyone who contributed to the inquiry. The Committee is grateful to everyone who provided written evidence and to those who appeared before the Committee to give oral evidence. That provided the Committee with a very valuable insight into innovation, research and development, and into the difficulties faced by universities, FE colleges, research institutions and in particular businesses that are involved in, or are for the first time seriously considering being involved in, innovation and research and development.

In his opening remarks, the Chairperson, Alban Maginness, highlighted the need for a co-ordinated, integrated and long-term approach to innovation and R&D. From the evidence considered by the Committee, it is clear that such an approach would be very much supported by universities and FE colleges, research institutions, businesses of all sizes and the government Departments.

To make the most of existing and future opportunities for R&D, we must have a long-term vision. That must include not only universities, large businesses and government, but small businesses, microbusinesses, local councils and organisations such as the Federation of Small Businesses and trade bodies.

4.15 pm

Stephen Moutray, Sandra Overend and Patsy McGlone all mentioned the low uptake of R&D among small businesses and the fact that only 10 companies account for the majority of R&D spend. Steven Agnew mentioned the need to increase the number of PhD students, which must be part of that same vision.

Stephen Moutray also mentioned the disconnect between government, business and academia; he commented on the need to include all three sectors, at all levels, in developing the structures, systems and processes for R&D. The Committee believes that that is an important first step in designing how we grow the research base in future. The vision must be one that says that any business, no matter how large or small, will be given opportunities and support to develop its good ideas into worthwhile products and services.

At present, many businesses regard R&D as an add-on. It also comes down to the issue of culture, which was mentioned by Robin Newton. He said that we have to recognise the need to develop high-tech, high-value products but that, first, we need to recognise that there are only particular markets in which we can compete and to adapt to those circumstances. R&D is seen as something that would be good to do if we had the time and resources. That attitude in the business community needs to change.

Stephen Moutray mentioned the benefits of putting in place a high-level steering group, which is one of the key recommendations in the report. Mike Nesbitt commented on the need for businesses to change constantly through

research and development in order to survive. Robin Newton, the rapporteur, spoke of the need for companies to think of strategies for R&D in the same way as they consider strategies for day-to-day activities.

The Department, the Executive, the universities and the business representative bodies all have responsibilities to come together to challenge and change attitudes to R&D, to share knowledge and information, and to provide practical support to all businesses when and where they need it. Increased support must be available to small businesses in particular to get them into the way of thinking that R&D is something that they can and must do.

The Committee has recommended new structures for R&D in the form of a steering group and a single unit to integrate and co-ordinate innovation and R&D activity. Sandra Overend considered the need for a more integrated and co-ordinated approach when she commented on the need to promote opportunities to all businesses. Steven Agnew highlighted the need to put in place appropriate structures to support research and development. Patsy McGlone also called for a more integrated and co-ordinated approach.

There seems to be quite a bit of confusion about the current structures for supporting R&D; many businesses simply do not know what support is available or what the nature of that support would be. Some respondents to the inquiry suggested that an innovation centre is required to act as a single point of contact for all R&D support. It was suggested that it should sit in Invest NI and be sited in the science park. The Committee has chosen not to make rigid recommendations about where the structures should be; it will be up to those with responsibility for developing the structures to agree the best place to base them.

The Committee found a surprising lack of awareness about the opportunities for R&D among businesses. Even when businesses know about programmes, they may not know how they can apply or whether they are eligible in the first place. Stephen Moutray mentioned the pressure and constraints that businesses, especially small companies, are under. Sandra Overend and Gordon Dunne also commented on the need for businesses to know what programmes are available to them and how to apply. There is clearly a need to raise awareness and to promote opportunities for R&D. Businesses need to be given support to apply for funding for research and development; they also need to be given practical, hands-on support where necessary to complete the application process.

We, as an Assembly, need to become more informed about research and development and to catch up with the rest of the island in particular. It is important that we learn from good practice elsewhere so that the programmes, systems and processes that we put in place to support R&D can compete with the best that others have to offer. It is also important that we look at our own strengths and weaknesses and understand the potential that exists here for government, business and academia to contribute to R&D.

Phil Flanagan mentioned the lack of resources that businesses have for R&D, and a number of Members also commented on the need to reduce the current high levels of bureaucracy and to support businesses to give them capacity and capability.

Gordon Dunne and Patsy McGlone commented on the risks that companies face in becoming involved in R&D, risks that may prevent them from reaching their full potential. It is only when that potential is known that proper support can be given to businesses to provide them with the capacity and capability to develop their good ideas and bring new and innovative goods and services to the market.

I also wish to comment on some of the short-term measures that the Committee recommended. Invest NI has a mentoring scheme in place for framework programme applicants. That is very commendable. Anything that can be done to increase participation and success rates in attracting European funding is to be welcomed. However, mentoring schemes are needed for all types of research and development activity. Many small and medium-sized enterprises and microbusinesses need support just to get started in R&D. It is when we get those small companies to start thinking about R&D as a key part of their business that we will have started to develop a real culture of research and development.

Businesses find it difficult, particularly in the current economic climate, to allocate funds to anything outside of what they would consider normal business activity. To have to wait for up to 90 days following submission of costs to receive funding can be prohibitive to many small businesses and can prevent them from becoming involved in research and development.

The Committee Chair commented on the need to make our processes more business-friendly by significantly reducing the delay between submission of costs and receipt of funding. The Executive will send out the message that the Assembly is serious about addressing the barriers to businesses becoming involved in research and development.

Judith Cochrane raised the issue of the need to focus on exports, and the report does focus on the need to commercialise research and development. That will result in new, innovative products and services, which, in turn, will make a significant contribution to exports.

Finally, I thank the Minister for her constructive and supportive comments in welcoming the report. She mentioned that research and development is a key driver for innovation and economic growth. The Committee welcomes the Minister's recognition that more needs to be done and her assurances that the position continues to improve. It looks forward to receiving a more detailed response from her in due course and very much welcomes her commitment and that of her Department to respond more fully to the report in the near future.

I commend the report to the House and ask Members to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment on its inquiry into developing the Northern Ireland economy through innovation, research and development; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in conjunction with her Executive colleagues, to implement, as applicable, the recommendations contained therein.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the next item of business, I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Private Members' Business

Criminal Justice: Murder of PSNI Officers

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer will have 10 minutes 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.

Before we begin, I advise Members of the need to take care in their contributions today. The first part of the motion refers to the sentences that were handed down for the murder of Constable Stephen Carroll. The House will know that the Director of Public Prosecutions has indicated his intention to refer matters to do with the sentencing of that case to the Court of Appeal for review. Although the referral has not yet been made, I ask Members to be mindful that those matters are expected to come before the Court of Appeal. I am sure that Members will be careful not to stray into the domain of the courts in Northern Ireland.

I also caution the House that I will expect the debate to focus on the key purpose of the motion, which is to call for a review of sentencing for the murder of PSNI officers, or on the amendment, which calls for a sentencing guidelines council. I ask Members not to stray into any other issue or refer to matters that are not directly related to the motion or the amendment, both of which are very clear-cut. If Members stray too far, I assure them that I will intervene very quickly.

Finally, the motion deals with sensitive and serious issues. I expect Members to be mindful of the dignity of the Assembly at all times. Let us move on.

Mr Craig: I beg to move

That this Assembly, in light of the sentences handed down to those responsible for the murder of Constable Stephen Carroll, calls for a review of sentencing for the murder of PSNI officers.

The DUP believes that this issue is of significant importance. On 9 March 2009, Constable Stephen Carroll was in the twenty-fourth year of carrying out his duty as a police officer and was brutally murdered in a terrorist plot in Craigavon. The whole community was stunned and had to come to terms with the first killing of a police officer for 11 years in Northern Ireland. At the end of March, Brendan McConville and John Paul Wootton received minimum sentences of 25 years and 14 years respectively for their parts in that callous murder. In the case of John Paul Wootton, the minimum sentence was lowered by Lord Justice Girvan to coincide with the ruling of Lord Woolf in the McCandless case of 2004. Clearly, it is thought that those under the age of 18 should be handed a lower sentence in contrast to adult perpetrators of murder. Although that may be true, the sheer belligerence of the act of killing a

serving police officer demonstrates a distinct knowledge and understanding of how to commit such an atrocious act.

Although that English ruling has been superseded by a newer framework in England, Northern Ireland does not fall under the new remit for longer tariffs to be administered. Subsequently, a lighter sentence was recently handed down. It should, therefore, be proper that Northern Ireland should have the same legislation as England in that regard. A minimum of 30 years is the sentence. In fact, in the Republic of Ireland, a similar conviction for the murder of a police officer could see a period of imprisonment of at least 40 years. The difference in those sentence periods in comparison with the actual sentences that were handed down suggests that PSNI officers do not hold the same degree of importance as their counterparts in England and the Irish Republic. A concern —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Craig: I will.

Mr Allister: The Member makes an interesting point, which is that we should have the same sentencing framework as in GB, which is set down in statutory form in the 2003 Act. Would he care to comment that, under the 2003 Act, the starting sentence for someone aged 17 at the time of committing the offence is not 30 years, but 12 years?

That is the current position under the 2003 Act. If the Member is advocating the 2003 Act, he is advocating exactly the de facto situation that we have. Is that not right?

4.30 pm

Mr Craig: The Member has raised a good point, and that is why, if he reads the motion carefully, he will see that I did not advocate an exact copy of the legislation in the rest of the UK. It is up to this House to decide what value we put on the life of a police officer. I agree with the Member if he is disagreeing with the minimum sentence of 12 years; I also disagree with that.

The sentence handed down to those who were responsible for the murder of Constable Carroll should act as a deterrent. In recent years, that, to my mind, has not been the case. It should be seen as a way to influence positive change in the sentences handed down to those who carry out horrific acts such as the murder and attempted murder of members of the security forces. It is important to highlight that the motion does not aim to create tension across the Benches. Rather, it is aimed at seeking clarification and assurances that any act of terrorism that attempts to claim or claims the life of a PSNI officer will be treated with severity through the judicial system.

The practice statement from the Court of Appeal in 2002 by Lord Woolf specifies the variation of starting points for life sentence offenders depending on their age and other mitigating factors that hold influence. A starting point of 15 to 16 years in the statement applies to cases where the killing was professional and politically motivated. The unfortunate reality in March 2009 was that this murder was carried out in a professional manner and had political ramifications, despite widespread condemnation from all sides of this Chamber.

The victim, Constable Carroll, was providing a public service and was specifically lured into position for the planned killing to take place. These factors all point towards this case being the most serious murder case since the formation of the Police Service of Northern Ireland. The recent Public Prosecution Service news release on the Wootton and McConville trial stated that it hoped that, following the trial process, the verdict:

"will bring a measure of comfort to Kate Carroll".

Inevitably, the outcome of the trial has demonstrated a concern, which many will recognise, about the sentence handed down to the offender. At the moment, there is, unfortunately, still a threat to police officers and members of the security forces. Those individuals are clear targets for dissident republicans, who are attempting to kill them. There is a feeling that the murder of a police officer or a member of the security forces should command the highest sentences possible.

The undue leniency of the sentence in this case leaves an open door to review, as I mentioned earlier, through the Court of Appeal. The Court of Appeal has a wide remit, and further consideration can be given to an increase in the sentence handed down. The seriousness of the offence and the widespread coverage that this case received should act as a precedent to demonstrate that future attacks or attempted murders of police officers should receive as high a sentence as possible from the judicial system.

The support of Lord Justice Girvan and the Police Federation of Northern Ireland's chairman, Terry Spence, for a review of sentencing policies is to be welcomed and demonstrates the collective view from both sides — the judicial system and the Police Federation — that new measures should be implemented to bring sentencing into line with law on the British mainland. In light of that, my party believes that it is of significant importance that a review of such sentences affecting attacks and attempted murders of police officers is carried out to give assurances to those who are presently affected and to support those who may become victims in the future.

Unfortunately, due to the lack of detail around the area, the DUP will not support the SDLP amendment calling for an independent council on sentences to be established. However, I have no difficulty whatsoever in commending the motion to the House. It is a motion that goes to the heart of policing in our community. What value do we put on the life of officers who we send out daily to take risks on our behalf so that our community will be safer? Unfortunately, I had to go to an incident last week where an attempt was made on the lives of two officers. That brought home to me the risks that those people take daily on our behalf to serve us, so it is only right that I commend the motion to the House.

Mr A Maginness: I beg to move the following amendment:
At end insert

“; and further calls for the establishment of an independent sentencing guidelines council for Northern Ireland.”

I do not think anybody in the House could fail to be moved by the reaction of Mrs Carroll to the murder of her husband, a serving police officer, and to the sentencing. Most, if not all, in the House would share that sense of concern and

outrage about what happened. That highlights the need for us, as legislators and public representatives, to send a very strong message to the community that we support the PSNI and officers in carrying out their duty serving the public. There is a need to send out a very strong message to those who attempt to murder and injure or do murder and injure police officers. It is very important that we send the very strong message that these are officers who serve and protect this community and uphold the law. Therefore, we are very supportive of the DUP motion.

The SDLP amendment also highlights an important issue to address now in a timely fashion. The Stephen Carroll case highlights the issues of public confidence and consistency in sentencing. It is important for us to remember that the public at times do not share the confidence that maybe we have in the justice system. Indeed, the 2008-09 Northern Ireland crime survey found that only 24% of respondents believed that the courts were effective at giving punishments that fitted the crime. Only 24% felt that the criminal justice system achieved the correct balance between the rights of offenders and victims. When asked what the criminal justice system could do to improve its public confidence rating, the largest proportion of respondents cited the need for tougher sentences. The case of Stephen Carroll highlights that. We believe, therefore, that it is appropriate to raise the issue in the House today. We regret the fact that the DUP will not support us in relation to that, but it is important to highlight the issue of a sentencing guidelines mechanism or council. Of course, the Department of Justice has conducted a consultation on that.

It is our view that a council should be the preferred method of dealing with sentencing and sentencing guidelines. That is because the council that exists in Britain serves a very useful public purpose in giving confidence to the public that sentencing will be appropriate and consistent. The Sentencing Council in Britain states that it will:

“promote a clear, fair and consistent approach to sentencing; produce analysis and research on sentencing; and work to improve public confidence in sentencing.”

It will also:

“prepare sentencing guidelines; publish the resource implications in respect of the guidelines it drafts and issues; monitor the operation and effect of its sentencing guidelines and draw conclusions; prepare a resource assessment to accompany new guidelines; promote awareness of sentencing and sentencing practice; and publish an annual report that includes the effect of sentencing and non sentencing practices.”

That council was chaired by a rather obscure Lord Justice, Lord Justice Leveson. He is not so obscure now. That council was important in informing the judiciary in relation to what the public felt. One of its functions is to help to educate public opinion on the difficult issue of sentencing. That should be the preferred option of this House, and I pay tribute to the Lord Chief Justice, Sir Declan Morgan, who set up a sentencing group in 2009. That group has been working, and he has expanded it. The group has been doing good and valuable work, but it is at the lower end of things. We believe that there is an added value to establishing a council similar to the one in Britain. The council would

be a combination of judges and laypeople and would be independent. There would be no political interference in that council, and it would have an educational role here in Northern Ireland. We ask all colleagues in the House to think carefully about our suggestion that that should be the preferred option.

I know that there are different views in the House, and I know that all of us are united in trying to move this forward and to win public confidence on sentencing. Let us go for the best option rather than for a mechanism that may not be fully effective in dealing with the issue that is so clearly highlighted by the Stephen Carroll case. That option is public confidence in sentencing and consistency in sentencing. I do not think it is up to us as legislators, at this point, to directly legislate on the sentencing of those convicted of the murder of a police officer. It may well be that, at some time in the future, we will have to legislate, but it is preferable that the Court of Appeal and the judiciary take into account the public views and the public concern of the Assembly in relation to the murder of police officers.

We in the SDLP have worked hard to support the PSNI. We believe that many young men and young women have joined the PSNI to serve the public valiantly and dutifully, and they deserve our utmost support. They should not be sold short, and, therefore, we are supportive of sending a very strong message to those who would seek to attack or murder police officers. There needs to be deterrence, and a very strong signal needs to be sent out that the murder of police officers will not be tolerated and that those who carry out and are convicted of those murders will face a very long and tough sentence.

This is a timely and proper motion to bring before the House. We are supportive of it, and we hope that colleagues will consider what we say, so that we can move forward on the issue together as a united House.

4.45 pm

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, Beidh mé ag labhairt ar son an leasaithe agus in éadan an rúin. Sinn Féin will support the amendment tabled by the SDLP. We thank the Members who brought the motion and the amendment to the Assembly today. Sinn Féin tabled an amendment calling for the establishment of a sentence guidance council because we believe that such a body would provide a fair, equitable, open and transparent process for producing appropriate sentences once a person is convicted. The DUP motion, in our opinion, moves away from those principles.

In the case of Stephen Carroll, I, like others, add my sympathy to his family and my condemnation of those who carried out his murder. Concerns have been raised by his widow, Kate — I acknowledge her presence in the Assembly today — and those concerns will now be addressed by the Court of Appeal. It is her right to do that, as it for any person who believes that a sentence is not appropriate. There is an ability to challenge that. In this instance, I believe that the mechanism has been employed correctly by the Director of Public Prosecutions. However, that in itself does not address the wider concerns in society about sentencing guidelines. Indeed, many people query the sentencing processes.

We have to ensure that the justice system and all its processes are based on equality and fairness. At present,

anyone convicted of murder receives a mandatory life sentence, and we have to ensure that people are not confused about what is a tariff and the fact that a person has been sentenced to life and that such a sentence is mandatory. As I have previously stated, criticism of the judicial systems and sentencing processes are not new, and one has only to consider the case of Harry Holland to verify all aspects of that concern and, in particular, some of the issues that we will address today.

Sinn Féin believes that there is a need for a clear and consistent approach to sentencing under the principles of fairness and equality. In our opinion, that will ensure maximum public confidence. Sentencing councils work successfully in other jurisdictions because they ensure that one of their core functions is to promote awareness among the public of the complexities and often the realities of sentencing. The Minister has stated his intention to set up a sentencing group as initiated by the Lord Chief Justice, and, although that may address some concerns, it is our belief that the Minister should go to the next level and put in place the mechanism that will inspire maximum public confidence, namely the sentencing guidance council model. That is the case because it is on a statutory footing.

In some ways, I am disappointed — I am sure that the DUP will respond to the contentions of Alban Maginness, who proposed the amendment — because, in my opinion, the House should not divide on this issue. The SDLP has proposed a fine amendment, and the original motion brings too narrow a focus to a very complex and sensitive issue. The SDLP amendment allows for all the issues raised today to be addressed through a sentencing council.

It is our responsibility as legislators to ensure that everyone is treated equally before the law, and the best method of delivering that in sentencing is, in our view, the model of the sentence council. Such a body should be placed on a statutory footing, covered by legislation, with guidelines that cannot be departed from without judicial explanation. In our view, that will address the many diverse and complex issues that the sentencing procedure entails and that have been brought to public attention. Indeed, such a council will cover all the issues arising from the Stephen Carroll case and will not prevent appropriate sentences when someone is convicted in the future. Therefore, we will support the amendment.

Mr Hussey: Article 1 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

The American declaration of independence, written in 1776, states:

"that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

In 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that was adopted by the United Nations declared:

"Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person."

Therefore, there is no argument that an individual has the right to life and, of course, that no individual has the right to take a life.

The human rights legislation goes further and dictates how someone who takes another person's life should be treated. It is within that that we have the call for the removal of capital punishment. Capital punishment is no longer an option open to the courts for the murder of a police officer or of any other individual. Some will agree with that restriction, and others will not. In our history, in 1973, the last man to be sentenced to hang was William Holden, and his death sentence was commuted.

We are aware of the policy of England and Wales in relation to the murder of a police officer. Schedule 21(5) to the Criminal Justice Act 2003, states that, if the offender is over 18 and the court considers the offence serious, the starting point for sentencing is a minimum term of 30 years. In the Republic of Ireland, the sentence is a minimum term of 40 years. Offences that would satisfy English law include:

"the murder of a police officer or prison officer in the course of his duty"

or

"a murder involving the use of a firearm or explosive".

So, clearly, in another part of this kingdom, the starting point would be more than 30 years' imprisonment for a person over 18, who, by use of a gun or explosive, chooses to murder a police officer, and, in the neighbouring Republic of Ireland, the starting point is 40 years.

I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board and as someone who had the honour to wear the uniform of the Royal Ulster Constabulary GC and the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Someone who is prepared to protect this community deserves the right to expect that this society treat those who murder police officers as being beneath contempt. I also believe that murder is murder and that a murderer should go to jail for the remainder of their natural life. The term "life imprisonment" should mean life imprisonment. In New South Wales, life imprisonment for murder is generally for the remainder of the prisoner's life, unless clemency is granted by the governor or governor-general.

Normally, we are looking at an offence committed by a person aged 18 or over because they are classed as adult. So, where do we go if the murderer is under 18? In the specific case that we are looking at, one of those convicted was 17 when the offence was committed. Was he any different then than he is now? As the case is subject to DPP review, I cannot comment further on his specific actions; however, had he been 21 at the time of the murder, his intent would have been exactly the same. People have to accept that in a civilised society it is not acceptable to murder a police officer in cold blood. At 17, you can legally marry, join the army, drive a car — in fact, our Environment Minister is considering reducing that age to sixteen and a half — so you are no legally different from someone who is 18. Most of your mental faculties and reasoning power would have been formed many years previously.

I believe that our law in relation to the murder of police officers must mirror that in England, as we are part of

the United Kingdom. I also believe that, given similar circumstances, the age of the perpetrator of the murder of a police officer is irrelevant. I would even be prepared to support the view that the law that applies in the Republic of Ireland should apply here and a 40-year tariff should apply.

Have the perpetrators learned anything from their act of terror? Mrs Carroll will never again have the opportunity to open the door to her husband, and it is Mrs Carroll who we need to have in our thoughts when we reach a decision on this matter. All those who are prepared to stand out on cold, dark nights when we are tucked up in our beds and, as members of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, put their life on the line for us deserve our support. The victim is the one we must remember at all times, not the perpetrator. As I said, human beings are endowed with reason, and nobody with a conscience would set out to murder anybody in cold blood.

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

Mr Hussey: I support the motion.

Mr Dickson: I begin by once again expressing my sympathy to Mrs Carroll and paying tribute to her husband, Stephen, a dedicated police officer who lost his life serving the whole community. His willingness to serve the public every day, including the night that he was murdered, contrasts so intensely with the cruelty and cowardice of those who carried out that attack. The events of that night have been repeatedly discussed in recent weeks. This cannot be an easy day for Mrs Carroll. Indeed, many more days will not be easy for her. I pay tribute to her dignified response to the sentencing and subsequent developments in the debate.

The Alliance Party supports the motion and opposes the amendment. In recent weeks, there has been much discussion about sentences for the murder of police officers and comparative sentences in England and Wales. Of course, one of the great benefits of devolution is that we no longer have to rely on other politicians when we respond to this type of public discussion in Northern Ireland. Devolution allows local representatives to engage with local people and give much greater consideration to their concerns.

As other Members have said, few crimes are as serious and as offensive as murder. Taking a life causes not only short-term distress but long-lasting pain and anguish for all those affected. It is important that such an offence is met with sentences that reflect the severity of the crime and the disgust with which it is regarded by society. Therefore, the Alliance Party supports a review of sentencing guidelines for all cases in which a life sentence of murder has been passed, including the murder of police officers.

I am somewhat surprised that an amendment was tabled by the SDLP. The Department of Justice's consultation on sentencing guidelines was issued in October 2010, and I note from the summary of responses of March 2011 that the SDLP did not respond, despite having ample opportunity to do so.

The Alliance Party is not prepared to support the establishment of an independent sentence guidelines council. On 23 June 2011, the Justice Committee was briefed on the responses to the consultation, and it was explained that there was overall support for a structured mechanism to deliver on sentencing guidelines. During the

consultation process, it was estimated that a sentencing guidelines council would cost Northern Ireland nearly half a million pounds annually. The majority of respondents agreed that, in a tough financial climate, a council or panel model does not represent value for money. The Alliance Party agrees that the adoption of either model cannot be justified when the objectives agreed for a sentencing guidelines mechanism can arguably be achieved by using existing structures. Moreover, there is an absence of evidence that such models boost public confidence in sentencing.

My party wants the views of victims to be represented. We want the provision of more information to allow for a better understanding of sentencing among the general public, and we want the public to be better engaged in the debate. To those ends, the Minister rightly put forward proposals to have a victims' representative on the judicial sentencing group, to install an interactive guide on sentencing on the NI Direct website and to develop a community engagement strategy on sentencing.

I am encouraged by the Department's intention to hold forums in the community. The response to the sentencing of Constable Carroll's killers once again shows that there is strong community interest in sentencing. Therefore, the Department's proposal for a representative of the judiciary and the main criminal justice agencies to attend those forums and engage directly with the public on sentencing is an important step that should be welcomed by the House. We also welcome the Lord Chief Justice's programme of action on sentencing. It is helping to improve transparency, consistency and public confidence and intersects, on many levels, with what the Minister is doing. We are moving forward effectively within the existing structures and without the need for a council that would cost —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone

Mr Dickson: — half a million pounds.

We should not lose sight of why we are having the debate. I finish by paying tribute to Mrs Carroll and her husband, Stephen. I welcome the public interest in sentencing and express my party's support for the original motion.

5.00 pm

Lord Morrow: This debate is taking place against a backdrop of some glaring inadequacies in the present legislation that are, in particular, evidenced by the sentences handed down to those who murdered Police Constable Stephen Carroll. Two individuals are now serving prison sentences for that dastardly crime.

The question is: why is there no specific offence of murdering a police officer? The murder of a police officer is treated in the criminal justice system as a normal murder of a person whose occupation happens to be that of police officer. In determining the sentence of a person who murders a police officer, the judge will consider aggravating factors to the crime, and being a police officer is one of them. However, murdering a serving police officer does not, under the guidelines, automatically bring a mandatory life sentence; rather, the starting tariff is 30 years. Discount will then be given for mitigating circumstances such as a guilty plea, etc.

There needs to be a debate on legislation for assaults and attacks on public servants performing their duty or linked to

the performance of it: when they are attacked when not at work but over something that is, in some way, linked to their work. At present, there is a separate charge definition for assaulting a police officer, so why not a separate definition for murdering a police officer? In respect of the murder of a police officer, a separate offence of "police murder" should be created and should carry a mandatory whole-of-life sentence. That offence would be committed when a person unlawfully kills, knowing that their victim was a police officer and intending to kill that person or is reckless as to whether death results.

We should look at legislation in the Republic of Ireland. The position there is set out in the Criminal Justice Act 1990, which places the requirement of a mandatory life sentence of 40 years, without the chance of parole, for those convicted of murdering Garda officers, prison officers or murder committed in an act against the state on behalf of a proscribed organisation for a political purpose.

Recently in my constituency, district judge Mr John Meehan sentenced a man to four months' custody for attacking two police officers. One was punched on the forehead and spat on; another, a female constable, was bitten on the arm. Judge Meehan remarked that although some may think that assaulting a police officer is not as bad as assaulting a civilian, he took the opposite view. So here we have a judge taking a stronger line because the victims were police officers.

As I have stated, a relevant specific charge of assaulting a police officer already exists. However, there is no specific charge of murdering a police officer, and that, in my opinion, needs to be urgently addressed. There is a fundamental discrepancy in this sphere of the justice system when the murder of a police officer carrying out the rule of law is not treated as a specific crime.

As the law stands, the gravity of the offence of murdering a police officer is understated in any sentence that will be parallel to the statutory murder tariff. It offers no additional deterrent to those who would seek to carry out their murderous activities, as we have witnessed with the dissident republicans who are becoming more active. Therefore, Northern Ireland in particular requires a change in the law, given the dissident republican threat against the police, the justice system and those who enforce it. We are fully aware that they remain the target. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the Assembly and of the Justice Department to give full protection by legislation to our serving police officers.

Mr Lynch: I support the motion and the amendment. My party colleague Raymond McCartney outlined some of the key issues, particularly in relation to Constable Stephen Carroll. Likewise, I send my condolences to his wife and family, who are here today.

I do not propose to repeat what Mr McCartney outlined; rather, I will deal with the issue of an independent sentencing guidelines council for this part of Ireland. In my opinion, a sentencing guidelines council would be the best vehicle to deal with the complex and often emotive issue of sentencing, especially for those families affected by the murder of a loved one, whether the person is a public servant or a member of the community.

It must not be forgotten in the context of sentencing that everyone is equal before the law and that everyone has the right to the equal protection and benefit of the law. Courts are often not best positioned to establish a complete system for dealing with sentencing, since they deal with cases one by one. Experience of other jurisdictions proves that even well-developed criminal justice systems eventually need a sentencing guidelines framework of some kind to guide the sentencing discretion.

The criticism, as outlined by my colleague Raymond McCartney, of judicial decisions and sentencing predates the case of Constable Stephen Carroll. Similar concerns have been raised in relation to such cases as Harry Holland and other high-profile cases. There is certainly a need for a clear and consistent approach to sentencing to improve public confidence in the criminal justice system. The 2010 Hillsborough agreement contained the commitment to establish a sentencing council. The DOJ recently published a consultation document on the issue, which presented three different models. The establishment of such a body would promote consistency in sentencing, deal appropriately with concerns that particular offences are not regarded with the appropriate degree of seriousness, bring greater transparency to sentencing and increase confidence in the criminal justice system, all of which should be based on the principles of fairness and justice.

The establishment of such a council would be a much more productive way to address the Holland and Carroll cases, rather than knee-jerk responses from politicians. I ask the House to support the motion and the amendment.

Mr S Anderson: I support the motion in my name and those of my colleagues. The motion has been brought because of the deep feelings of outrage, revulsion and disgust that were felt and expressed right across the community at the 14-year sentence handed down to one of those convicted of killing Constable Stephen Carroll. Constable Carroll was a dedicated police officer and a family man, who was shot dead by terrorists in my constituency. He was the first PSNI officer to be murdered. I am glad that the Director of Public Prosecutions has referred the case to the Court of Appeal. In light of that, I will try to confine my remarks to the broader issue.

We need to have a very tough sentencing regime to act as a deterrent against the crime of murder. Those who murder get off far too lightly. When we come to the murder of police officers, the crime somehow seems to be even worse and even more unforgivable. Police officers are the custodians of the rule of law, they put themselves on the front line against lawbreakers and criminals, and they do so to protect the whole community. That is why the murder of a police officer is greeted with revulsion and anger in any democratic society. Such a murder is a direct challenge to the rule of law.

In Northern Ireland, we know all about the murder of police officers. Some 300 RUC officers died at the hands of ruthless terrorists. Surely, the early release of prisoners under the Belfast Agreement was a studied insult to the memory and gallantry of all those brave officers. Thankfully, the murder of police officers is no longer a frequent or regular occurrence. However, two PSNI officers — Constable Stephen Carroll and Constable Ronan Kerr — have been murdered by dissident republican groups, and that is two too

many. They were killed because they dared to want to serve the community. The community must unite as never before to demand tougher sentences for those who, for whatever reason or for whatever warped cause, go out and murder police officers.

Kate Carroll, in stark contrast with those who murdered her husband, has been an example to us all. I had the sad task, as the then Mayor of Craigavon, of having to visit Kate and her family at her home just after Stephen was killed. She has been given a life sentence, and will never see her husband again. However, she has shown enormous courage, restraint and dignity in coping with her loss. My thoughts and prayers are with her as she tries to come to terms with that great loss.

Although a justice of sorts has now been done, Mrs Carroll has rightly described the 14-year sentence handed down to one of those convicted, who has shown no remorse, as "disgusting". She said:

"It gives the message out that it is fine to kill a policeman here because you get a small rap on the knuckles whereas in England you get the full term."

It does seem absurd that sentences for the murder of police officers are not as tough here as they are in England, where the minimum term is 30 years.

Mrs Carroll also made the valid point that it is the younger and more impressionable who are being sucked into terrorist activity. Stiffer sentences would surely act as a deterrent to that particular group. How tragic that such young people are being drawn towards terrorism. What a contrast with those young people joining the ranks of the PSNI. Dissident republican terrorists are intent on deterring young people, mainly from the Roman Catholic community, from joining the PSNI because of fear of assassination. It is, therefore, vital that we do all we can to ensure that they do not succeed with this aim. If we want to encourage young people to choose policing as a career, one way of doing that would be to ensure that that career is made safer because those who murder police officers will go to prison, and go to prison for a very long time.

Our motion calls for a review of sentencing. The judge in the murder trial has himself called for such a review. There has already been some debate about who should take the lead in this. The DPP and the Court of Appeal have a role, but I feel that the Justice Minister cannot and must not sidestep the issue. He has the power and the duty to look at that legislation.

Turning briefly to the amendment, I do not believe that we need to establish yet another body. Surely, the DPP and the Department of Justice should be able to work together and with other relevant parties to ensure that something is done. Justice demands a tougher sentencing regime. Sentencing demands it. Action must be taken, and taken soon. I support the motion.

Mr Elliott: I thank colleagues and Members for bringing forward the motion today for debate in the Assembly. Like all other Members who have spoken, I pay tribute to the late Constable Stephen Carroll for being the dedicated police officer that he was serving this community. I pay tribute to his wife and family, who are now left without a husband and a father. Many of us in this community know what that

has been like down the years. Many of us have visited the homes of those families. All we can do is hope and pray that that will come to an end and we will no longer have to continue to carry out that role.

Sentencing guidelines is a huge issue. I listened to Mr Maginness talk about the proposed amendment to bring forward a sentencing council or something to that effect. I listened to others talk about what is required and that those who are under the age of 21 can be sentenced for only so long. I have to tell you, this is not rocket science. Everybody knows what is required. I do not think that we need commissions, quangos or councils to tell us. The general public know what is required. They know that if somebody murders a policeman in cold, brutal terms, having gone out with the idea and mentality to do that, they should be sentenced to the longest term possible. Whether that is 30 years or 40 years, I think the longer the better. We should not be in the situation where we are delaying any longer. I look forward to hearing with what speed the Minister will bring forward proposals. We do not need any more delays. We have had our debate. We have had our consultation. We know what the public are thinking. This has been about for a long time now. We just need to get on and do it. We need to react to what people believe and think.

5.15 pm

There needs to be deterrents. There needs to be deterrents for those who have murder on their mind; for those who have taking life from other human beings on their mind; for those who take the life of people and good citizens who go out to serve the community and who want to serve all the people here in Northern Ireland. There are some people who need that deterrent. They need to know that they are going to be punished, whether that is for the murder of Stephen Carroll, Ronan Kerr or anybody else. They certainly need to know that they will suffer severe consequences. To me, life should mean life.

I know that people make mistakes in life. They do not go through life without making those mistakes. If they were to show some remorse and indicate how sorry they were, maybe there could be a more lenient look at it. Down the years, however, I have seen that many of the people who carry out those murders and those terrible acts and deeds show no remorse. They show no feelings for the grieving family who have been left behind. That is the huge difficulty.

Some of those people will be released within 11, 12, 13, 14 years to, perhaps, live a very comfortable life beyond that. If they showed remorse and wanted to help society move forward, maybe we could look at that in a more positive vein. Without that, no sympathy should be shown to those people; they should get a life sentence, and a life sentence should mean a life sentence. They should stay in jail until their life is ended, so that they know exactly what it is like for the people who have been left on the outside.

Mr G Robinson: The sentence that was handed down recently to someone convicted of the murder of courageous PSNI officer Stephen Carroll is a disgrace and should be interpreted as lowering the value of a police officer's life. All our police officers must be highly valued, so a life sentence must be the only tariff, with life meaning life. In other words, there must be a strict and absolute deterrent.

I have been approached by serving and former officers who feel that anything less than life imprisonment for the killer of a police officer is totally unsatisfactory. I urge the Minister to review the current sentence guidelines and to seek to greatly strengthen them in line with English law, under which a perpetrator aged over 18 attracts a 30-year sentence. I sympathise with Mrs Carroll and her family. As far as I am concerned, we are all part of Great Britain, so the laws here in Northern Ireland should be the same as those in GB.

As many points have been covered, I state my support for the DUP motion and urge all MLAs to support this very worthwhile motion in support of all our dedicated police officers who protect life and property day and night.

Mr Allister: The murder of Constable Carroll was foul and wicked in every sense, and I am sure the thoughts of us all continue to be with his family. However, the murder was no more foul and wicked than the murder of 300 members of the RUC down through the years. There are Members who should hang their heads in shame with regard to the protestations they make about the inadequacy of the sentencing of those convicted of the murder of police officers. Some of them are the same people who campaigned for, supported and demanded the introduction of the early release scheme under the Belfast Agreement, when the murderers of many police officers had their sentences cut short and were released back into the community. Those who, today, call for stiff sentences for the murder of police officers, should, therefore, examine their past commitment on the issue in respect of what they had to say and what they campaigned for.

The sentences are often inadequate, but they are at their most inadequate when that which is imposed is terminated by a release policy, the gates are opened, and they are ushered out at the behest of a political process. That is a classic illustration of the corruption that is brought to a sentencing process when it is politicised, and politics demand that sentences are cut short. That was wrong then, and it is still wrong.

Many people have said that the present sentencing regime should be as it is in GB. I have a lot of sympathy and empathy with that. Let us be clear: if Constable Carroll had been murdered in England or Wales, some people seem to think that under the 2003 legislation, the sentence would have been 30 years, but, in fact, it would probably have been a whole life sentence. Under schedule 1 to the 2003 Act, it is provided that, where the motivation is political, a whole life sentence is available for such a person. Where it is not political, and the murder is that of the police officer, the sentence available is 30 years. However, the 2003 Act makes a distinction in respect of young people. Indeed, historically, for as long as one can go through many of the statutes in this regard, that distinction has been made. Those who say that we should have had the English system should reflect on the fact that under the 2003 English Act, the starting point for someone who is under 18 when they murder is in fact 12 years. It is a surprise to me that we have had this debate given that the real focus of dissatisfaction flows from the sentence of one of the persons who was under 18. We have had this debate, and no one has addressed that issue. Is it right or wrong that the sentence for a young person should be less than that for an adult? This House can talk about all these issues, but unless it addresses that issue, it is not addressing the

crux of the matter whatsoever. Therefore, that is something that needs to be carefully addressed.

In this case, I feel that the judge was acting within the parameters that he had to act within. He took the starting point, added a little to it and gave the sentence that he gave. However, our system allows a review, and the review has been activated. The opportunity now exists for the Court of Appeal to examine what has been happening in England, to draw as it did on the McCandless case and the English experience at that time and to say what the experience is now, in light of what should now be the approach to this issue, and it can review the sentences in that regard. It has that facility so we do not need a sentence advisory council. That would be an unnecessary encumbrance on the system. It is not necessary.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time has almost gone.

Mr Allister: A scope of sentences is available that can be made adequate, and if it comes to it, let us put it in legislation, but let us deal with the issue, rather than run away with it, which some have.

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): I congratulate Jonathan Craig and his colleagues on obtaining this debate and welcome the interest that has been expressed all around the Chamber in these very important issues.

Like others, I will start my speech by paying tribute to the work of Constable Stephen Carroll and his colleagues in the PSNI and express my sympathy to Mrs Kate Carroll for the dignified way in which she has responded to her tragic circumstances. The fact that the circumstances of Stephen Carroll's murder have now been rehearsed so openly in recent weeks can only have added to her pain and grief. I have had the opportunity to speak to her over the weekend and this afternoon, and I want to pay tribute to her and acknowledge the courage and dignity with which she has put forward her case and represented many other police families at the same time.

No decent person could be unmoved by the emotive yet always dignified response that Kate Carroll has made to the sentencing issue of Stephen's murderers. What she has said has struck a chord with many people and has been reflected in every part of the House this afternoon.

As has been said, it is certainly the case that the devolution of justice powers gives us the opportunity to be more responsive to the concerns of people in this jurisdiction, and we need to give serious consideration to the views that have been expressed. We in the Chamber do not always agree easily on approaches to justice matters. However, it seems that there has been very strong support for the points made by Jonathan Craig, in proposing the motion, and Alban Maginness, in proposing the amendment: we need to send a strong message of support for police officers in general and recognise the gravity of the crime that was inflicted on Stephen Carroll. I have been greatly concerned about this subject for some time.

The legislation governing the determination of tariffs that applies to us is the Life Sentences (Northern Ireland) Order 2001. Under that legislation, the setting of a tariff is at the discretion of the court, guided by sentencing guidelines. As others have reflected, that has been updated in other jurisdictions since then. Lord Justice Girvan has already

said that he believes that the current guidelines require reconsideration. I certainly welcome what was possibly a unique statement for a trial judge, reflecting his concerns about that. The guidelines have been in place for some time. We have seen different guidelines developed in England and Wales, our most comparable jurisdiction. Others have referred to the situation in the Republic in relation to the murder of police officers or prison officers, or other particularly serious categories of murder. We should reiterate the point that has just been made again by Jim Allister: Members can quote 30 years, or perhaps 25 years or a whole life for the murder of police officers, depending on the motivation, in England and Wales, but the tariff for anybody who is under the age of 18 when they commit a murder there is 12 years. I must say that I share the view that Kate Carroll expressed to me, which is that it is very difficult to tell the difference between somebody who is 17 years and 10 months and somebody who is 18 years and one month.

The Director of Public Prosecutions has quite properly referred Wootton's case to the Court of Appeal, which means that the court will now have the opportunity to consider those matters. I do not think that it would be right for me as Minister to take any precipitate action before the court has had the opportunity to rule. It is the role of government to determine the legislative framework within which courts make their decisions. Other jurisdictions have legislated for different minimum tariffs. That was not the case 11 years ago, but I believe that the time is now right to review the arrangements in Northern Ireland. Therefore, once the Court of Appeal has had the opportunity to consider the Wootton case, my Department will put in place a wider review of the legislation governing the determination of tariffs where the court has passed a life sentence for murder.

The review will include, but will obviously not be limited to, the murder of police officers. In the context of today's debate, it is clear that the issue of police officers will be a significant part of that review. At that stage, I will want to hear all relevant views on what sentencing should be. This case, while demonstrating all too clearly the impact that an individual case can have on public confidence, has shown the level of interest and engagement that there now is in justice issues under devolution.

Members raised a number of issues about how —

Mr McCartney: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ford: Yes.

Mr McCartney: In relation to the Minister's announcement about a review, is he saying that he will wait until the Court of Appeal rules on the Stephen Carroll case before he initiates a review or that he will do that immediately?

Mr Ford: I am saying that I believe that it is appropriate to wait for the formal outcome of the Wootton referral to the Court of Appeal. However, preparatory work is under way in the Department to ensure that we can move speedily when that case comes through.

I am glad to say that we now have an environment in which we can discuss openly and frankly issues such as this. I believe that the debate in the House this afternoon has been very positive. I want to build on that by taking the issue to the wider public, rather than just confining

it to the Chamber, in order to have a consultation on an appropriate sentencing guidelines mechanism, with greater transparency, consistency and community engagement to ensure that sentencing applies in a way that promotes public confidence.

Justice Committee members will be aware, following discussions with my officials, that I was influenced by two particular factors as I looked at the outcome of the consultation on sentencing guidelines. There was a specific issue around value for money and another around the specific development, unique to Northern Ireland, that is coming forward from the judiciary.

The amendment calls for an independent sentencing guidelines council. That is something that, in the past, I have spoken about the need to consider. Indeed, it arose during the Hillsborough Castle discussions that led to the devolution of justice powers. However, we have to acknowledge that such models can be costly to establish, costly to maintain, and in the current financial climate, it would be remiss of any Minister to ignore those kinds of concerns if we can provide an appropriate way of addressing sentencing mechanisms that provides confidence without the formalities of a bureaucratic system.

5.30 pm

The separate judicial development to which I just referred is the programme of action initiated by the Lord Chief Justice. That is something that contains a number of measures to enhance the structures by which the judiciary ensures consistent and fair sentences. For the first time, we will have sentencing guidelines for the Magistrates' Court, which was not previously acknowledged. Guidelines for 67 offences have been developed and published, covering both the Magistrates' Court and Crown Courts. Although Alban Maginness said that they were mostly at the lower end, they cover crimes such as manslaughter, child cruelty, hate crime, tiger kidnapping, duty evasion and serious sexual offences. Although there was certainly a need for guidelines in the Magistrates' Courts, the work being led by the Lord Chief Justice covers a range of serious offences.

There is also, for the first time, public consultation on areas where guidelines should be developed. Those are really the things that I would wish a guidelines council to produce. The others around community engagement can and will be led by the Department. I believe that what I am proposing as Minister can meet what we would have hoped to have seen from a formal sentencing guidelines council without unnecessary expenditure. I have not picked up any particular evidence internationally that a formal statutory council would do anything more to improve public confidence.

I believe that the judiciary has shown that it is not unresponsive to public concerns, and the Lord Chief Justice's programme of action is a clear indication of that. So, too, was the response of Lord Justice Girvan to the concerns expressed by Kate Carroll and the wider public on the Wootton case. I believe that those are significant steps forward in this jurisdiction, providing for improved consistency and transparency in sentencing. However, I believe that we also need to do more.

One of the key gaps that needs to be addressed is the issue of community engagement, which is why I can announce today that the Lord Chief Justice has agreed

to my request that he should include lay members on the judicial sentencing group, a group that he has established under his programme for action to identify areas where sentencing guidelines are required and to oversee the development of guidelines. There will be two lay members appointed through a public and transparent process, one of whom will represent the views of victims, because that is a particularly important perspective. We all know that, far too often, victims feel that their views are not recognised and their voices are not heard. I hope that the outcome of this debate will show that that is not the case. I believe that introducing lay members will open up the process, which has been seen as something of a closed shop until now. Sentencing benchmarks will be transparent. They will enable informed debate on sentencing issues outside the context of an individual case.

In tandem, I propose to develop a community engagement strategy to ensure a two-way flow of information on sentencing issues. We will pilot open forums in the community on a range of justice issues, attended by representatives of the judiciary and the main criminal justice agencies. It will be a two-way process, providing the opportunity to inform community representatives and others about sentencing practice and also, importantly, enabling communities to let us know about the issues of concern to them and allowing open and frank discussion of those issues.

As I have said, I am convinced that information on sentencing practice is central to the success of building public confidence in sentencing. Enhanced provision of data to the public on the NI Direct website and to the judiciary will also form part of the strategy. Those data will include sentencing statistics and information on work with offenders, on the effectiveness of various disposals and on ongoing developments across the justice system. The strategy will be an involving process, responding to the needs identified from ongoing community liaison and liaison with the judiciary.

I believe that the proposals that I am announcing today, which are tailored to local needs, will use local strengths. Alongside the work of the Lord Chief Justice and through existing structures and partnership working, I believe that they will enhance consistency, transparency and understanding of sentencing practice in a way that will promote public confidence, delivering the objectives set for a council, but without the need for a separate and costly body. I believe that the measures that I have announced should address the concerns raised by those who supported the amendment.

As I said, the mechanisms will be reviewed within two years to assess their effectiveness in achieving these objectives. If a case exists for a formal sentencing guidance council with statutory powers that go beyond what we have done, I will be prepared to look at that on the basis of the evidence.

I welcome the opportunity for the House to debate this important issue and, again, I acknowledge Kate Carroll's bravery and determination. We should not forget that although we have debated general issues today, the motion was brought about through one particular set of tragic circumstances.

I certainly support the thrust of the motion in calling for a review. All those convicted of murder are given a life sentence. That legislation does not require review, but what is needed, and what I have undertaken to do, is to review the legislation covering the setting of tariffs where the court has passed a life sentence for murder. I trust that I have explained why I believe that an independent sentencing guidelines council is neither appropriate nor necessary at this time, and I hope that Mr Maginness will consider not pressing his amendment in order that the House can be unanimous in its support of the motion.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his response. As we speak today, we are united in our sympathy for Mrs Carroll and her family. In their loss, she has become a figure of great dignity and great courage and, more recently, of reconciliation. That has come from her loss, and I thank her for that.

I welcome the motion and support the amendment. In sentencing those responsible for the murder of Constable Stephen Carroll, it is clear from the reaction of the Director of Public Prosecutions and the trial judge, Lord Justice Girvan, that the current guidelines require reconsideration. Lord Justice Girvan stated that the guidelines needed:

"to properly take into account the argument that there is a heightened need for deterrence and retribution in the fixing of tariffs, at least in relation to certain categories of murder including, in particular, the terrorist murder of a police officer."

One of those sentences has been referred to the Court of Appeal, where, hopefully, a more appropriate term may be applied.

We note the Justice Minister's announcement today of the inclusion of two lay members on the judicial sentencing group established by the Lord Chief Justice, and the fact that they will be appointed through a public appointments process. I welcome the news that one of them will represent victims. It is a small move; it is welcome, and it has to be seen as such. However, we do not believe that it goes far enough in establishing an independent sentencing guidelines mechanism.

At the outset, Mr Craig, who is always very wise in the case that he presents, said that what my colleague Mr Maginness proposed lacked detail. The consultation document on a sentencing guidelines mechanism contains quite a bit of detail, from page 26 onwards, on how the mechanism should and would work. The idea was put out for consultation, and my colleague went through the results in some detail in Committee.

In opposing our amendment, Mr Dickson said that existing structures should be used. Unfortunately, those existing structures do not appear to be working too well; otherwise, we would not be having this type of debate today. The Hillsborough agreement in 2010 contained a commitment to establish a sentencing guidelines council. The establishment of a clearly independent sentencing guidelines council would be the best way to achieve the high level of public confidence in our courts system that we all want to see.

Sentencing bodies across the world can and do carry out a range of functions, including drafting guidelines,

public education, disseminating information and resource management. Information on those bodies is contained at the beginning of the consultation document. When the Department of Justice consulted on the options for a sentencing guidelines mechanism, an independent sentencing guidelines council clearly appeared to be the preferred option among many respondents, yet it has not materialised. Instead, as I said, the Minister appears to be tinkering with the notion of the judicial sentencing group, with some additional measures.

Mr McCartney spoke extensively in favour of the amended motion, as did Mr Lynch, who also referred to the DOJ consultation document and the detail of models contained therein.

There is a cost to maintaining an independent sentencing guidelines council. Nobody disputes that: that is why it is supposed to be there. However, the long-term cost of failing to address a lack of public confidence in the court will inevitably be much higher. The costs involved concern the associated secretariat and support function, including legal expertise, research and analysis, community engagement and public education and administration. Some of those support functions are included in the proposals being made by the Minister but they come without the benefits of having an independent council.

I welcome the motion and support the amendment. Establishing an independent sentencing guidelines council, as set out in the Hillsborough agreement of 2010, would be the best way to review individual sentencing issues and ensure that a robust and independent sentencing guidelines mechanism exists that can secure and improve public confidence in our judicial system.

Mr Givan: I thank everyone for their contributions this afternoon. Constable Stephen Carroll was brutally and callously murdered on 9 March 2009 by republican terrorists. The police were deliberately lured into the area, and using an AK-47, the terrorists killed Constable Carroll. He served for over 20 years in the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Police Service of Northern Ireland and was the first officer to be killed serving in the PSNI. He joined the service on 13 March 1986.

Sadly, like Constable Carroll, so many of our gallant men and women serving in the police, in the then Royal Ulster Constabulary GC and in the PSNI, have been and continue to be the target of terrorist organisations. We in this House have a duty to defend those who have defended, and continue to defend, us and wider society.

Having been found guilty, Brendan McConville and John Paul Wootton were sentenced to 25 years and 14 years respectively. The response to the inadequacy of those sentences, particularly in respect of John Paul Wootton, has been almost universal consternation across our society.

Kate Carroll has shown great dignity and determination. I pay tribute to her for the work that she has done in leading this campaign, and I recognise her presence here today. I also thank the Minister for taking the time today to meet us. Kate Carroll has led the calls for a review of those sentences and a much greater and fundamental review of sentencing generally. Those calls have resonated across our community.

John Paul Wootton was found to be actively involved in that murderous act and wider activities of republican terrorism, specifically seeking to obtain personal information about police officers for use by terrorists. He also made a cold-hearted comment, which dehumanised police officers: "a cop is a cop". That clearly inferred that police officers were legitimate targets. The fact that that individual received a 14-year sentence has caused distress to the family and concern across our community about the leniency of the sentence, the message that it sends to terrorists targeting police officers, and the message it sends about the value that we place on the life of a police officer. Specifically, there are concerns about the message that it sends to terrorists: that they can actively recruit our young people to carry out those acts because of the lenient sentences that they will get because of their age.

I corresponded with the director of the Public Prosecution Service on behalf of Kate Carroll on this matter, seeking a referral to the Court of Appeal on the grounds that the sentence was unduly lenient. Significant discount was given to take account of the defendant's age, resulting in a reduction of 11 years, compared with the sentence given to Brendan McConville. I believe that the director would have had sufficient grounds to refer this without being invited to do so by Lord Justice Girvan when additional sentencing remarks were made. Those additional remarks were highly unusual, and I welcome the move by Lord Justice Girvan to seek his decision to be referred to the Court of Appeal, which the director of the PPS subsequently confirmed he will do. We await the grounds upon which he seeks that referral, as the general sentencing guidelines used need to be considered for future cases.

5.45 pm

Equally important is the opportunity for the Court of Appeal to deal with the leniency of the 14-year sentence given in the case of Wootton. I agree entirely with Lord Justice Girvan's comment, which Mr McGlone also quoted:

"I feel bound to express the view that the current guidelines and the case law based on them do require reconsideration to take account of modern conditions and to properly take into account the argument that there is a heightened need for deterrence and retribution in the fixing of tariffs, at least in relation to certain categories of murder including, in particular, the terrorist murder of a police officer".

After the case of R versus McCandless in 2004, the Court of Appeal failed to update the sentencing guidelines in Northern Ireland when it had the opportunity to do so to reflect the mandatory minimum terms prescribed in England and Wales through the Criminal Justice Act 2003. Instead, the Court of Appeal chose to continue to follow the 2000 practice direction of Lord Woolf that prevails today and to which Lord Justice Girvan felt constrained to adhere.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I will not because I have a lot more to say.

I trust that the Court of Appeal will now make the appropriate changes. Under the current law, it is for the Court of Appeal to consider this matter. The Assembly cannot answer for what happened prior to the devolution of policing and justice. However, the option is now available

to this place to create legislation that can provide the legal framework for sentencing similar to that which was passed in the 2003 Act at Westminster or, as many on this side of the House would argue, that goes much further. This option should be kept open as we await the response of the Court of Appeal.

Ultimately, it is the politicians who must be satisfied that the appropriate laws are in place to ensure the protection of our society. That is why I have concerns with the amendment. In principle, I have no objection to the establishment of an independent sentencing guidelines council, which was discussed in Committee a number of times. However, we feel that it is necessary to have much more information about how independent that council would be. We believe that we, the legislators, are ultimately responsible for defining the law. If we are not satisfied with sentencing guidelines, whether they are created by the Court of Appeal or a sentencing guidelines council, this place can take those decisions.

I have concerns about how the amendment is worded and about what exactly is meant by "independent". Would the House have the right to change a decision if a sentencing guidelines council decided something that we did not agree with? I am concerned about the detail of the amendment and that it would tie the Assembly's hands in looking at this issue in the future. Alban Maginness said that we should maybe not legislate now but left it open that this place could legislate on these matters at a future point.

The Court of Appeal now has an opportunity not only to deal with this specific case but to set a wider sentencing framework for this type of crime. Let it carry out that work, but let us be satisfied that what is put in place is what the people want. If we are not satisfied, let this place show that it is up to the challenge of creating legislation that introduces specific time frames that satisfy what I believe the public wants when it comes to the murder of a police officer.

I welcome the Minister's comments on the appointment of two lay members to the body that the Lord Chief Justice has established. It has been tasked with reviewing sentencing not only for murder but for a whole range of crimes and should be given the opportunity to do that work. We will await that body's response and production of a framework, and depending on whether we are satisfied with it, we can come back to it.

I thank everyone for their contribution. I will conclude by again commending Kate Carroll for the way in which she has led this campaign. I trust that the House will be unified. Hopefully, I have explained our position on the amendment. We have technical considerations rather than a fundamental difference in principle. Nevertheless, we do not feel that we can support it at this stage. I trust that the Assembly will, however, be able to come together to support the substantive motion.

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

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly, in light of the sentences handed down to those responsible for the murder of Constable Stephen

Carroll, calls for a review of sentencing for the murder of PSNI officers.

Adjourned at 5.50 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 12 June 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill: First Stage

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): I beg to introduce the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill [NIA 7/11-15], which is a Bill to make provision relating to an inquiry into institutional abuse between 1945 and 1995.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Local Government (Boundaries) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): I beg to move

That the draft Local Government (Boundaries) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

The order is made under section 50 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972, which stipulates that it must be laid in draft and approved by resolution of the Assembly. The purpose of the draft order is to give effect, with modifications, to the recommendations of the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner. The commissioner, as Members will know, recommended the boundaries and names of the 11 districts that are listed in section 1 of the Local Government (Boundaries) Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 and the number, boundaries and names of the wards into which each district is to be divided.

Members will be aware that my recommendation late last year to the Executive was a 15-council model, under which there would have been greater recognition of local character and identity, upfront costs would have been less, and the logistical and management issues would have been eased. However, as Members are also aware, the Executive voted in favour of an 11-council model. In doing so, they agreed two modifications to the commissioner's recommendations. They are outlined in the statement of reasons for modifications of the recommendations of the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner, which was laid in the Assembly along with the draft order.

The two modifications relate to the boundaries between the new Belfast district area and the new Lisburn/Castlereagh district area, one at Galwally and one at Ballyhanwood. The modification at Galwally places the Forestside shopping centre and the building that serves as Castlereagh Borough Council's headquarters in the new Lisburn/Castlereagh district rather than in the new Belfast district, as recommended by the commissioner.

At Ballyhanwood, two undeveloped fields have been moved from the new Belfast district to the new Lisburn/Castlereagh district, as any future development on this site is likely to be in keeping with land use at the Dundonald leisure park. Neither modification has an impact on the electorate in the two affected local government districts, although they will have an impact on the citizens and communities of those areas. No residential properties move in the Ballyhanwood modification, and only 10 residential properties move as part of the Galwally modification.

I also circulated a paper to Executive colleagues on a further modification at Warrenpoint. I understand that my proposal to the Executive had wide political support in the relevant area and had community endorsement; however, when my paper was circulated, the Office of the First and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) advised me that the boundaries had been settled and that, as a consequence, the door was closed on my proposal.

The review of public administration (RPA) was launched by the Northern Ireland Executive almost 10 years ago. After numerous delays to the reorganisation of local government, the history of which is well known here and outside, it is now time to take forward the Executive's decision. Although I have made my view clear on the issue of the number of councils, it is not inconsistent with my view that Northern Ireland needs a new phase of radical reform, protecting the reform achievements of the past 45 years, learning from the benefits of reform over those years and deepening reform across a wide section of public policy that includes, in my view, local government and local government reform.

In order to advance the reform agenda and to enable me to manage the Executive decision, which is my ministerial responsibility, I have established implementation structures to manage reorganisation. To name a number and to assist progress, I have appointed a regional transition committee (RTC), which I chair, to act as a mechanism for reform implementation and to allow elected members to provide high-level political leadership. I have established a regional transition operational board, comprised of government officials and council officers, to support the RTC and to co-ordinate the operational delivery of reform.

I have set up nine task-and-finish working groups to focus on the key areas of transferring functions: finance; human resources; legislation; pilots and community planning; programme delivery; communications; and system convergence. I have asked the voluntary transition committees to reconvene and to begin the preparations for convergence. Along with the statutory transition committees and shadow councils, when established, those reform structures will help to ensure that the 11 new councils are fully equipped to take up office after the next local government elections.

Beyond the politics of local government, the operation and practice of the reform of local government is a significant undertaking. In my view, it is a matter of regret that the once in a lifetime opportunity presented by RPA at this stage will not see the transfer of many significant functions from central government that would be better suited to local government, save that of planning. However, planning and the transfer of planning tell a tale, in that in a short period of three years, which is still adequate time, local councils will become the local planning authorities. Getting that right with resourcing, capacity, management, architecture, and to change the culture of local councils and councillors from being planning lobbyists, which is a proper and legitimate function of councillors, to being a planning authority responsible for planning decisions, local development plans and community planning, is the measure of what we need to achieve over the next three years.

The making of the boundaries order is a step in the creation of the 11 new councils and a development that can create stronger, more effective local government that will deliver

improved outcomes for everybody. Ultimately, that has to be the measure of what we are doing. Does the reorganisation of local councils create better, stronger, more effective, more accountable, better value and more efficient local councils that better reflect the interests and needs of those who we serve, citizens and ratepayers?

The agreement of the new council boundaries and number of wards also provides me with the opportunity to consider the position of councillors. I acknowledge their commitment in an environment that is demanding and carries risks. For many years, they provided a voice on behalf of the people, and continue to do so. I have said in the Chamber, and say again, that during the years of terror and civil conflict, councillors were the front line in maintaining and advancing democratic practice across the North. They did so, at times, at great personal cost, including risk to themselves and their families, and with great courage and, very often, with great integrity. As you will recall, Mr Speaker, they also did so with very little remuneration or income most of the time. They were heroes and heroines in a very dangerous civil conflict. Those who stood and held the line for democratic practice, accommodation and the best values to inform the development of this society deserve our appreciation and respect. I will be making a statement to the House before the summer about how to take forward recognition of councillors who are stepping down in the event of RPA and about severance arrangements in order to recognise their years of service, courage and the role they played in representing the needs of people, especially those most in need.

Circumstances in respect of the life of a councillor are changing and our Government is evolving. Today — we heard some of this yesterday — we have a consensus that it is not appropriate for an elected representative to hold more than one elected position. I took the first step in addressing that issue in April of this year, reducing by two thirds the allowances — basic and special responsibility — of councillors who hold another elected position. I also understand that, further to the work of the Commission's review of remuneration of Members, as of July this year, the reduced allowances that councillors now enjoy will be further adjusted with regard to their MLA income, reducing that third that is now in place by a further half.

Mr Weir: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am sorry to interrupt the Minister in full flow. Although I am keen to debate MLAs and councillors' pay to our hearts' content, with the greatest of respect, is this not straying quite a distance from the business before the House, which is the Local Government (Boundaries) Order (Northern Ireland)?

Mr Speaker: Order. It is certainly the Minister's prerogative. It is the Minister's statement, and I think we should allow the Minister to continue.

10.45 am

Mr Attwood: It is not common practice for a Member to object to good news. I can imagine what would happen if I were to give bad news. On this occasion, if the Member will listen further, he might consider, on behalf of his council colleagues, that this might be good news.

Mr Beggs: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In raising that point of order, should the Member have declared an interest? Perhaps someone has pressed the point that he is concerned about losing some money.

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Minister to continue.

Mr Attwood: If that is the principle, Mr Speaker, I anticipate that up to 30 Members will have to declare an interest should they choose to contribute to the debate. Up to 30 Members remain as councillors. That is their democratic choice, and it may or may not reflect the interests of the people who elected them. Those who continue to be councillors and MLAs need to get their head around that principle and decide whether that best serves the House, their local councils and the community that elected them.

The Executive have agreed proposals for the next stage in the process to deal with the issue of MLAs who are also councillors. There will be a statutory bar on a councillor holding more than a single elected position. I intend to include these provisions in a local government reorganisation Bill, which I propose, subject to Executive agreement, to introduce to the Assembly in the autumn.

When the previous Executive considered the planned reduction in the number of councils, they agreed to provide severance for outgoing councillors. The proposed ban on double-jobbing, and the adjustments already introduced to the allowances and special responsibility payments of MLAs who are councillors, provide a fresh backdrop against which I can give further consideration to severance for councillors who feel that it is time to step down. That will provide an opportunity for fresh hands to take up the reins and shape the policies of future councils. As I said, I shall bring a statement to the House before the summer recess.

The Executive have agreed that the functions that are to transfer from central government to local government should be fit for purpose, sufficiently resourced and rates neutral at the point of transfer. I stress those three principles: fit for purpose, sufficiently resourced and rates neutral. I reassure local councils and give a personal undertaking that those principles will be honoured. It will be shallow and shoddy practice if we end up with a situation in which the transfer of functions is done on the cheap in a way that is hostile to the authority of local councils and the interests of local citizens and communities, and, meanwhile, central government holds on to the resources and funds that should be appropriate to transfer to local councils in the event of reorganisation.

These principles — fit for purpose, sufficiently resourced and rates neutral at the point of transfer — cannot be compromised. Given that planning is the most significant function to be transferred, I will judge myself and the transfer of planning against those three standards. Otherwise, come RPA, on the day when councils begin to roll out development plans or make decisions on planning applications, there will not be the resources, capacity or personnel to ensure that that is done in a way that is consistent with the needs of communities, including local businesses.

I am also aware that the timing of the reinstatement of the voluntary transition committees did not enable councils to make the necessary financial provision to support them when striking the rates for the current year. Therefore, I am seeking, through the June monitoring round, to provide some assistance to the voluntary transition committees in this financial year. A number of councils, parties and individual Members have raised with me the issue of funding associated with RPA, and I have no doubt that a lot of

comments will be made about that during the debate. I will reply in substance to all of that at the end of the debate.

Recognising that this is an issue and that we need to ensure that there are sufficient resources to take forward RPA in the short term and given the need to roll out the sharing collaboration proposals through the improvement, collaboration and efficiency (ICE) programme brought forward by councillors, councils and council management last August, I am looking for support at June monitoring and through this debate for interventions to help councils to take forward all that work to ensure that the heavy responsibilities that fall to councils are properly attended to in the short term. On the far side of that and on the far side of the business case that is being reworked in the context of the costs of RPA, there may be further opportunities to provide some assistance to councils with the upfront costs of RPA.

I also believe that elected representatives, whether in councils, the Assembly or Westminster, should receive reasonable allowances to perform their civic duty. Following the reform of local government, councillors will take on more work as they will serve larger councils with increased functions, and it is only right that remuneration reflect that enhanced role. I intend to set up an independent panel to conduct a review of councils' remuneration and to advise me on the system and level of allowances that will be appropriate for the new councils.

I want to make sure that the 11 new councils are effective in delivering the Executive's vision of a strong and dynamic system of local government that is responsive to citizens' needs. If they are to achieve that, their policies need to follow the principles of good governance and equality of opportunity. We need only read the papers over the past 24 to 48 hours to wonder whether one or two councils across the North of Ireland still do not embrace and live up to the principles of good governance and equality of opportunity. I will ask officials to provide me with a report on the conduct of councils in which the principles of good government and equality of opportunity have, on the face of it, not been honoured in the election of senior officers over the past 24 or 48 hours. I believe that the new councils — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. There is no time limit on this debate; Members will have an opportunity to speak for as long as they want. *[Interruption.]* Order. Allow the Minister to continue.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You rightly outlined that we will have an opportunity to ask questions on this. Will we have an opportunity to ask questions on the boundaries or will we have an opportunity to ask questions on this ramble here today, which has no relevance to the boundaries?

Mr Speaker: Order. Members will have an opportunity to ask the Minister about whatever he has spoken on this morning in the Chamber. *[Interruption.]* Order. Allow the Minister to continue.

Mr Attwood: I welcome questions on anything that I have raised in the Chamber, both about boundaries and about the broader issue of RPA. I would be very surprised if, in preparing for this debate, as I am sure diligent Members have, they have not anticipated issues that they want to raise with me, not just about boundaries but about all other

issues that are relevant to RPA. Indeed, it would be remiss of Members not to do so in a debate such as this when they have the Floor for as long as they need. I remind Members that I have the Floor for as long as I need to respond as well.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for giving way and thank him for acknowledging the contribution of local councillors in Northern Ireland over the past 40 years; it will be reassuring to them. Councillors from all parties have shown compassion and passion throughout that period and at times, as you said, Minister, in very difficult circumstances in which their families have been put at risk by their courageous stand.

You made reference to radical reform being necessary, and part of the RPA is about bringing efficiency and value for money, but it is also about delivering economically and socially. There is a growing opinion in the north-west that, given its historical regeneration and cultural agenda, Derry City Council should remain intact or, at the very least, be amalgamated in some way with part of Limavady council.

Would the Minister not support that concept, which is gaining momentum as we carry on —

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind Members to keep their interventions brief. I indicated earlier that Members will have an opportunity to speak on whatever the Minister has said. The Minister is setting the scene around all of this, so Members from all sides will — *[Interruption.]* Order. Members from all sides will have an opportunity to question the Minister. Once again, the House is holding the Minister to account.

Mr Attwood: Mr Hazzard may regret that he has just said that we may be here all day. Before he joined the Assembly, my longest contribution was, I think, an hour and 35 minutes or an hour and 40 minutes.

Mr Flanagan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would just like to clarify that it was me who made that smart comment and not Mr Hazzard.

Mr Attwood: The point is still valid. Before Mr Flanagan joined the Assembly, my longest contribution was an hour and 40 minutes or maybe an hour and 45 minutes. I threatened my colleagues at the SDLP group meeting this morning that I intended to surpass that in my reply, so you may want to hold your breath.

Yes, there is a need for radical reform. That statement is not just from me; it is a statement from the councils. Why else would you bring forward proposals last August for savings of up to £570 million over 25 years through the sharing of and collaboration on services if not with the ambition of being radical? I do not know how it is not radical to say that there is a better way of maintaining and arguably improving services for ratepayers at a lower cost base.

The real issue is whether we are serious about the improvement, collaboration and efficiency programme. Are we serious about transferring significant functions to local government? Are we serious about taking the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that RPA presents to put in place the necessary structures and mechanisms? It seems to me that the Executive stumbled at one of the hurdles in

that challenge in respect of the issue of having 11 or 15 councils. However, that is where we are.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for giving way. He quoted a figure of savings in councils of 500 and something million pounds. I am wondering where that figure came out of. My recollection is that the PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) report stated 400 and something million pounds. So many figures are being bandied about that you do not know what to believe.

Mr Attwood: There are two headline figures, one of which is in the PwC report around what the savings may be from local government reorganisation. That business case and report is being updated. In late summer, I will have that updated report and business case on the costs, both upfront in terms of RPA and the potential savings over 10, 15, 20 and 25 years.

The second headline figure was produced by the councils themselves — by councillors and council management — in the ICE proposals of August 2011. Those essentially sought to establish how councils could more greatly share and collaborate on services in a way that reduced costs, maintained services, was more efficient and effective, and recognised the difficult circumstances faced by ratepayers and councillors alike. Out of that, you can get a headline for what the potential savings may be from RPA on one hand and sharing on the other.

I will return to the comments made by my colleague Mr Ramsey. Yes; it seems to me that in parts of the North — not everywhere but particularly in Fermanagh and along the west corridor, including in and around Derry — people are beginning to realise that previous political doubt about RPA happening has been replaced by political certainty that it will. It is my job to manage that decision. However, as the reality of RPA happening begins to impact, people are beginning to work through its consequences more fully.

11.00 am

In working through the political reality of RPA happening, there are clearly businesses in Fermanagh, councillors in Derry and many other people — citizens and communities — in between, who are beginning to ask whether 11 is best and whether a different number, be it 12 or 15 —

Lord Morrow: Change the record.

Mr Attwood: I am not going to change the record. Right? My obligation —

Lord Morrow: — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Minister to continue.

Mr Attwood: If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Lord Morrow: The record is broken —

Mr Attwood: The record is not broken. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Attwood: If it is broken, why do the Fermanagh Economic Development Organisation, the Irvinestown Trustee Enterprise Company and the Belleek Chamber of Commerce of Main Street, Belleek, and so on and so forth, write to

me? You are saying, Mr Morrow, to all those people —
[*Interruption.*]

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

Mr Attwood: Mr Morrow is saying —

Lord Morrow: Get on with it.

Mr Speaker: Order.

A Member: Lord.

Mr Attwood: Sorry. Lord Morrow is saying to Mr Gormley, the chairperson of Belleek Chamber of Commerce, and to Gerry McNulty, the company secretary of Irvinestown Trustee Enterprise Company — I could go on — that the record is broken. That is the response of a senior politician to people in Fermanagh raising questions and concerns about the decision of the Executive, which I, as I made clear, am implementing and managing, not least because I believe in the radical reform of local councils.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way. I do not think it wise counsel to say to people, who are articulating real concerns and fears, that they should “change the record.”

Lord Morrow: It is you we are saying it to.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for giving way. Minister, I am somewhat confused. I recall clearly that the DUP, at NILGA and across the party, stated its position that the 15-council model was its preferred option for these boundaries. Why has the DUP's position changed? I also recall that Mr Francie Molloy was at one time suspended from his own party, or under suspicion from it, in relation to Sinn Féin's proposal for a seven-council model. Does this response not smack more of a carve-up or a bad decision between Sinn Féin and the DUP than good government?
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Attwood: I will leave Lord Morrow and Mr Molloy to answer for themselves the questions raised by my colleague Mrs Kelly.

Mr Campbell: If they ever get the chance.

Mr Attwood: You will get the chance, a chance at length to do so, and I will be given the chance to respond at length to you.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Minister for giving way. He referred to a number of letters from concerned businesses and business organisations in Fermanagh. He asks what our answer to them is. However, the more pertinent question is this: what is the Minister's response to them? They have written to the Minister asking him to show leadership and to try to come up with some sort of solution that will alleviate the huge problem in Fermanagh where we are going to see what looks like a significant increase in domestic and non-domestic rates due to the historical underspend in Fermanagh in terms of the historical spend in Omagh. What businesses and citizens in Fermanagh are looking

for is some sort of positive leadership from the Minister whereby he will take forward that issue in the Executive and try to get it resolved as opposed to throwing out numbers, such as the 12-council, 13-council and 20-council models. The fact is that the Executive have agreed on an 11-council model. We need to accept that and try to mitigate any potential increase in rates for people in Fermanagh. That is the positive leadership that the Minister should show. I encourage you to do that, and if you do, I will completely support you.

Mr Attwood: I welcome those last words. As to complete support, I do not know anybody who completely supports anybody in anything. That would give them a licence to do what they want. I am a wee bit cautious. I seek support where I am doing what is necessary to try to protect ratepayers, citizens and communities. I will manage this process going forward. Whatever my view may have been about the 11-council model or the 15-council model, I have said and made it clear that I will manage the process going forward. I do not think that anybody can doubt that, in managing the process going forward, which involves a lot of difficulties, problems, issues and needs, over the past three or four months, I have applied myself, my officials and the Department to undertake that task and move forward in a positive way. If there is a contradiction in what Mr Flanagan says, it is this: I would not be getting all that correspondence, and other Ministers and Members would not be hearing that conversation, had the model been for 15 councils. Why? In a 15-council model, Fermanagh, like Belfast and six other councils throughout the North, would not be facing reorganisation.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will in a second.

Fermanagh would not be facing reorganisation and so would be able to deal with local issues in the context of a stand-alone Fermanagh council. Therefore, you cannot say that the only issue is the consequence of RPA, and I will deal with that in a second. You have to face up to the primary issue: you would not be getting representations, Mr Flanagan, or asking me, through you, Mr Speaker, Assembly questions about the very issues articulated by the various organisations that I have just outlined. Through the Assembly processes, you would not be asking me questions for written answer, which, on this occasion, I have answered, unless what Fermanagh people wanted, as implied in their correspondence, was a stand-alone, independent Fermanagh council. You cannot make an argument about the consequences of RPA without looking at the primary argument about RPA. So let us deal with the issue. I will, no doubt, deal with it in reply to comments later on in the debate.

I will let Mrs Kelly come in.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Minister, for allowing me to come in at this point. I am particularly struck by the fact that Fermanagh will be the only one of the 32 counties of Ireland without any local identity through its own council. Is that not a shocking statistic? One wonders about the leadership of MLAs from that county. Perhaps the Minister will indicate to the House the strength of feeling, on behalf of the people of County Fermanagh, of the political representatives at Assembly and council level.

Mr Flanagan: Before the Minister gets up, will he give way?

Mr Attwood: No. I will deal with that point, and then I will give way. Mr Speaker, my undertaking to you is that, today, I will give way to each and every Member who asks me to do so. That is why I think that the debate might not be over by lunchtime, but I may be proven —

Mr Flanagan: Tomorrow.

Mr Attwood: All day might yet, Mr Flanagan, mean all day.

Let us deal with the issue of leadership. Over a year ago, £80 million was allocated in a budget line known as the social investment fund. None of the £20 million for year 1 was spent — not a penny. Today, I will be asked what I am doing about local government funding, and I will deal with that. However, the Assembly voted on and approved that £20 million in March 2011, and not a penny of it was spent in 2011-12. I would put a little money on the fact that, by Christmas this year, very little, if any, of that budget line will have been spent. The consequence will be that it will all be spent, in my view, from December this year and in the two years thereafter, and there is a danger in that. The £80 million is in the budget line, but the allocations for year 1 and, thus far, year 2 have not been spent. There is no appraisal system for any projects that might be allocated money under the project and no management structures for the investment zones where that money might be spent. No members have been appointed to any management board. Is that a wise use of money when there is a sister programme called neighbourhood renewal on which that money could be spent and given that a hardship fund was set up by the Executive over a year ago, on my recommendation, to help people in need? Is that not a better way to spend that money? Is that not a better example of leadership? If you want to talk about leadership at a critical time when there are unspent moneys, the likelihood being that they might not be spent very quickly — never mind very wisely, which is a wider debate — and ask me about money and resources for policy priorities, let us have the full debate about that £80 million. If that money was split in various ways to deal with issues of need, maybe even to deal with the issues of local government reorganisation costs on the far side of the business case, we would be in a wiser place.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Minister for giving way. I take him back to one of his earlier points, when he said that I tabled questions for written answer. I have tabled questions for written answer, and organisations have sent numerous letters to the Minister, but not too many answers have come out of the Department of the Environment.

Mrs Kelly raised the issue of cultural identity being lost in Fermanagh. Perhaps she can explain why the three SDLP councillors in Fermanagh voted against the retention of townlands in Fermanagh, which will strip us completely of our cultural identity. The Minister made the point that people in Fermanagh are looking for a stand-alone, independent Fermanagh. That is not what the majority of people in Fermanagh are seeking. What we are seeking is that there will be no negative financial impact on ratepayers, but that we will still benefit from improved services and the economies of scale that will come from downsizing local government.

Talking of downsizing local government, let me take the Minister back to one of his party's policy papers, which was

published in April 2011, on downsizing Stormont. In that paper, the party advocated —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Flanagan: — that it would implement RPA on an 11-council model.

Mr Speaker: Order. I now must insist. Interventions are becoming speeches. The debate has already started through interventions. That worries me. Quite a number of Members want to make a contribution, but the debate should not be had through interventions. Interventions, in any other place, are sharp, straight and to the point. They are not speeches. The Minister is right; he has the Floor, and has the right to take interventions. However, interventions cannot turn into speeches. I am warning Members: interventions must be short, sharp and to the point.

Mr Attwood: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will deal with those issues, some of which have to be answered by the SDLP. Although I am an SDLP Member, I am here as a Minister. However, I will deal with them as best I can.

Let me make it very clear that I believe in radical reform. I believe in RPA. Although I have differences with colleagues around 15 councils, I am going to manage 11, and am demonstrating conclusively that I am managing 11. Officials in the Box will confirm the amount of time we spend on that and the preoccupation I have with getting it right. For example, we are trying to create structures within and around the Department, and with councils, to get community planning right. This is a huge opportunity, which we cannot lose, to reshape our communities in the interests of being better going forward. I make it very clear that the comments I am making are in that context.

I hope that the people of Fermanagh read the comments of Mr Flanagan and what he said about the issue of 11 councils or 15 councils. What he said, as I understand it, is that the people in Omagh who say that they do not want to go with Fermanagh but want to go with Strabane do not carry much weight; that the people in Fermanagh who say that they do not want to go with Omagh do not carry much weight; and that the people in Strabane who say that they want to go with Omagh and not with Derry do not carry much weight. That might be Mr Flanagan's sense of things, but, stepping back from the issue of 11 or 15 councils, that is not my sense of things.

Given the scale and size of the Fermanagh/Omagh council model, and given what a lot of the Omagh councillors and management have told me and what a lot of the councillors in Fermanagh have told me — not Sinn Féin councillors, who were silent during the course of that meeting — I do not think that that is a good read of the mood in Fermanagh. For those who do not live there, or have the intimate knowledge of the area that Mr Flanagan might have, does it not sound counterintuitive, if not wrong, that the people in Fermanagh are saying they have no difficulty going with Omagh and that, really, the issue is only around resources, assets, rates, convergence and debt profile?

Mr Molloy: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will in a second.

You might be right, Mr Flanagan. However, if that is your call on it, my sense is that you are misreading your own community.

11.15 am

Mr Molloy: I have a number of questions. The Minister seems to advocate county councils, which, when you look at the Six Counties, goes back to the seven-council model. I am surprised at what was said about a Fermanagh council for Fermanagh. Does he accept that the role of those who advocate working together on the improvement, collaboration and efficiency (ICE) programme, particularly the chief executive of Omagh District Council and any council chief executive, is to lead co-operation in the transition to the new councils? If we cannot get co-operation between Omagh and Fermanagh, how does he advocate putting the ICE programme together, because it would mean co-operation across all councils in the area?

Mr Attwood: I will deal with those questions, but there are some residual matters around townlands that were raised by Mr Flanagan. I think that the House is aware that the Pointer system means that we have the capacity to build townlands into the addresses of all government correspondence. I, for example, have issued an instruction that all DOE correspondence, in all its expressions, should have the townland name as part of the address.

Mr McCarthy: Hear, hear.

Mr Attwood: Thank you.

If Mr Flanagan would like to check any correspondence that he might receive from me, he will see that the Goodwood House address includes the number, street and townland name, which is Town Parks.

Mr Flanagan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a second.

I have instructed the Department that townland names should be incorporated into addresses in all its expressions. I know what question is coming from Mr Flanagan, so I may as well get the answer in before the question. I went further, and I wrote to all councils and said that they should incorporate townland names into their addresses. Did I, as Minister, support the notion that the addresses should be townland names only? No, I did not. Why? I did not support that because it could end up being hostile to the interests of local citizens. Why? Providers of services such as insurance could end up saying that they did not know where a particular place was. That might be unfortunate, but that is how insurance companies would have viewed it. They might have looked at a certain address and asked where it was.

In encouraging local councils to use the townland name in all correspondence, as I am rolling out in government, and I encourage all other Ministers to do the same, I made a judgement call that prescribing that it had to be the townland name and not the established address name would end up being hostile to the interests of local people.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Minister for giving way. Mr Speaker, I am well aware that townlands have been debated extensively in the House, but, perhaps the Minister will take on board the fact that parts of his Department issue letters and driving licences without townland names. I know people

in Fermanagh who have received a driving licence from DVANI without a townland name on it. They submitted a form that included their townland but got back a licence that did not. Maybe the Minister will agree to take that forward.

In his previous discussions on correspondence with Fermanagh District Council, the Minister was keen to emphasise that the council was very opposed to going in with Omagh. However, he will recollect that he has received numerous letters from Fermanagh District Council, as did his predecessors, seeking a change to legislation that would allow a council the option of naming a property against a townland, but he has refused to listen. If he is so interested in listening to the wishes of citizens and district councillors, why will he not take that on board? The Pointer system can facilitate an address in which a townland is the primary address.

Mr Speaker: Order. There have been many interventions, and I have warned Members. I will not warn them any longer; I will merely ask them to take their seat. The model of an intervention in other places is short, sharp and to the point. This morning, interventions from Members are ending up as statements, and that needs to stop. We also need to get back to the motion before the House. We allowed the Minister to set the scene this morning. I think that the scene has been set —

A Member: Right round the whole world.

Mr Speaker: Order. We should now try to move the business of the House on.

Mr Attwood: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Let us deal with the issues.

Mr Hussey: Will the Minister accept an intervention?

Mr Attwood: I will shortly.

Mr Speaker: Allow the Minister to deal with the previous intervention.

Mr Attwood: Let us deal with the issue of driving licences. I get a bit frustrated in my Department because every time I get an Assembly question about driving licences and the DVA and the DVLA, a standard paragraph is put into the response, which starts with, "Driving licensing is an excepted matter." That is the problem. I do not have control.

A Member: Of anything?

Mr Attwood: I have control of some things, but I wish that I had control of a lot more. We, as a Government and as an Assembly, should be scoping out, in the same way as the Scottish Government did through the Scotland Bill, ways and means of extending our opportunities for greater powers and greater control of the destiny of the people whom we represent. However, the problem is that it is an excepted matter.

If you go to Derry, Newry, Manchester, Swansea, Edinburgh, Newcastle, London, or wherever you want to go in Britain and Northern Ireland, you will get a licence. As I understand it, because that is standardised and is an excepted matter, we may not have the influence over the description of addresses that I would like to see. It is inconsistent. In the DOE private office, townland names are used, and I have instructed my agencies and the Department to use Pointer

to incorporate townland names. I have also written to all councils to say that I am in favour of townland names, without being prescriptive in a way that could be hostile to the interests of their citizens. Therefore, of course, I want to have townland names as part of driving licences. It follows. That is me being consistent. To use your words, that is "showing leadership", but, sometimes, because of the issue of excepted matters, I do not have full control of how some things are managed.

I am not sure about some of the points that Mr Molloy was getting at, but I am not going to comment about the views or the actions of chief executives, save to say that whatever our differences with management and councillors around the issue of 11 or 15 councils, we have three years, which is adequate time to get this right. However, it is not an extravagant amount of time. Everybody needs to apply their minds and their energies to making sure we get over that line. I understand that there are tensions around money and around the breadth of representation on regional transition committees and voluntary transition committees and when the latter become statutory, but this is still a once-in-a-lifetime political opportunity to reconfigure local councils in a way that serves interests better. If the horse has bolted on the issue of 11 or 15 councils, the horse has not bolted on the issue of making sure that local government measures up.

I do not understand one of the questions raised by Mr Molloy. If Fermanagh and Omagh can co-operate on shared and collaborative services, they should be doing it today. They should not wait until tomorrow or next year or for RPA, they should be doing it today. I have some frustrations that, in the period since August 2011, the gear change has not fully happened around ICE sharing and collaboration.

Newry council has an electricity framework that more and more councils are joining. Belfast council has a stationery framework that 22 or 23 councils have now joined. There is co-ordination between Banbridge, Craigavon and Armagh cluster in respect of the purchase of wheelie bins and the like. Those things should be happening now. I encourage chief executives and elected representatives to push on with the ICE programme because it is one of the interventions that can fund RPA and see better spend in council areas now.

Lord Morrow: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: On the far side of three years, is it beyond our imagination and ambition to identify savings, amounting to many millions, that can become part of the narrative of local councils being reconfigured in a better image?

Mr Hussey: First —

Lord Morrow: Who is it? Is it me?

Mr Speaker: I think that it was Ross Hussey who first indicated that he wanted the Minister to give way. I am sure that the Minister will take Lord Morrow's point afterwards.

Mr Hussey: First, I declare an interest as a member of Omagh District Council. Secondly, if anybody carries weight in the House, I certainly do. *[Laughter.]* I come from the townland of Dergmoney Lower. The Minister referred to collaboration between councils. Does he accept that there is very close collaboration between Omagh and Strabane

district councils? They do, after all, share a chief executive and other services?

Mr Attwood: I am sure that the Member will give further evidence of that in his subsequent contributions. From my sense of the place, my judgement is that Omagh and Strabane should be together because of their local identity and character in county terms. That is the balance of the argument, but that argument has not prevailed. I regret that, but that is where I am. Members will be able to articulate their views.

Mr Speaker, I have to immediately correct something that I got wrong. Mr Flanagan will be quite interested to know this, but it only begs further questions. I hold in my hand a driving licence. It is a UK driving licence for the reasons I explained. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Attwood: It is actually the driving licence of a Member, Karen McKeivitt. Should I give out your address?

Mrs McKeivitt: No problem.

Mr Attwood: The address is Lower Carrogs Road, Ballyholland. So, it appears that, unbeknownst to me, I have been able to prevail over the DVA to issue driving licences that include the townland. The power of my office knows no limits, it seems. *[Laughter.]* Apparently, you can get your townland name on a licence. That raises a question: if that is the case, why, at an official level, was that denied to somebody? You have a precedent here. I am sure that Mrs McKeivitt will photocopy that for you, so that you can, if you so wish, wave it in the face of some DVA official when you next apply for your licence.

Mr Flanagan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Speaker: Order. Before the Member rises, I am trying to work out in my mind what a driving licence has to do with the Local Government (Boundaries) Order. Really, we must get back to the motion and the business before the House. If your intervention very much relates to the motion before the House, I am happy to listen. However, if it is about driving licences, it is certainly nothing to do with the Local Government (Boundaries) Order.

Mr Attwood: I give way to Lord Morrow.

Lord Morrow: There certainly is confusion about what we are debating here today. The Order Paper states one thing, but the debate tells us something entirely and absolutely different. A precedent has been established here today that the Assembly will probably regret. We have opened the floodgates for any Minister to come in here and discuss anything that he or she wants. That, unfortunately, has happened today.

The Minister is referring, perhaps, to a lack of leadership — I am not using those words — in Omagh and Fermanagh. Does that not cry out for leadership from somewhere else then? If there is a lack of leadership in taking this forward, surely the Minister has a bounden responsibility and an obligation to provide leadership where he deems that it is lacking. For instance, we have established transition committees, but they are merely voluntary. In other words, they do not have to happen. It is the call of councils whether they want to have them.

Surely it is time for the Minister to concentrate minds on the issue and say that, from today, they will be not voluntary but compulsory.

The Minister is leading on an issue on which he does not want to lead. He is taking forward a set of proposals that he has no heart in, and he is just not up for it. There is nothing really wrong with that, except that it is a bit hypocritical. Maybe he should step to one side and say, "I cannot take the issue forward because I am not for it and I do not want it to happen". I think the whole thing is not going anywhere, because the Minister is taking it at two speeds — a snail's pace and a dead stop.

11.30 am

Mrs D Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Further to Mr Beggs's earlier point of order, is it not incumbent on Members, when they speak, to declare an interest as members of district councils?

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us move on. It is up to Members whether they want to declare an interest in any subject.

Mr Attwood: Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I thank Lord Morrow for that intervention. It is the call of the Speaker and the people who manage the business of the Assembly, but I think that, on significant public policy issues, it is not a matter of latitude; it is actually a matter of good practice that there should be accountability on the Floor of the Chamber. The notion that you can divorce the issue of boundaries from the issue of numbers, the issue of functions from the issues of resources and costs and all the rest of it does not seem to me to be credible. I think that Members would be frustrated if they were not given some opportunity, and I have certainly given them plenty of opportunity. More important than that, the people that we represent will ask, "What does all that mean?". The 'Belfast Telegraph' today does not make pleasant reading.

Mr Humphrey: What about yesterday?

Mr Attwood: I do not know what you are referring to about yesterday. It does not make pleasant reading on the basis of its assessment survey, which is not necessarily conclusive of anything. It does not make particularly happy reading about the standing of government and the Assembly. In one way, it is a bit of a reply to the 'Belfast Telegraph' and it is certainly a response to the community that, whether it is on the issue of townlands, resources or anything up to and including the boundaries, we have a full opportunity for some accountability today. I welcome that. I do not have any issue about that.

Lord Morrow is quite right that it is better to have something statutory than voluntary. That is why, with officials, we are trying to identify at the earliest possible opportunity how voluntary transition committees will become statutory. I hope to be able to update the Committee and the House in that regard. That point is valid. I accept your point, Lord Morrow. I might not accept all the other points, but I accept the point that creating certainty by having statutory transition rather than voluntary transition is something that I need to take forward.

Lord Morrow: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will in a second. There was a wonderful contradiction in what Lord Morrow said, which I think Hansard will confirm. He said that I was leading on an issue on which I did not want to lead. Think about that for a second. You either lead, or you do not lead. Suggesting that you can be leading on an issue on which you do not want to lead seems to reveal something. I will tell you when things were at snail's pace and a dead slow: it was during the last mandate, when, for reasons that I still cannot fathom —

Lord Morrow: It is always somebody else.

Mr Attwood: Well, what does the record say? It says that there was stalemate and that this got stuck around the Executive table. I was there for part of that stalemate. If it is the will of the DUP and Sinn Féin that 11 should prevail today, why did it not prevail before? Why was it stuck? Why did it go at a snail's pace and dead slow previously, if there was no big issue about 11, so much so that they can now say that they want that to prevail and say that it is democracy? I accept the will of the Executive, but why did they not do that 15 months ago? You ask about who is leading: what does it say about the failure of leadership in the previous mandate when there was failure to agree on 11 only for there to be agreement on 11 four or five months later?

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will in a second. Although we have come to 11, the evidence of the past four months shows that I have been leading on 11. *[Laughter.]* I hear laughter, but, if Members had been sitting on the regional transition committee, it would not have been laughter they heard but a hard conversation with local councils and local management in order to say that, although I hear the concerns about a vast range of issues, we need to stay in the room, work it through and get it over the line.

We have had those conversations, and those structures are being set up. We are trying to work through the issues, including how to be more inclusive in the membership of the RTC. We are updating the Business Committee, and I will bring forward proposals for a councillor severance scheme and so on. If you examine the evidence, you will draw the conclusion that, although I am managing a decision of the Executive, I am leading in taking forward the implementation at Executive level, whatever my views might be as a politician.

I will give you an example: the Executive endorsed a proposal for the roadside testing of individuals by the police as part of the change regime around drink-driving. As an individual, in my party capacity, I have great concerns about granting further powers to the police to deploy against the citizen. It has come from a background where, for all the changes that have happened in policing, we need to be measured in the powers that we give them. However, I recognised the overwhelming evidence from the consultation: 82% of people questioned said that random breath-testing on the side of the road was an important intervention to grant to the police in order to control drink-driving —

Mr Speaker: Order. I now insist that both the Minister and Members get back to the motion. That includes interventions. I am looking at Mrs Kelly, who has indicated that she wants to make an intervention. I may come to a

point where I will not allow interventions any longer because the debate is taking place through interventions. Members are making statements, not interventions. I say to the Minister and to Members: let us get back to the motion. It is the only motion before the House.

Mrs McKeivitt: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you rule on the last intervention from Lord Morrow? He made a sexist remark, referring to the deputy leader of the SDLP as a silly girl when she was making a viable and valuable comment in the debate.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me say to all Members that this is the cut and thrust of debate. Let me read Hansard and come back to the Member, but, at the end of the day, this is about the cut and thrust of debate in the Chamber. *[Interruption.]* Order. Allow the Minister to continue. I say to the Minister: let us get back to the motion before the House.

Mr Attwood: People can draw a conclusion from the point that I was making.

I will confirm what I said about the putting the voluntary transition on a statutory footing: officials are looking at subordinate legislation to do that as soon as possible.

Lord Morrow: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: Yes.

Lord Morrow: The Minister says that we need to be extremely careful that we get the transitional committees absolutely right. Whatever I might have against the Minister, I will not accuse him of not being careful; he borders on the careful, all right. The transitional committees that he speaks about are not new phenomena that we are trying to develop; transitional committees were in place before and seemed to work reasonably well. In fact, the transitional committee that covered Dungannon, Cookstown and Magherafelt worked exceptionally well. However, nothing can move until the Minister gives a lead. I ask him please to try to address that issue and tell the House that he will change their voluntary status and make things happen. Minister, if you do that today, we would nearly be prepared to forgive you for all that went before.

Mr Attwood: On one reading, your price is quite small, if you are prepared to forgive me.

There is a slight contradiction in what Lord Morrow has just outlined. He rightly points to a cluster of councils working very well. He has good knowledge, given his length of experience as a councillor in that area, that they did work well. They were voluntary, they worked well, they did their business, they got on with things, and they moved things forward. I could give you a number of examples of clusters of councils, working together voluntarily, that got on with the work and the business and began to interrogate what they needed to do to work together and work through the implementation of and potential issues with RPA. They did that in a situation of great political uncertainty and stalemate at the Executive. Yet, they got on with it. That suggests to me that councils working in a voluntary capacity were able to do substantial and significant work, even though there was political uncertainty and stalemate. Therefore, I say to councils that, given that there is political certainty and that RPA will happen within the time frame

and in the character that we have been talking about, it is even more imperative to get on with business. The good experience and practice before the political certainty of recent times should apply the minds of councillors and the voluntary transitional committees to getting on with the work.

To ensure further certainty and definition around RPA, we are looking at subordinate legislation to put voluntary committees on a statutory basis. However, this is a matter of political will more than one of structure. I have always said that you should create certainty and avoid doubt, and statute is the way to do that. I will not wander too far from the subject, Mr Speaker, but I hope that, when I come forward with a climate change Bill with rigorous statutory emission targets, Lord Morrow will say, "I agree. Let's have statute. Let's create certainty".

As the past 40 years have demonstrated across a range of public policy interventions in Northern Ireland, a model of good law and hard enforcement is very good for introducing radical change. That is why a statutory transitional committee is better than a voluntary one, but that does not mean that the good work cannot be done by the voluntary committees, as Lord Morrow testified. I presume that, at one time or another, he was a member of a voluntary transitional committee, so he can give some intimate validation of that assertion.

11.45 am

Lord Morrow: Are you saying that that is why it worked so well?

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

Mr Attwood: I have no doubt that it worked better because Lord Morrow was there. Lord Morrow applies his mind to tasks and gets things over the line. There are a lot of MLAs who should not be councillors who contribute to that practice.

I will go back to my concluding remarks. It might surprise you, Mr Speaker, that I had two paragraphs left 45 minutes ago.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: Yes.

Mr Allister: The Minister is in a most intriguing position. He has come to the House with an order that he patently does not believe in. He has then single-handedly led a filibuster on his own order. At the end, will he advise the House, in accordance with his beliefs, to vote against the order?

Mr Attwood: My advice to the House is to vote in favour of the order. Let there be no doubt or lack of certainty about that. I advise all Members to vote in favour of the order. That is the view of the Executive and the view that I am expressing here today. Fortunately, we live in a democracy. Robert Kennedy once said that he demanded the right to dissent because there was much to dissent from. That is a pretty good maxim. If it had not been for the democratic dissent of brave people over the last 30 or 40 years, we would not be here at all but in a much worse place. Bobby Kennedy was right in the context of the history of the last 40 years and about how the House should inform itself about

this and other issues. There is much to dissent from, and we demand the right to dissent. If people choose to dissent later in the debate, I respect that. However, that is not the advice that I give them on how to vote.

I have not filibustered anything. In an idle moment over the weekend, I might count the number of interventions that I have taken so far. That number will no doubt multiply later in the afternoon. Therefore, I have been responding to the debate. I am sure that Mr Allister, who enjoys a good debate, would criticise me if I stood up and said, "That is not on the Order Paper. Therefore, I will not answer that question". This is not a filibuster; it is a proper process of accountability in which I am dealing with any and all issues that touch on and go beyond local government.

Mr Givan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will in a second.

I will not deny that I would prefer 15 councils. Before you came in, Mr Allister, I said that my preferred model was 15. Why? I think that 15 better reflects local character and identity. There would be fewer upfront logistical and management issues, because six councils would not be merged at all. The upfront costs would also be less. Having gathered all that information, my view was that 15 was a better model. However, the Executive decided to the contrary. I am a Minister who lives by the ministerial code, and I will not be reckless with the ministerial code. Therefore, I will manage the situation. I told my Executive colleagues that I would manage the situation; that is the word that I used. However, in managing that situation, I also have to recognise that there is a need for radical reform of public policy in the North, which includes RPA. Therefore, I will not be shy about taking forward RPA. It is in the best interests of the people whom we represent and is a mechanism for good government, even though I do not agree, personally, with the principle of 11.

I will give way.

Mr Givan: Thank you, Minister. I have a couple of points. I missed the start of the debate, so forgive me if they have been dealt with. I raised these at Question Time.

First, you will be aware that, in your own constituency, residents in Twinbrook and Poleglass have been well served by Lisburn City Council, which is a very low-rate council. Those people will now move into Belfast City Council and face a significant increase in their rates as a result. What is being put in place to deal with that problem for those people? The problem is replicated in other councils, where amalgamation will result in a significant differential in the rates that are applied.

Secondly, what is the process for redefining the wards within the new boundaries? When will that commence? Will there be a cap on the number of councillors to be elected in each ward? Will there be seven-seat, eight-seat or five-seat wards? Can the Minister give us any more detail on those issues?

Mr Attwood: I recommend that the Member reads the entire Hansard report of the debate to get a flavour of it, although, curiously, the points that he raises have not been raised heretofore. They are clearly important.

In my capacity as a constituency MLA, I do not concur with your assessment of the benefit to the residents of Twinbrook and Poleglass of being part of Lisburn City Council. It may be a low-rate council, but in many instances it has been a low-service council. There is good evidence of that. There are also some wider issues around the treatment of people in Twinbrook and Poleglass. Remember that the population of Twinbrook and Poleglass is larger than that of Ballymena. It is a startling fact that the number of people who live there, in some of the most deprived wards in the North of Ireland, is comparable to the population of Ballymena. I was in Ballymena only two weeks ago, and, despite some difficult circumstances, the council and the commercial community in that part of the world are demonstrating leadership and a lot of rigour and vigour. Compare that with the dereliction of the commercial infrastructure in Twinbrook and Poleglass. I am not suggesting that that is totally, absolutely, completely and utterly the fault of Lisburn City Council. There are a lot of reasons for it, and a lot of accountability is required in a lot of places as a consequence.

The Member makes a good point about rates convergence. How will we fund local government RPA? The Executive have decided that there will not be assistance with upfront costs. No Executive Minister dissented from that view, either in this mandate or the previous one. That was the working principle. Although some might dispute whether that was a settled outcome, it was the Executive's view, and it was communicated to bodies representing councils and councillors in April 2010, subject to correction. That is not the end of the story. I have put in bids for the June monitoring round to assist with the real-time, real-life process of change in councils. If we can provide resources — I think that we should — to help change management, to help the ICE programme, to help build up capacity around planning and so on and so forth, a good argument can be made now, in advance of a business case, to demonstrate that we recognise the scale of what is being undertaken. However, councils have to recognise the scale of the economic circumstances that we in central government face. I trust and hope that there will be opportunities, and I look for support today in the Chamber, because these matters are to be decided by the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the rest of the Executive between now and the first week in July.

What are the other interventions? What further flexibility can we have around loans? There is further flexibility that we can have around loans. What can be done with the disposal of surplus assets? I do not mean a fire sale of assets but the disposal of surplus assets. On the far side of RPA, there may not be as much need for council buildings and accommodation as was the case heretofore. Can we identify ways and means of helping there? What is the profile of assets in councils? I am mindful of the fact that in some councils in particular there is a profile of debt that creates a great burden. Are there opportunities for a mutual bank to provide funding?

Lord Morrow: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will in a second, but I want to answer your colleague's question first.

Across that narrative, there is the story of how we will fund RPA, and part of that has to be about rates convergence, which the Member has raised. I await further advice from

officials, but my view of the notion of a Big Bang outcome on day one of the new councils going live, with a common rates burden across the council cluster, is that it will not happen. The differentials in rates between the councils that will emerge will be of such a scale in certain places that the notion of having convergence on day one — the Big Bang theory — is not sustainable. Therefore, we will work through how to deal with rates convergence in a way that is measured and proportionate over the appropriate time limit and does not impose undue burden on people.

On the far side of today's debate, in the event that the recommendation that I am urging on the Assembly is adopted, the matter will pass to the Secretary of State, because local government boundaries are his responsibility. He will then appoint a district electoral area commissioner, who will bring forward recommendations on district electoral areas that will go for public consultation and inquiry. On the far side of that process, legislation will be tabled at Westminster to give definition to those recommendations.

I have been passed a note, as I cannot recall the answer to the question about the number of councillors. They will correlate with the number of wards, as set out in schedule 2 to the boundaries order. That will be your lunchtime work. There will be 462 wards, and there will be 462 councillors. As I said, the drawing up of district electoral areas will be a matter for the Secretary of State. Belfast will have 60 wards; two councils — Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon, and Newry, Mourne and Down — will have 41 wards each; and the other eight councils will have 40 wards.

I am trying to find where I left off my opening remarks. If we are to achieve the dynamic, strong local government that responds to the needs of all citizens, policies need to follow the principles of good governance and equality of opportunity. I think that I touched on that in my previous remarks. The new councils will make better choices for citizens if they represent the society on behalf of which they act. There is a danger that these could end up being warm, meaningless phrases. Let me tell people, given the experience of recent days, that, when it comes to having a code of conduct for councillors, an ethics regime, proportionality on committees and a system that sees proportional distribution of council offices through d'Hondt, Sainte-Laguë or some other mechanism, this will be the new order of things. There will be no compromising on it. If it is left to me, no council will have any opportunity to get up to practices that deny fairness, democracy and equality.

The order is a step forward in the reorganisation of local government. Together with the proposals that I have outlined today, it will help us on our way to having 11 dynamic councils, which, if we get this right and apply our minds to it, will create vibrant, healthy, prosperous, safe and sustainable communities that have the needs of all citizens at their core. In answer to Mr Allister's point, I ask the Assembly to approve the draft order.

Mr Allister: But do you mean it? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): Members will be glad to hear that I will be brief and will stick to my notes.

The Committee was briefed on the Local Government (Boundaries) Order by departmental officials on 17 May 2012. Members were provided with the draft boundaries order giving effect to the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner's recommendations subject to two modifications. They were also provided with a statement of reasons for those modifications, maps of proposed boundaries and revised maps of the modifications. Members were informed that on 23 February 2012 the Executive had agreed that the commissioner's final recommendations report should be laid in the Assembly, subject to the two modifications.

12.00 noon

Members sought clarification from the Department on the guiding principles that governed decisions made by the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner. They were advised that paragraph 19 of schedule 4 to the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 states that the number of electoral wards in the district should be substantially the same and that the Boundaries Commissioner applied the principle that deviation from the electoral average should not exceed 10%. The Committee was later advised by the Department that the largest variance from the ward electoral average recommended by the commissioner is 11.99%. The Department also advised that paragraph 18 sets the number of wards for districts outside Belfast at 40, with some limited latitude on either side.

The Committee then considered a written request from Newry and Mourne District Council for the inclusion of an additional ward in the Warrenpoint/Rostrevor area. Members asked the officials about the feasibility of that in the guiding principles and were informed that it would compromise the electoral balance significantly, with a variance of 46%, which is much greater than the 10% guide figure. The Department acknowledged that consequential changes to other wards would allow that variance to be reduced. However, officials pointed out that, when they examined the options for doing that, it impacted on the ward boundaries of seven neighbouring wards and still resulted in a variance of 13.9% and 14.6% less than the ward electoral average in respect of each of the two wards at Warrenpoint, thus leaving them still some way outside the 10% variance guidelines. In addition, the Committee was made aware that the Boundaries Commissioner had provisionally recommended 40 wards in the Newry and Mourne district. However, he later exercised his discretion to revise that to 41 in his final recommendation on the grounds that there should be a proper representation of the rural and urban electorate within a district.

The Committee noted that only one other district outside Belfast has 41 wards in the draft order. The rest have 40, which means that a district with 42 wards would appear inconsistent. Members were also concerned about the potential knock-on effects for surrounding wards if another ward were to be created in the Warrenpoint/Rostrevor area. On learning that the best alternative would affect seven other wards, they felt that there was insufficient time to revisit the issue within the time required for the election of shadow councils in 2014. Consequently, the Committee concluded that the Newry and Mourne District Council proposals would be outside the rules of the 1972 Act, would be inconsistent with principles applied across Northern Ireland by the commissioner, and would cause

a consequential ripple effect that could not be addressed within the necessary time frame for the election of shadow councils in 2014. The Committee subsequently agreed by majority to recommend that the draft Local Government (Boundaries) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved by the Assembly.

I now speak as the Alliance Party MLA for South Belfast. I have been contacted by a number of my constituents who feel that the Forestside shopping complex should be included in the Belfast boundary and are frustrated with the decision to modify the original recommendation. Many regard Forestside as being firmly in Belfast; after all, it is only four miles from Belfast City Council and some 15 miles from Lisburn.

There is an argument that Castlereagh Borough Council headquarters need to be located within the Castlereagh/Lisburn council. There are many examples of council-owned premises located in different council boundaries, Roselawn cemetery being a prime example in Belfast.

The attempt to influence the independent recommendations could be perceived as a financial gerrymander, and I am concerned about the potential impact that this could have on residents' rates in Belfast. However, it is important to highlight that, although parties may have issues with certain specific boundaries, this was an independent process, and that must be respected.

What is done is done, and there is no point in harping back to old arguments about the number of councils or the boundaries. We need to move on and get on with it. I encourage the Minister to bring forward tangible plans for local government reform that are focused on the serious areas of finance, staffing and governance, and that are robust, rational and expedient, because deadlines already seem to be slipping. Local government reform needs to move past the focus on the number of councils to detailed plans that ensure efficient and well-resourced local government. I am keen to see how this reform will be financed. I note that the forecasted date for introduction is October 2012, and I ask the Minister to ensure that he and his Department keep to the timetable outlined.

Lord Morrow: We have just had an example of how to speak to a motion. Having listened to the Minister, it seemed that he did not address the issues in any great depth, so we will not have an opportunity to question him on where he and his Department stand on the boundaries.

Mr Speaker, you said, and we accept, that it is the Minister's prerogative as to where he takes the debate. I suspect that that will not be lost on other Ministers, and we will find ourselves in a different position in this House in the future.

To an extent, the Minister trod onto the financial side of the debate, but then he pulled back and, in fairness to him, he said that things would depend to some degree on the Department of Finance and Personnel because I suspect there is a bit of a crossover. However, there is no doubt that the issue of finance is an important part of the argument, including the existing debts of some local councils. I understand that local government debt at the end of last year totalled around £500 million. That is a substantial sum by anyone's standards.

It is ironic that the cluster of councils that I am particularly interested in, namely Cookstown District Council, Magherafelt District Council and Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council, account for just about 1·15% of that total debt. It is also ironic and coincidental that those three councils are among those with the lowest rate base across the whole of Northern Ireland. That is worth saying.

I do not say this to get at the Minister, but I want to emphasise to him, as did the Chairperson of the Committee, that the debate is over about whether we are going to have seven, 11, 15 or any other number of councils. When we talk about the record being broken, we are not talking about what Fermanagh District Council, Omagh District Council, Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council or any other council are saying. I am talking about what the Minister is saying. We have no doubt that the Minister is reluctantly leading on a model on which he would prefer not to lead. He would prefer to be leading on a different model. His party's manifesto at the last election was, however, silent on the number of councils. I stand to be corrected, but I think that the SDLP was silent, which tells me that it can be persuaded.

The Minister finished by reluctantly saying that there will be 11 councils, so let us go for it now. Also ahead of us are the shadow councils. Some Members — I am not sure whether the Minister is among them but I certainly am — have been in local government long enough to remember the last reform under the Macrory report, which introduced a model of local government that presumed a local Assembly. That was not the case, and, therefore, there was always a gap. In fairness to Macrory, that was not his fault. He put forward his proposals on the understanding that there would be an Assembly here at Stormont. The point is that there was no transition. It was a case of going straight from one into the next and getting on with it.

The Minister and other Members rightly said that during the worst times of trouble in this country, it was local government that held the line. It was the one seat of democracy and the one area that people were able to identify with. Indeed, I think of the bravery, courage and tenacity of local councillors.

We are hearing much talk about saving money. I am not convinced that what the Minister is telling us here today is absolutely correct because some of us have been here long enough. We were not paid when we went into local government. Why were we there? We and many others were there to serve our communities and do our bit for them. So I take a wee bit of umbrage when I hear about how the Minister is doing this, is entitled to do that and that everybody will have to live with it. Let it be said, however, that, way back in 1973, financial gain was not the motivation of people who went into local government because many did so voluntarily then and would still do so today.

When the Minister makes his winding-up speech, or if he does because maybe he has said enough already, will he make clear whether it is his intention to allow capital expenditure to continue or will he put a moratorium on that? We need to know. I am not saying what he should or should not do, but he must make a decision and tell us clearly what that decision is. Some councils are run exceptionally well financially. The figures are there for everyone to inspect. At the last call, I think that the combined debt of Dungannon,

Magherafelt and Cookstown councils was just under £5 million. That is exceptional, and I do not say that simply because I am a member of Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council. If the position was contrary to that, people know that I would say so. I would like to hear the Minister's proposals on that issue

Again, I urge him as strongly as I can to make the transitional committees statutory. If he could do that from tomorrow, it would not be too soon. There are many more issues, but we have had a long debate, and maybe we all wandered and digressed slightly, so I will stop there.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá. I think that you were right to give some latitude to Members, Mr Speaker, because a lot of councillors and members of the public are unsure about what exactly is taking place. I will open up the debate, although I do not know about the driving licence and climate change issues. However, the debate was open and honest, and some questions had to be asked.

12.15 pm

To be fair, standing in the support of the order — I will try to stick to the order — it is time for the Minister to show leadership on the matter. The Minister has taken decisions. When I say that, I mean that he has taken decisions recently. I will not say that he has “made” decisions but that he has “taken” them, and he can interpret that however he wants.

In relation to some of the issues that have been raised here today, I want to raise the issue of Omagh and Fermanagh. We have accepted that we are going down the line of an 11-council model, so let us get on with it. However, in the absence of councils taking those decisions and because of the uncertainty that lies there, it is important that the Minister shows leadership on that and directs those councils in a way that enables them to deal with the issue.

Two of my colleagues are coming behind me, so I will leave some issues for them to discuss, but I agree with Lord Morrow that the voluntary transition committees should be in statute. There is uncertainty about that. In the previous mandate, a process was agreed on how to take that forward, and I want the Minister to comment on the groupings that he has set up in relation to the transfer of functions and the community planning groupings. He has set those groupings up and, to my knowledge, there are no councillors on them. Council officials are on them, and maybe he can explain why he has decided to go down that route.

I want to bring up the issue of what happened in Craigavon council last week. I will not go into the detail of that, but when will the Minister bring forward the reorganisation Bill? The sooner we get the governance practices in place, we will be able to ensure that what happened last week in Craigavon council does not happen again.

Can the Minister indicate when he proposes to bring the other associated legislation forward? He mentioned a wait of three years, but we will find that that process will not be long going in, and I would like him to ensure that that process is in place, and the subsequent legislation that we require to move the process on. What legislation is left?

The funding issue is a major one for councils. The Minister indicated that he requested, through monitoring rounds, funding for some of the process. When will he bring his business case to the Executive? I want him to stop saying to the House that the Executive proposed not to fund it. We have heard that 100 times already, and it is not helpful. The Minister needs to show leadership because it is his office and his Department, and I want to see what his business case proposes to do to facilitate the reform process.

He made a comment about the ‘Belfast Telegraph’. For anybody listening in today, this debate has gone some way to ensure that the business is working. I pay tribute to the people in the Department, because the DOE and the Committee, in the previous mandate, brought a significant amount of legislation through this House. So, we will certainly not be found wanting. This is the first piece of the jigsaw, and I want the process to move forward. With that, I support the order.

Mr Elliott: Mr Speaker, I note that you have quite a lot of patience today. I commend you for that, because this is an emotive subject in many areas. The Minister had to lay out quite a lot of context, and everyone in the House is broadly agreed that, in essence, local government had to be reformed and there was a requirement to reform local government. That has been on the statute books for quite a long time. I was interested to hear Lord Morrow talk about the Macrory report. Although I do not remember the workings of it, I have read up about it. It is interesting that reference was made to the fact that Macrory was set in the context of there being a Northern Ireland Government here at Stormont. If that is the case, maybe we should just stick with the 26 councils and reform them to some degree and get better administration, and, maybe a much better —

Lord Morrow: Give them some more powers.

Mr Elliott: Sorry, did you say “more powers” Lord Morrow?

Lord Morrow: I was talking about the powers.

Mr Elliott: Oh yes, the powers. However, Macrory was clearly set in that context, and it is interesting that now that we have back a functioning Northern Ireland Assembly Government, we are moving away from the Macrory proposals. In fairness, we all agree with that, but we need to get the right context and to make sure that we get it right. If we do not, we will have to live with this for maybe another 30 to 40 years.

I reiterate what the Minister and a number of other Members said about local government over the years since the Troubles started. Local government has been the one and only local democracy here in Northern Ireland. When there was conflict, even in their own chambers, councils stood together for their own area. They stood up for their own area and got the best for it, and, I have to say, at times, they had to look at what that was in a much wider Northern Ireland context.

I suppose that when I said that we need to try to get this right, I was hoping that some coterminosity would come out of the boundaries reform and that we would at least have got a level of togetherness on some issues, whether around the health trust areas or the Westminster constituency boundaries. However, we do not seem to have got coterminosity with anything in this 11-council model. That is

why, for a long time, we have highlighted our concerns about it. I know that there were a number of different 15-council models, but, from my memory, most of the parties, apart from, I think, Sinn Féin, broadly supported the 15-council models for some years, and there appears to have been compromise or a carve-up — call it what you want — to reach 11.

I want to speak briefly about the finances. I know that three areas of finance are linked to this boundaries review. The first is that of the transition costs. I noted that, in recent correspondence, the Minister indicated — I do not have the exact wording in front of me but he can clarify it if he wants to — that the transition costs of the local government review will be met by local councils. That is an Executive decision. I know that might have been questioned here today, but that is what is in his correspondence. I am happy for him to clarify that now or when he speaks later, but we need clarification because I know that a number of councils and councillors are saying that it is up to the Minister and the Executive to fund this transition, or at least part-fund it or find the mechanism for funding it. Even Mr Boylan said in his contribution that a mechanism needs to be found. I want to hear from the Minister whether a mechanism has been discussed at or rejected by the Executive. We need to hear it and councillors need to hear it. Councillors need to be aware of the exact position and if the Minister is going to put forward proposals to the Executive on that funding mechanism.

The second issue around the boundaries review is rates convergence cost, which is one of the biggest aspects for us in County Fermanagh, and, I appreciate, in some other council areas as well. There have been indications in the past that the Department is looking at mechanisms to finance that or at least make it easier on such councils. However, I can tell you that I have not yet heard how or if that will happen. That is a massive issue for people — businesses and householders — who will be hit with a severe rates increase. They will be hit with one rates increase over the transition costs and by a second, with the rates convergence cost. That will be a huge blow to councils that have been mature in how they spent their money down the years and careful about where they put their finances. It is very unfair for them to be hit with those massive costs. I am interested to hear whether there is any idea as to how those rates convergence costs can be met.

The third part of the finance issue is the transfer of functions. Again, I wonder what discussions there have been with Ministers about what functions will leave their Departments. That is a massive issue, not only for local councils but for Departments. If a lot of functions move out of a Department, there will not be much left in it. I would like to know whether the Minister has engaged with those other Departments and Ministers to establish what functions will be transferred and how that will be funded. In the Minister's recent correspondence with us, he wrote that the transfer of functions will be rates neutral at the point of transfer. However, it does not say whether it will be rates neutral in three, four, five, six or seven years. Are local ratepayers going to have to pick up that funding again?

There are three hits that the ratepayers will take over the boundaries review and changes: the costs of transition, the convergence of rates and the transfer of functions. Maybe

it will be rates neutral at the start, but certainly not in the future.

I do not know how some councils, individuals and ratepayers are looking at the new boundaries. I wonder whether the people of Dundonald realise that they will be part of Moira, and whether the people of Moira realise that they will be a part of Dundonald. Do the people of Rosslea realise that they will be a part of Carrickmore, and vice versa? I do not think that a lot of people realise that, but it is time they woke up and realised the consequences. A lot of that local accountability, history and heritage will depart. No longer will people be a part of their own Fermanagh or Castlereagh council. It is time that people woke up and realised that.

On top of that, we need to be aware of this issue: will we continue with the potential of the single business organisation? That is key to an 11-council model. Some of the clusters say that they are opposed to the single business organisation and others are much more positive about it. We need some clear guidance as to how that will be taken forward.

The next point is the single waste authority. I believe that the three waste authorities in Northern Ireland have been very slow, almost not moving at times. It is very frustrating. They tell us that they are making progress, but when you ask what progress that is, it is very difficult to establish. I wonder whether we should press forward with a single waste authority in the near future.

I pose those questions to the Minister because they are critical and key to the boundary review and the new boundaries. The Ulster Unionist Party believed — as, obviously, others did — that there was a better model than the 11-council one. I and the Ulster Unionist Party believe that the 11-council model is clearly not the perfect solution and not the right one for Northern Ireland. We believe that it is a carve-up and that people came to an agreement simply because it handed the majority of power in one area to one particular party, and the majority of power in another area to another party. That is the reality of it.

I do not know whether the people of Dundonald realise that they will not be a part of Belfast. Do the majority of the people of Omagh realise that they will be a part of Fermanagh? Do the people of Strabane know that they will be a part of Londonderry? What really annoys me is that Omagh wanted to go with Strabane, and Strabane wanted to go with Omagh. Why could that not be facilitated? Practical solutions were rejected because a political carve-up was wanted. That is the reality. It is time we had a fresh look at it.

I know that people say that the model is now there, and we need to get on with it. However, from the indicative timetable that the Minister has supplied, the district electoral area legislation will not go through until, I think, November 2013. There is time to change it. There is time to take forward a much better proposal for the people of Northern Ireland that will suit all the people, or at least the vast majority of them, and not just a couple of political parties in here that are doing it for their own ends.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately after the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting

until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when the House comes back will be Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.30 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Speaker's Business

Appointment of Junior Minister

Mr Deputy Speaker: I inform Members that the Speaker was notified this morning by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister that they have appointed Ms Jennifer McCann to replace Ms Martina Anderson as a junior Minister in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Ms McCann affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office in the presence of the Speaker and the Clerk to the Assembly/Director General, and has now taken up office as a junior Minister. I offer her my congratulations.

Oral Answers to Questions

Employment and Learning

Regional Colleges: Higher Education

1. **Mr Doherty** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how his Department intends to increase higher education provision within regional colleges.

(AQO 2136/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I join you, Mr Deputy Speaker, in congratulating Jennifer McCann on her appointment. I look forward to working with her. In light of yesterday's announcement, I also recognise the contribution to the Assembly made by Mr Doherty.

In response to the question, I am fully committed to further education colleges delivering higher education courses. For 2012-13, my Department has increased the overall higher education allocation to colleges by almost £1.6 million. I am particularly committed to expanding intermediate level provision through the expansion of work-based foundation degrees, with a target of increasing foundation degree enrolments to 2,500 by March 2015, from a baseline of 1,132 enrolments in 2010. Importantly, our colleges and universities work in partnership with employers to ensure that higher education provision delivered by colleges meets the needs of the Northern Ireland economy. There is a particular focus on STEM — science, technology, engineering and mathematics — subjects.

There are 11,000 students taking higher education courses in further education colleges, on both a full-time and part-time basis, which is around 20% of the total higher education enrolments. In the current academic year, the total number of funded full-time higher education places in colleges is 3,833, which represents a 15% increase since 2002. Also, in December 2011, I announced an additional 70 full-time higher education places for further education, the first tranche of which has been allocated for 2012-13. There are around 7,000 part-time higher education enrolments in further education. The Department does not place a cap on part-time higher education places. Therefore, the expansion of part-time provision within existing budgets offers colleges another route to increase higher education provision.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before calling Mr Doherty for a supplementary question, I point out that question 7 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer. Question 8 has been transferred to the Department of Education, again for a written answer.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. I also thank him for his congratulations to our new junior Minister, Jennifer McCann, and, indeed, his comments towards myself.

Will the Minister expand further on his Department's commitment to establishing a greater rural base for the delivery of higher education courses in our regional colleges? Is the Minister thinking of establishing a pilot scheme around any of the regional colleges?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Doherty for his supplementary question. My Department's higher education strategy, Graduating to Success, which was launched in April this year, makes clear that we are committed to working with the higher and further education sectors to develop a pilot scheme for the creation of university bases in colleges. I believe that the establishment of such learning and study facilities will improve the opportunity for higher education students to undertake part of their undergraduate course locally with access to university materials and resources. That is something that we have reflected in the 'Rural White Paper Action Plan'.

Mr P Ramsey: Like the Minister, on behalf of the SDLP, I wish Jennifer McCann well in her new appointment as junior Minister. As this may be Pat Doherty's last question here, I wish him all the best as he departs from this gracious House.

What discussions has the Minister had with colleges in Northern Ireland about course provision, particularly in light of the priority given to STEM subjects in courses provided through the colleges?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Ramsey for his question. My Department is taking a very clear direction of travel that is in line with the Programme for Government and the economic strategy. We are asking all third-level education providers to have an increased focus on STEM subjects and other economically relevant subjects. We are also looking at what we do in other provision in that area, and we are seeing progress in all that work. It is, of course, for the colleges and universities to set their own curricula. My Department does not seek to micromanage, but I think that it is fair to say that all the directors of the colleges and the vice chancellors of the universities are very clear in their responsibilities to Northern Ireland and the economy, and they are very aware of our wider objectives as an Administration.

Mr Kinahan: I also congratulate Jennifer McCann, and I wish Pat Doherty all the best in the future and hope that he takes up his post. *[Laughter.]*

The Minister mentioned that 1,132 places were taken up and that there is a target of 2,500. What are the targets for the future years? How are those places linked to possible jobs or studies, and what jobs will they lead to?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Kinahan for his supplementary question. I want to be clear: we are talking about a baseline figure of 1,132 at present. That is not 1,132 places filled out of a total of 2,500 allocated places. We are talking about seeking to increase that figure to 2,500 by March 2015. Essentially, that is more than doubling the number doing foundation degrees, which are very much geared towards employers' needs. That type of approach is often the most flexible way of engaging directly with the ongoing skills needs at the higher level that employers are articulating. Of course, it is open for people who do a foundation degree to progress to a full honours degree, depending on their circumstances, but we are very keen to promote foundation degrees as an entry point to higher education or as something that is of value in and of itself.

Learner Access and Engagement Pilot Programme

2. Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the learner access engagement programme. (AQO 2137/11-15)

Dr Farry: I recently received the final longitudinal evaluation report from PricewaterhouseCoopers on the learner access and engagement pilot programme (LAEP). That report can be accessed via my Department's website. Significantly, almost one half of the programme's enrolments came from the 20% most deprived areas of Northern Ireland. The programme, which recognises the unique strengths of further education colleges and non-statutory organisations, has successfully raised the profile of local colleges, and its mentoring aspect, which community organisations provide, has played a key role in recruiting, retaining and enabling hard-to-reach learners to achieve qualifications. In light of the evaluation report's very positive findings and recommendations, I have given my approval to proceed with the development of a mainstream programme, which will commence in the 2012-13 academic year.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome that announcement from the Minister. I have seen in my constituency the effectiveness of the programme in action. How important is it for our regional colleges to work in partnership with local community groups to ensure that we get skills to those hardest-to-reach adults?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Lyttle for his supplementary question. It is important to recognise that we have a fully comprehensive set of programmes and courses available formally through colleges; indeed, that is reflected in other aspects of our work. However, it can, at times, be more effective to work and engage at a community level, particularly when we are trying to encourage people who have been out of education for some time or who may be facing barriers. The LAEP has been very successful in engaging with people in that regard, and I am very satisfied with the conclusions that we reached in it. The participants warmly welcomed it. One of the key features was the strong partnerships that were developed over time between colleges and the community sector. I look forward to that being replicated in the mainstream programme.

Mr Campbell: The Minister mentioned the most deprived areas and hard-to-reach areas, which are often synonymous. How will he measure the success of attracting people into the programme from communities that, by and large, over the past 20 or 30 years have not reached the fulfilment necessary to get into full-time employment?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Campbell for his question. LAEP is designed to reach those who have been disengaged, and I regard it as very important. There is a track record in accessing the hardest-to-reach communities. I am conscious that there are capacity issues in different parts of the community, and we are mindful about the future design of the programme to ensure that, as far as possible, we have consistent outreach across Northern Ireland to all sections of the community.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. For many people, access to broadband is a particular

barrier. Does the Minister's Department work closely with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) to address that barrier to improve access for learners from rural areas, given the dire broadband provision there?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her question. I have listened to people's concerns about access to broadband in rural areas. Although it is not the direct responsibility of my Department, I am more than happy to engage with my colleagues in DETI and DARD to make sure that we have equitable access across the community. We talk about reaching the most deprived communities, but they are not just urban communities; they are often rural communities as well, and isolation can be particularly acute in such settings.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for his answers. I was particularly struck by his affirmation of the value of the work done at community level by colleges in identifying and addressing local need, which makes me wonder why it was necessary to pay consultants to tell them that they were doing a good job.

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Nesbitt for his question. It is important that we be realistic about how government works, particularly when justifying the investment of significant resources. We are investing a seven-figure sum into LAEP, and government expects us, as, indeed, do the Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee, to show proper diligence in the programmes and investments that we design. That having been said, I am determined that we will press on rapidly over the summer to ensure that we have a mainstream programme in place as quickly as we can for the new academic year.

Universities: Courses

3. Mr Craig asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures his Department has taken to align university courses with business and industry needs. (AQO 2138/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department recently published Graduating to Success, which is the higher education strategy. It fully recognised the need to rebalance the profile of provision so that the qualifications offered will more closely reflect the needs of the economy. Universities must ensure that graduates develop the skills needed to exploit future employment opportunities and that the work-ready requirements of employers are met.

In December 2011, I committed to funding an additional 700 university places in economically relevant subjects by 2014-15. In addition, to take account of the needs of the local economy, I will be implementing a new research funding model from academic year 2012-13, which will include a premium targeted specifically at research in science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects and areas of wider economic relevance.

In information and communication technology, I have convened a working group that brings together key stakeholders to consider how the current and future skills needs of the sector can be addressed. An action plan will be published that will outline initiatives to address the challenges facing the sector. Queen's University and the

University of Ulster have announced that they will offer a postgraduate MSc course aimed at non-IT graduates in the next academic year to meet the needs of the ICT sector.

2.15 pm

Employability skills are also a key focus in the strategy, and my Department expects that all learners will have the opportunity to undertake a period of work placement while undertaking a higher education course. The business sector will also be encouraged to support such opportunities, and that is further developed in my Department's skills strategy and employer engagement plan.

Mr Craig: I thank the Minister for that comprehensive answer. Does he agree that in software programming and the industries that rely on it, there are 10 places for every graduate and that there is a dearth of people going into those industries? Is it the case that we do not provide enough careers advice to get people into such industries? Would the Minister look at providing funded places on relevant courses? I know that, in the past, the Engineering Council did so to get people interested in that field.

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Craig for his supplementary question and, in particular, for highlighting one of the most critical areas for the future of Northern Ireland's economy. We already have a strong ICT base in Northern Ireland, but we also have the potential to grow that significantly over the coming years. It is important that we have the right skills to address the requirements of growing local companies and new investors. For that reason, we convened the ICT working group, which is due to report on and publish its action plan in the next few weeks.

We are looking at the full spectrum of interventions required to promote that aspect of the economy. That includes looking at careers; the work around A levels in schools; how universities attract students; how employers offer placements to students; and how we collectively talk up the fact that the industry provides effective and attractive careers. It is particularly important that we count people working in software development, which is distinct from more general ICT, as real professionals. Someone who is good at science at school does not have to become a doctor or other health professional, as important as those professions are, but can consider working in software instead. Software jobs can be very rewarding for economic growth and are some of the best paid, on average, in our economy.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I pass on my congratulations to my party and constituency colleague Jennifer McCann on her new role as junior Minister.

I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Is research being done on future employment opportunities? What jobs are coming down the line for those now at university? Are they being skilled up so that they are job-ready when they come out of university?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I also pass on my recognition of his work in the Assembly, in light of yesterday's announcement about him and some of his colleagues.

I want to stress two things in response to the question. First, we are doing a lot of work to project our economy's skills requirements. In the event that we achieve a lower level of corporation tax, there will be some shifts in those requirements. So it is important that we ask such questions now in anticipation of what will, hopefully, be good news following other discussions in due course.

We are also working to try to link much more effectively the needs of today's employers to the nature of courses undertaken in higher and further education. I do not want to imply that we are, all of a sudden, turning higher education into something that is simply about mechanically churning out workers. It is still important that we teach people critical analysis and how to think. Nevertheless, subtle changes in the overall balance of graduates are needed to ensure that we are much more in tune with the future needs of our economy. We have to match supply with demand. We cannot really afford much room for error in an economy such as Northern Ireland's.

Mrs Overend: Given the obvious need to align university courses with business and industry, does the Minister agree that the powers within the Department for Employment and Learning would be best suited to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment following the imminent dissolution of his Department?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her question. I am already on record as saying that, as far as my party is concerned, we want to see a single Department of the economy in due course as part of a wider restructuring. If decisions are taken elsewhere that we are to have an advanced rationalisation, I nevertheless think that we need to see a proper Department of the economy where we link the suppliers of skills with those who are best placed to articulate the needs of the economy and employers. It is important that we have that overarching perspective within whatever structures we take forward.

Things are working well at present. It is important to reflect that, whether we are talking about students in schools taking up STEM-type subjects at GCSE level and A level or about people going to university, over the past 18 months, we have already seen a significant increase in applications for STEM subjects. That is an encouraging demonstration of how co-ordinated government policy is having an effect on the ground.

Youth Unemployment: Employability Skills

4. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the planned diagnosis of the employability skills of unemployed young people.

(AQO 2139/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department is developing a package of measures to tackle youth unemployment. A key feature of that initiative is the engagement between the employment service adviser and the client in assessing employability skills and needs. That engagement is facilitated by an employability assessment tool that helps the adviser to assess the client's work readiness and to then develop a package of support tailored to their individual needs and aimed at helping them to move into work.

The tools have been developed by the occupational psychology service within the Department for people claiming both jobseeker's allowance and employment and support allowance, and they are currently being tested in 12 offices across Northern Ireland. We will review the effectiveness of the tools in the coming months, with a view to putting diagnostic arrangements in place throughout Northern Ireland by the end of the year.

Other aspects of the new youth employment programme will include a short period of work experience, employer subsidies and longer periods of work experience focused on areas with the potential to rebuild and rebalance the economy.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister for his reply. Has he set any specific targets for Pathways to Success, his strategy for young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs), which he launched yesterday?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr McCallister for his supplementary question, which takes a considerable leap across. What I will say in relation to NEETs, and to link the issue to the diagnostics mentioned in the answer to the main question, is that there is a lot of work to be done to work with people who are facing barriers when it comes to signposting. The Careers Service has an important role to play, and, indeed, my Department's officials and the community sector have an important role to play in mentoring.

We are very seized of the issue of NEETS. We know what our existing baselines are. A large aspect of that, however, is determined by our overall levels of unemployment. Those figures have risen significantly over the past five years. They have now stabilised over the past 12 months but are still at a very high level. A lot of that will be influenced in the coming months by what we can do with demand and, in turn, matching that demand with effective supply.

Mr Eastwood: Given the Minister's announcement yesterday about young people who are not in employment, education or training, how does he intend to address the issue of upskilling young people in particularly hard-to-reach and marginalised areas?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Eastwood for his question. There is a common theme in a lot of the policies that my Department has developed, particularly over the past 12 months. We are very focused on upskilling and progression. Where we can see opportunities to focus the training that we are investing in on the future skills needs of the economy, we will take those opportunities, because, in doing so, we get a double win. Not only are we involving people more in the economy, both for their own sake and for that of the wider society, but we are ensuring that, where they are becoming engaged, they are doing so with skills. That applies as much in what we do with NEETs as it does in what we do with the more mainstream youth unemployment programmes, across our further and higher education offering and with initiatives such as apprenticeships.

Mr G Robinson: Will these measures take into consideration the employability skills of young people with disabilities?

Dr Farry: The Department does a lot of work based around people who face a range of different barriers, including physical ones. The disability employment service, part of

the wider employment service, looks specifically at those details. The aspects of that are probably too numerous for me to recite at this moment, but I will write to Mr Robinson setting out the full spectrum of programmes that we have.

Employer Engagement Plan

5. **Mr S Anderson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the employer engagement plan.
(AQO 2140/11-15)

Dr Farry: I published my Department's employer engagement plan in March. It makes a major contribution to how I intend to implement the skills strategy for Northern Ireland, 'Success through Skills – Transforming Futures'. The plan focuses on how my Department will engage with businesses over the coming years to encourage them to raise the skill levels of their employees so that we can rebalance and rebuild our economy in line with the Northern Ireland economic strategy. The employer engagement plan includes over 20 projects and initiatives, the first of which will be delivered over the next 18 months.

We have made significant progress in a number of important areas. By the end of March 2012, our skills solutions service, which works with employers to upskill their existing employees, had made a total of 737 contacts with companies, exceeding the target of having 600 contacts with employers by September 2012. Nine priority economic sectors that my Department will focus its provision on in the coming budgetary period have been identified. Collaborative working with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's foresight unit is being further developed in order to identify the skills needed for emerging and niche sectors. This will be an ongoing process to ensure that we exploit the commercial opportunities from scientific innovations and rebalance the future economy.

Six projects have been approved in the 2011-12 financial year through the joint Department for Employment and Learning and Invest NI assured skills initiative, which supported the promotion of 726 jobs. An employer engagement unit was established in my Department in January to provide enhanced recruitment services to employers. The unit works in partnership with other employer-facing staff in the Department.

Mr S Anderson: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive reply. The employer engagement plan sets no fewer than 11 targets to be met by September 2012. Are all 11 targets on track to be met by September, or is there any slippage?

Dr Farry: It is important that we stick as far as we can to the targets that we set, and I am confident that we are on track for meeting the vast bulk of them. I will come back to the Member in detail as to how we are getting on with the 11 specific targets he referred to.

In my original answer, I referred to the fact that we have already exceeded some of the targets, in particular, through the assured skills programme. I mention that just as we are joined by my colleague the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. We have made significant improvements during this year on the number of projects that we have supported in the past financial year, so we are seeing that particular programme striding forward.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister provide an update on the work of the engineering skills working group?

Dr Farry: I have been very conscious of comments made by a number of elected representatives, as well as representatives from the engineering sector in Northern Ireland, regarding particular skills issues.

2.30 pm

Over the past number of weeks, the Northern Ireland skills adviser, Bill McGinnis, has been conducting a scoping exercise on my behalf with a number of employers. We are due to convene a stakeholder group meeting before the end of this month where we intend to work through those issues. On the basis of what happens at that event, we will take further decisions on whether we need to create a standing working group to work through particular points. However, we are making good progress in that regard, and I recognise this as an important sector for the future of our economy.

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 1, 8 and 9 have been withdrawn and require written answers.

Business: Non-bank Finance

2. **Mrs McKeivitt** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what investigations her Department has made into the potential for non-bank finance for local businesses.
(AQO 2151/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Access to finance remains a key challenge for many businesses throughout Northern Ireland. That was highlighted in the Executive's economic strategy. During the 2011-12 financial year, Invest NI offered over £89 million of financial assistance to companies across Northern Ireland, which will lead to total investment in the local economy of £451 million. Invest NI is putting in place a range of funds that will make in excess of £100 million available to local businesses. The funds will ensure that early-stage companies with high growth potential are not held back because they cannot access finance. In early April 2012, Alastair Hamilton, Invest Northern Ireland's chief executive, wrote to all MLAs outlining Invest Northern Ireland's access to finance strategy to highlight the significant role the funds will play in aiding the liquidity of local SMEs.

I welcome the recent publication of 'Signposts to Funding Opportunities' by Diane Dodds, one of our Members of the European Parliament. It is designed to assist businesses by introducing a wide range of funding programmes that exist in the United Kingdom and the European Union. I also recently announced that the economic advisory group will be undertaking a study that will examine whether there are gaps in the provision of finance, as well as what the Executive might do differently to ensure that SMEs have the necessary access to finance to start and grow their businesses.

Mrs McKeivitt: What discussions has the Minister had with the UK Government on the implementation of the recommendations from the industry working group led by Tim Breedon from the Association of British Insurers that the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills

set up to undertake a review of how to expand access to non-bank lending?

Mrs Foster: The Breedon report, which has proposals to widen business access to new and alternative sources of finance, was published in March 2012. I have not yet had the opportunity to speak with Vince Cable about it. However, we have, of course, been looking at its main recommendations, which include increasing awareness of alternative financing by creating a single business support agency to deliver the national Government's range of SME finance programmes, drawing on international examples, such as Germany, allowing industry to establish a business finance advice network and opening up access to capital markets financing for small companies through the creation of a body to bundle and secure SME loans. Of course, Invest Northern Ireland has gone ahead of the Breedon report in Northern Ireland and has made available a particular range of programmes that help large companies right down to microfinance. I certainly hope that that will go some way towards addressing the finance gap that we all know is present in Northern Ireland and across the UK.

Mr I McCrea: In her answer to the substantive question, the Minister referred to the access to finance strategy. Will she provide the House with more detail on exactly what that is?

Mrs Foster: The access to finance strategy came about because the chief executive of Invest Northern Ireland and I were very concerned that, when we visited companies, we saw that the recurring theme was the inability to access money that would allow them to either continue to exist or to grow. Therefore, funding initiatives have been made available. The Northern Ireland Spin Out fund (NISPO) has been in existence since 2009, so it obviously predates this initiative, but we are wrapping it in and around everything else that is going on. Co-Fund NI involves Invest Northern Ireland co-investing on a pari passu basis with a private investor. Of the development fund, the SME growth loan fund and the small business loan fund the only one not in existence at present is the small business loan fund. We hope that it will be operational by September. It is a very important fund because it will provide loans typically ranging from £1,000 to £5,000 for very small, possibly even single-person companies that are having great difficulty finding funds on a commercial basis. It is a very important fund and will be operational by September.

Mr Cree: The Minister referred to the good work done by Invest Northern Ireland. Will she advise on the proposal for enterprise loans that the Chancellor made in the recent Budget? Will that have any particular benefit for Northern Ireland or any particular application to complement what is already in existence?

Mrs Foster: As I understand it, the enterprise loans are just for England at present. It is hoped that, if they work in England, they will have an application right across the United Kingdom. They have been introduced only in England at present, but we will watch closely to see how they could impact on small and medium-sized businesses across the UK.

Boosting Business Jobs Fund

3. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the number of jobs created, to date, through the Boosting Business jobs fund.
(AQO 2152/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The various jobs fund measures will specifically seek to create 4,000 jobs by March 2014. The measures focus on a range of sectors and programmes and include support for new business starts by residents of neighbourhood renewal areas and young people not in employment, education or training; broader support for social enterprises; a new programme to accelerate business growth; employment support to specifically create new jobs across a range of sectors; and specific support through the Department for Employment and Learning's Steps to Work employer subsidy to provide additional incentive to create new jobs for the unemployed.

To date, there has been a very encouraging uptake across the range of jobs fund measures, as evidenced by the positive results in the first year of the scheme. The jobs fund exceeded its year 1 target by promoting 2,390 jobs against a target of 2,250 and actually creating 1,021 jobs against a target of 1,015, which represents an impressive conversion rate of 43%. In addition, Invest Northern Ireland has created a healthy pipeline with over 180 diverse projects at different stages of development. Collectively, these business investment projects have the potential to create a further 1,700 new jobs. Invest NI continues to work with a wide range of businesses and stakeholders across Northern Ireland to promote the scheme and support new job creation projects.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the Minister for her answer and the good news story that it contains. Does the Minister have any new job figures for my East Londonderry constituency specifically?

Mrs Foster: All politics is local. I thank the Member for his question. As of 8 June 2012, 61 projects have been added to Invest NI's work in progress in East Londonderry since the launch of Boosting Business in November 2011. Those projects have the potential to create approximately 50 new jobs and lever in investment of over £4.5 million. As well as that, a total of 80 enquiries for the constituency have been received and logged through the Boosting Business enquiry handling centre. Of those, 18 have been referred to other Invest NI teams for further action.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister provide an update on how the figures outlined compare with those set out in the Programme for Government targets? Perhaps she can also give us an update on how many jobs were created in North Antrim.

Mrs Foster: It will not come as any surprise that I do not have the North Antrim figures in front of me. However, I am happy to provide figures similar to those I gave for East Londonderry.

In relation to Invest NI's 2011-12 end-of-year results, the targets for jobs promoted and jobs created have been exceeded, which is very pleasing. In fact, all the targets set for Invest NI for this year have been met apart from two. One of those is relevant to the subject that we discussed yesterday, namely the need for more to be done on research and development and innovation and, especially, to get more businesses to invest in it. The second, relating to start-up businesses, is no surprise either, given the lack of a contract being awarded because of the legal processes that were ongoing last year. However, I can tell the House that the tender is now out for that business start-up programme.

It is in the Official Journal of the European Union. People have 40 days to apply, and it is my hope that the tender will then be awarded, subject to legal processes, obviously, by September of this year. We are keen that that should be in place, nobody more so than me.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's response to date. How does the Department assess performance across all constituencies in Northern Ireland to make sure that there is continuity and consistency of the fund?

Mrs Foster: In the past, we were not able to get the figures, and I know that it was a source of some frustration to Members that we were talking about jobs promoted yet were not able to look at jobs created. That issue was raised with me on a number of occasions. We can now provide the figures, so, if Members wish, we can supply the appropriate material for each Member's constituency.

Tourism: Belfast

4. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the development of tourism in Belfast over the last three years. (AQO 2153/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Belfast has seen significant development over the past number of years, with the reopening of the Ulster Museum and the Lyric Theatre; the opening of the MAC, Belfast's new arts centre; developments at Belfast zoo; and, of course, Titanic Belfast. Those examples and many more provide a wide range of attractions for tourists to see in Belfast, which is now listed in Fodor's travel guide as one of the top visitor destinations. There are further plans to develop a conference and exhibition centre to add to the product on offer and attract the lucrative business tourism market. All of that is testament to the good working relationships between the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau, the city council and Tourism Ireland to ensure that Belfast continues to grow as a tourism destination, with an increase in visitor numbers and revenue.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for her answer. I declare an interest as a member of the board of the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau.

Does the Minister agree with me that the way forward for tourism in Belfast, which has grown exponentially over the past number of years, is to continue with the collaborative approach between the Tourist Board, the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau, Belfast City Council and her Department?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. I was in City Hall just yesterday with my good friend and party colleague, the Lord Mayor of Belfast, Gavin Robinson, at the official launch of Super-connected Belfast, at which I was more than happy to demonstrate my support for the super-connected city project for Belfast, which will bring the new digital connected programme. Belfast is one of 10 cities bidding for money through that programme, and I am very hopeful that it will get the maximum amount available, because of the fact that it is working collaboratively with Departments, other agencies and the business community.

One of the best examples of partnership working has been shown to be Titanic Belfast. All the agencies worked

together to deliver the signature project on time and on budget, and I am delighted to tell the House that I understand that visitor numbers are in excess of 200,000. All involved are absolutely delighted at the number of visitors to date. You may recall that the annual visitor target is 425,000, so we have almost reached the halfway mark, and the signature project has been open for just over two months. It is an absolutely brilliant piece of work by all concerned, and we are very pleased with the way in which it is going.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her update thus far, and I take the opportunity to commend all those involved in increasing the visitor numbers to Belfast.

Political tourism attracts a lot of people to parts of my constituency, including the Falls and the Shankill, and it has a positive impact on people coming here. Can the Minister outline today, in writing if she has not got the answer with her, whether there is a strategy that her Department, Tourism Ireland, the Tourist Board or Belfast City Council has to further enhance visitor numbers coming here to take part in political tourism?

Mrs Foster: There is always a discussion over whether we should look to the past or the future in Northern Ireland. I know that very many visitors who come to Belfast want to look at our past, and many of them will take a black taxi tour to different areas of the city. That is very good, but we want to mix that with the future Belfast as well, and that is what we are trying to do through all the new developments that I mentioned, whether it is the MAC, the Lyric Theatre or Titanic Belfast.

I think that there is a cultural offering that is unique to Belfast. We should not shy away from that. I have always said that, if we want visitors to come to Belfast and the rest of Northern Ireland, we must be authentic in what we do, and, therefore, we have to face up to our past. I hope that we can do that in a mature way, so that, when people visit us, they get the factual context of what happened in Northern Ireland.

2.45 pm

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I hope the Minister will accept that the cultural offering is not exclusive to Belfast. Given her roots and background, will the Minister assure us that areas beyond Belfast will not be forgotten about in the promotion of tourism and its values?

Mrs Foster: I assure the Member that the whole of Northern Ireland is very much on my agenda. He will know that from the number of visits that I make right across Northern Ireland. Of course, cultural activities will take place right across Northern Ireland, particularly on 12 July. I know that the city of Londonderry is looking forward to its year of culture next year as well. Of course the rest of Northern Ireland beyond Belfast benefits from tourism, but we must realise that Belfast is our capital city, and, if people come here for short breaks, they tend to come just to Belfast. Our challenge is to signpost those visitors to attractions right across Northern Ireland, so that, when they return, they can go to all the other places that we want them to visit.

Mr Allister: Whereas there have been many good news stories on tourism, can the Minister explain how we have reached the situation where there is a threat to remove HMS Caroline from Belfast to Portsmouth? Can she assure the House that all that needs to be done will be done to retain that vessel, which itself has immense tourism potential?

Mrs Foster: Not only has it immense tourism potential, it has immense historical and cultural significance for Northern Ireland, as it is the last battleship that served in the First World War and at the battle of Jutland. HMS Caroline has been berthed in Belfast since 1924 but was only decommissioned from the Ministry of Defence in March last year. Since then, despite the fact that the responsibility does not all fall to me as tourism Minister, I have taken up the case. I commissioned a business case in August last year. I have only recently received that business case, and I hope to meet the Minister of State for the Armed Forces Nick Harvey in the very near future to discuss HMS Caroline.

Of course we want to keep HMS Caroline in Belfast. I believe that the solution is a partnership with the National Museum of the Royal Navy, which owns the ship, so that we can keep it here in Belfast. It would cost a huge amount of money to take Caroline to Portsmouth. Would it not be much better to see her preserved here in Belfast? Therefore, I have no difficulty in assuring the Member that I will do everything in my power to find a workable and sustainable solution to keeping Caroline here in Belfast.

Tourism: West Tyrone

5. **Mr Doherty** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps she intends to take to secure greater capital investment in the tourism industry in West Tyrone.
(AQO 2154/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board offers financial assistance through the tourism development scheme for capital-based tourism projects. Seven applications were received from the West Tyrone constituency under the 2011-13 call. Three have received a stage 1 approval and progressed to stage 2 assessment. One application was placed on the reserve list. The tourism development scheme is currently closed for applications. NITB has been facilitating key stakeholders in the Tyrone and Sperrins tourism area to progress a destination management plan, and an aligned action plan will identify key capital projects to be developed.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer. However, I am sure that she will share my concern that not one penny was invested in Strabane District Council by the Tourist Board between 2006 and 2011. Can the Minister give me a satisfactory answer as to why that happened and an opinion of her arm's-length bodies in the rest of west Tyrone in tourism terms?

Mrs Foster: I take his point about capital projects; that is what the tourism development scheme deals with. When questions are put to me about specific programmes, I have to answer those specific questions. I do not accept that no money was spent in the Strabane area over that period by the Tourist Board. We have been working with Sperrins Tourism Ltd up there.

I have been looking at the tourism development scheme. It was created back in 1992, and it is administered by the Tourist Board. I do not have any input into the applications or how they are assessed. Applications are assessed against the criteria that are set out. I have been looking at the geographical spread of the TDS, and I have some concerns about that. I intend to review the TDS and look at it a little more closely. We are at the end of the five signature projects, and we are moving on to the nine tourism destination areas, of which Sperrin and Tyrone is one. I want to see equal spread so that capital spend is spread right across Northern Ireland. I give the Member the commitment that I intend to look at the TDS in the future.

Mr Hilditch: Following on from that, will the Minister indicate whether she is content with other parts of Northern Ireland, or is there concern in other areas?

Mrs Foster: There is. Those issues have been raised with me, particularly in relation to the TDS. As I said, a number of schemes are run by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, but, in relation to the TDS, representations have been made to me. It is inevitable that that will happen when applications are put in and are not successful. It is no surprise that the TDS is hugely oversubscribed. Therefore, there has to be a very stringent application of the criteria. However, in my role as Minister for tourism, I want to have a look at whether the scheme needs to be reformed.

Fuel Poverty

6. **Mr Murphy** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what aspects of her Department's energy policy support the eradication of fuel poverty. (AQO 2155/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Numerous aspects of my Department's energy policy support the fight against fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. Among those is the ongoing work aimed at encouraging more energy suppliers into the market, thus providing consumers with greater choice and lower prices. In addition, the work towards extending the provision of natural gas to new areas across Northern Ireland, our work with the regulator in relation to smart meters and, most recently, my approach to the Executive to consult on a new energy efficiency measure as part of a new energy Bill should all assist in the challenge of tackling fuel poverty.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer. Obviously, she is aware that the Department for Social Development takes the lead on fuel poverty. Given that the primary focus of her Department is on supporting business and the economy, is there not a danger that, in the fuel policy area, those who are most in need will be neglected?

Mrs Foster: I do not accept that. We have a very close relationship with the Department for Social Development, particularly in relation to fuel poverty. We sat on the interdepartmental group on fuel poverty, and we are a member of the newly formed cross-sectoral fuel poverty partnership. The Member is, of course, right: our primary focus in DETI is on business competitiveness, but we will continue to work with others on a range of matters relating to fuel poverty.

Energy: Whitty Report

7. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the recent report on energy by Lord Whitty.

(AQO 2156/11-15)

Mrs Foster: As he made it clear that his specific considerations were around the issues of affordability, sustainability and security of supply, I am surprised and disappointed that Lord Whitty's report fails to recognise that those are the three key pillars previously identified by the Executive in their strategic energy framework, published some 18 months earlier, or to acknowledge any of the work progressed to date towards implementing those specific framework goals. Overall, my assessment of Lord Whitty's report is that it brings little, if anything, new to the Northern Ireland energy debate and, in many instances, simply echoes recommendations previously put forward by others.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answer. Given that a knowledgeable and experienced person is calling for the Utility Regulator to play some part in assessing the home heating oil industry, will she consider legislation to enable that?

Mrs Foster: Again, this is an issue that has come before the House on many occasions. Unfortunately, although Lord Whitty called for oil regulation by the Utility Regulator in his report, he presented no new evidence to underpin his recommendations. The Northern Ireland oil distribution sector is considered to be competitive and transparent on price, with lower prices than in parts of Great Britain, and the Office of Fair Trading's report confirmed that.

Although Members may think that it is a good thing to bring about more regulation in the home heating oil sector, one has to ask who would pay for that. Unfortunately, this was another issue that Lord Whitty did not address. It would impose sizeable regulatory costs on the competitive oil supply and distribution sector, which, frankly, would be passed on to consumers. That is not a particularly wise thing to do at a time when people are under increasing pressure to pay their energy bills. Indeed, it would be better to look for ways to make things more competitive and give more choice to people who wish to switch from oil to gas or renewable heat.

Mr Copeland: I have formed the opinion that the Minister does not think much of Lord Whitty's report. Despite that, may I ask her for an update on her Department's consultation on the extension of the gas network? What actions is she taking as a result of that consultation, given that that issue was included in Lord Whitty's report?

Mrs Foster: Although Lord Whitty was not that keen on the gas network extension, which disappointed me, I very much believe in it. We want gas to be available to everyone in Northern Ireland and not just to people in the east of the Province. The Department will continue to work with the Utility Regulator on licensing and related issues, and I was encouraged that he recently issued a discussion paper to seek the views of interested parties on how a competition process may be designed to deliver distribution and transmission extensions. Just last week, he organised a half-day workshop to discuss the award of the licence.

The roll-out of natural gas is progressing and is keenly awaited by a lot of industries in the west of the Province. I have been lobbied on a number of occasions by large energy users in the west of the Province who are keenly awaiting the gas network. I will do everything in my power to make it a reality.

Mr Agnew: Following on from that, will the Minister comment on Lord Whitty's assessment that it would be better to get more people onto the existing gas network than seek to extend it to the west, where, in many places, it will never be viable, and that promoting renewables in those areas would produce more benefit?

Mrs Foster: I totally disagree with the Member that bringing gas to the west will not be feasible. We have had the feasibility report on bringing the gas network. There is nothing to stop us continuing with gas penetration in the existing licence area while, in parallel, looking towards a gas extension. We do not just stop in one area because we are extending to another area. They can go together in parallel. Therefore, I think that is a particularly weak part of Lord Whitty's report.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Daithí McKay is not in his place. I call Ms Michelle Gildernew.

Small Businesses: County Fermanagh

11. **Ms Gildernew** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the impact that the amalgamation of Fermanagh District Council and Omagh District Council will have on small businesses in County Fermanagh. (AQO 2160/11-15)

3.00 pm

Mrs Foster: Fermanagh District Council and Omagh District Council have been working in partnership for some time on a number of areas, including local economic development. For example, the Survive and Thrive programme, aimed at supporting local SMEs and funded through my Department under the local economic development measure, is being delivered jointly across both council areas. Consequently, I believe that the amalgamation of both council areas will lead to an enhanced partnership approach that, alongside the support available from Invest Northern Ireland, can only benefit small businesses in the area.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Executive Committee Business

Local Government (Boundaries) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012

Debate resumed on motion:

That the draft Local Government (Boundaries) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved. —
[Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment).]

Mr Dallat: I am pleased to take part in this debate, but it is more in sorrow and regret than joy. I say that from a fairly strong position, because I spent 33 years in local government, from 1977 until 2010. I sacrificed a great deal to put down the roots of democracy when others were putting up boycott posters and advising people not to vote. So, I hope those people who reached this agreement understand that many people across the North sacrificed a great deal and, indeed, gave up their time and, perhaps, neglected their families to ensure that we would have solid roots on which to build our democracy. I see George Robinson nodding in agreement. I think he understands that we all know about that.

So, you will understand, Mr Speaker, our disappointment that the decision to move forward with 11 councils was not collective or unanimous. That is a matter of regret, because we are still a fledgling democracy, from a worldwide viewpoint. We are still in our infancy and people such as myself who have been here for the past 14 years will understand that there were times when we were not sure whether this Assembly would last. So, to take a departure based on the agreement of two parties rather than all parties is not particularly clever.

I have no intention of getting into the old orange and green thing because I fear that the map has been painted with too much orange and too much green. There are too many peace walls in Belfast, and although there are no actual peace walls in the rural areas, believe you me, there are areas yet where a lot of work has to be done to ensure that those invisible peace walls come down.

I am not sure whether Sinn Féin or the DUP got the better deal here, but the 100,000 people who are currently under nationalist-controlled councils and are moving into unionist-controlled councils do not think that it was a great deal. I am sure that George Robinson and I would disagree about Limavady. I am sure he is very pleased that they are moving into Coleraine, but I am afraid that a lot of people I know would disagree with that and believe that Limavady, for example, had much more affinity with the City of Derry than with North Antrim.

Other areas have been mentioned, such as Newry and Mourne. We had a presentation the other morning from one of the councillors there, and the words "nationalist", "unionist", "Catholic" or "Protestant" were not mentioned once. The presentation was purely about the democratic right of local people to live in a geographical environment that they feel comfortable with.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the Member for giving way. He mentioned Limavady. Does he not agree that if Limavady went into the council area of Londonderry, it would be a very small fish in a big pond?

Mr Dallat: I thank the Member for his remark. I see you smiling, Mr Speaker, and you will know, as someone from Derry city — I do not want to involve you — that your involvement in Derry has, without a shadow of a doubt, enriched that city, and helped it to get to the stage that it is at today, where it is pluralist, is reaching out to the world and, next year, will become the City of Culture. I do not think that that would have been possible without the two communities working in harmony. Indeed, there are many times when I envy the type of agreements reached in the Maiden City between the two communities. I applaud them for it, and, to be honest, I wish that we could have emulated that in Coleraine.

Of course, I am in a very privileged position because I was the first nationalist mayor of Coleraine. That was about 12 years ago, but when you consider that Ballymena is getting round to that only now and that Craigavon has not quite managed it, I should, perhaps, feel privileged.

Mr Moutray: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Member said that Craigavon has not had a nationalist mayor, but it has. His colleague Mrs Dolores Kelly was mayor some years ago.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Member for putting me right. Obviously, my geography of the whole of the North is not all that good, and it is good that other Members are here to correct me.

Mr G Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I remind the Member that it took me 17 years to become mayor of Limavady.

Mr Speaker: There is no doubt about it: Mr Moutray and Mr Robinson are now on the record. Perhaps we could move to the business before the House.

Mr Dallat: Some time ago, we were told, I think by the First Minister, that steps would be taken if our Minister did not agree to this carve-up, or whatever it is. I am not sure what was meant by steps, but I presume that it would not have been particularly pleasant for Mr Attwood.

At times, I wonder whether we really appreciate the history that was made in 1998 when the Good Friday Agreement was signed. Do we really thank the Lord above enough for the opportunity to begin a peace process that was to be built on inclusivity and would put behind us for ever and a day those dark days when people felt excluded? We are a democratic party, and our principles are based on that. The party came into being in 1970, and I joined it in 1973. I think that I mentioned earlier —

Mr Speaker: Order. I am giving the Minister and Members some latitude because I understand that it is a big subject and that there are sensitive issues. However, we really need to try to return to the draft local government order.

Mr Dallat: I thank you, Mr Speaker, for putting me right. I will always accept democratic instructions rather than the other form of instruction.

We were told that the 11-council model was the right one, but all the research from consultants, statisticians and everyone else clearly indicated that a 15-council model would not burden the ratepayers or the Department. Massive payouts will go to people in senior positions in councils, and they will, of course, absolutely welcome the reform of public administration. My goodness, if certain people can get early retirement with a golden handshake and all sorts of packages and pensions, they will, of course, agree with this carve-up.

The question of savings has been mentioned. We were told that, under the 11-council model, £438 million would be saved over 25 years, with an up-front cost of £118 million. The ICE programme, which was commissioned by the association of councillors, clearly indicates that a much more substantial saving can be made by following that. There would be far less of a carve-up, and local communities would not be displaced from the surroundings in which they have felt comfortable since 1973. We know that the public at large are slow to accept change. How many Members have met people who think that local councils still let houses? You hear it all the time, and that has been going on for 50 years.

Mr Speaker, you have been lenient with me, and I thank you for that. There are, of course, many other advantages in selecting a 15-council model. I do not have time to go into that, except to mention them briefly. The 15-council model would achieve savings with less disruption; reduce the need to combine or split the assets and liabilities of councils; permit the retention of clusters that have collaborated successfully over the years; and, most importantly, keep natural communities together, thus preserving local communities. Such clusters have worked extremely well between Coleraine and Limavady. They have worked extremely well between Coleraine and Ballymena on one side and Ballymoney on the other. They are very flexible, do not cost anything and can be refreshed as people need them.

Finally and most importantly, a 15-council model would allow the opportunity to build confidence among stakeholders, and given the low level of satisfaction with the Assembly, that, surely, must be taken seriously. I know that everyone here is concerned that public confidence in the Assembly is lower than it should be. To be frank, the decision to go for the 11-council model is not the best way to build democracy.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's announcement on the boundaries. It is an important step forward. It is belated, I suppose, when I think that we have gone round the houses several times since, through NILGA, I was first involved with RPA. It is unfortunate that it has taken so long to get to this stage. However, the order is an important development. Although a lot of the issues were dealt with during the cross communication this morning between the Minister and various Members — the debate, by and large, has taken place — there remain some issues that we need to touch on.

The DEAs are important. We now have the council boundaries, and the next stage must come quickly. The Minister has indicated that a commissioner will be appointed, but the speedier that is done, the better, so that the DEAs are set out. Members, parties and the

communities can then start to link in with the DEAs, because the new larger councils will make the local aspect of doing that a wee bit more difficult to manage. It is important that we start to look to those communities, because we will be dealing with community planning and various structures that need to be community led.

The transition committees have been mentioned a number of times, and it is important that they are moved from their present voluntary basis to a statutory role. If we are to kick-start this, councillors and council officials need to be sure that, this time, we will complete the journey that has started so many times.

It was said earlier that the transition committees have worked well in their voluntary capacity. That raises two issues. The first is that of the resources that were put into the councils to make it happen — councillors and officials and all were recompensed. The other is that we had transition managers. Unfortunately, we lost a number of those managers in the delays that happened. Some of them went back to different councils. It is important that we reactivate that approach and bring in transition managers to complete the job, because a lot of good work has been done, including in my council area, where I chaired the transition committee for a number of years. In Dungannon, Cookstown and Magherafelt, one of the issues was that the transition manager was key to a lot of work done between the three councils, and it is a wee bit like asking officials to vote themselves out. A lot of them were a bit reluctant to do that, so it was a bit like asking turkeys to vote for Christmas. They were reluctant to create the transition committees across the councils because it might mean the end of their jobs. So, we need a transition manager to make that happen, to develop it and to come up with new ideas. I hope that the Minister will be able to bring the system into operation. The key to the success of the transition committees the previous time was a transition manager.

3.15 pm

We now expect more powers to be transferred. It is unfortunate that various Departments have reneged on some of the transitions that were to happen with the transfer of various roles from the Assembly to local government. The Assembly is a legislative body, and it needs to deal with legislation, develop it and transmit it down to the councils for implementation. We need to see more powers transferred, and resources need to go along with them. That is to ensure that those powers are not being transferred and jobs are not going to local government without the resources to finance them. Over the past year, we saw something like 11 Bills give more work to local government, but there were little or no resources to make that happen or to help ease the burden.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. I do not by any means disagree with him, but I am interested in the line that he is taking on the transfer of functions. Just for clarification, is he suggesting that, now that Members have themselves in position in the Northern Ireland Assembly, they may be building empires for themselves in their own Departments and are reluctant to transfer those functions down to local councils?

He also touched on an issue that I raised earlier. How does he propose to ensure that the finances go with the transfer of functions?

Mr Molloy: It may be the case that some Members who have power bases in the Assembly want to hold on to as much of that power as possible. However, Members who are now in the Assembly need to see that their new role is about making things happen with legislation and about ensuring that local government implements that legislation.

Very often, the issue comes down to officials in Departments delegating and saying that we could transfer this or that but retain the other. We need to make sure that that process is open, and maybe the review of quangos should also be part of the process. We should look within Departments to see what else can be transferred to ensure that we get good powers to local government.

It is important to ensure that any resources that are required for those new functions accompany them. It is up to the Assembly to do that. The Assembly's role is also to designate that and to ensure that Ministers transfer with that function all the resources that were in the Department that was dealing with the issue originally.

Planning is one such function. However, we hope that local government will have more powers than just planning. At the end of the day, planning will still be controlled by the legislation that is made in the Assembly, so it will not be handed totally over to local government. The Assembly will still have a role in planning. However, making planning decisions is a very important role for local government.

We also need to ensure that councils have the power to make change. I propose that the Minister looks at the power of general competence as one way forward. The power of well-being gives councils a wee bit of a role in seeing and dealing with need in an area, but the power of general competence is stronger. It gives the council more room to identify issues that may have been neglected in the past. Unadopted roads, infrastructure and footpaths and things like that are just a few examples of matters that may, in the future, be transferred to local government. Once it sees the need, local government could then meet it, deal with it and take account of it, instead of passing it back to another Department or around the Departments. I hope that the Minister will look at that situation.

We also need to look at powers, and we should recognise that the primacy of the elected member is still key. Council officials would sometimes like to think that they run the councils, and sometimes they do. We must take that wee thought out of their heads and give power back to elected members and give them the confidence to run the council and make it representative of the communities that they are elected to serve.

There has been a lot of talk about savings. I pointed out to the Minister that making such savings needs co-operation with the ICE programme. Chief executives need to lead that. They cannot step back from it and say that they are not working or co-operating with it. They cannot allow the divisions in two different council areas to develop. We need to ensure that those transition committees are up and running, that chief executives are given the role of implementing them and that the councils are given a statutory role to ensure that that happens.

The new councils will need to have the powers to make the changes, and we are talking about shadow councils as one way of making that transition simpler. However, that will need to be looked at again to see whether it is necessary because it could create confusion. John Dallat said that people still think that councils allocate housing and deal with roads. How will that develop in a transitional or shadow council, and how will it develop in a full council?

Single waste management was mentioned earlier. I am not sure about that. I sat on one of the waste management groups, and one of our concerns was that if you put it all into one single area of waste management, you end up with an incinerator being the solution to everything. We did not see that solution as a way forward in the rural SWaMP group that I was involved in. The danger is that Arc becomes responsible for single waste management, the incinerator becomes the solution to solving the problems and recycling goes out the window. So, we need to be careful because people are looking at 25-year contracts. Independent recyclers are saying that there is a better alternative — a local alternative — and a means of dealing with that that does not have the same risks as the risks we are taking now.

The key to all this is that we now have the boundaries, and we must get the infrastructure and the transition committees in place to ensure that local government has the power to make decisions and that those decisions will be respected by the Assembly and given the support and resources to carry out those functions.

Mr Kinahan: I am pleased to be speaking on this subject as it is the same subject that I spoke on in my maiden speech in June 2009, three years ago. I hope that today proves to be an important day for Northern Ireland as we put the boundaries legislation in place. Then again, I am not sure whether what we are doing today has been fully and properly agreed and that we know where we are going. I am also concerned that we have done nothing for the past three years and that today is a step that looks good in front of the public, but, actually, all sides are not agreed on where they are going.

When I look at a lot of what we do in the Chamber, there are days when I would love to shake it — really shake it — because, many times, nothing happens. We all speak with sincerity and yet we do not listen to each other. Today, we have a chance to start sorting out our local government and get it somewhere, and yet this morning's debate was reduced to petty politics and trying to show each other up in the Chamber. I want to see this place really working. I want to see the boundaries properly agreed. That means boundaries that do not just suit the two main parties, if it is a carve-up, which is what it looks like. I want to see boundaries that we can all live with. If you look at where we are going, you will see that this is a small step towards the change of government, but the change of government is huge, and we must ensure that that small step is the right one. It will be 20, 30 or maybe 40 years before we can change local government again, so let us ensure that we get it right. From what I have seen going on in the Chamber today as we squabble, I am concerned that this will fall by the way. As proof of that, we have already seen challenges to the Minister, who is trying to take it there, although his heart is not necessarily in the 11-council model. However, we have also seen the other major parties challenging him

to the point where they do not like the way he is taking it around the 11 councils. We must change local government. The public want it. They want efficient local government and they want to see things happening. Please, think of shaking this Building, shaking everyone up and getting everyone to pull together.

Now, the point of today's debate is boundaries, and the way we work with boundaries, which is a form of gerrymandering and the manipulation of constituencies. Let us not make it just a carve-up, so it is set between two major parties. Let us make sure that we do it for the best.

The commissioner will be in place this autumn. That has to be good. However, he must be totally independent and must look at the boundaries for the good of Northern Ireland. In the 2009 model, the commissioner did not regard community identity as an important factor. The commissioner must look at communities, boundaries and the long-term effects that change will have. He must look especially at the most important factor: the communities themselves. This is not a subject that the public will find exciting, but we must remember that they want us to cut the costs and the rates. As Mr Dallat has indicated, we must also remember that the public do not know the differences in what we do. Boundary changes need to fit the Assembly boundaries and the Westminster boundaries and not just be left on their own. This has to be part of a long-term plan.

In South Antrim, we are joining together Antrim Borough Council and Newtownabbey Borough Council. We will build a strong council. At the moment, Newtownabbey leans heavily and strongly towards the DUP, which I hope we will change in time. However, one of the greatest complaints that I get from people on the ground is that the council is not listening to the electorate. When you get a body that is too strong, often it is not listening to the people on the ground. That is not just an attack on the DUP; it could be an attack on any party. We have to put in place something that works for everybody.

I go back to South Antrim. Look at the boundary changes. Poor Glenavy gets kicked about like a football. In at one time, out at another; now in for Westminster and in for the Assembly. We are about to add in Jordanstown, Knockagh and Monkstown. It will be good to see them and to get down there and work with them. However, the electorate do not know the boundaries. They do not know which body they are talking about. They just want to be well represented. What we do today has to make sure that we do not confuse the electorate.

We have already heard that the original RPA was planned in 2002. We have not got anywhere to date. The public, as I said, want to see that working efficiently, to pay less tax and lower rates and to get their problems resolved.

As we have discussed, we were meant to be devolving a mass of other matters to councils. Let us use this opportunity to make sure that we get the best from the changes we are putting in place. We have heard a bit of debate on dual mandates, waste and all the other matters. When those original changes were being put in place, what happened to the coterminosity we were meant to see, whether it was with health or with policing? I think that we have lost our way. I really hope that today's first

step is a step towards getting proper, good, efficient local government.

I am concerned, as our party is, about the cost, and how we are going to have the resources to actually move the councils forward. We have to think of a way of doing it efficiently. If it is going to cost what PricewaterhouseCoopers came up with, or more, we are talking about £120 million. In the economic times that we are in, we cannot just pass that on. We must think again: how do we do it efficiently?

I suppose what we are asking today is that we put in changes to local government, but let us try to put in changes that allow us, in the future, to keep changing it as is necessary, and not put in something that is a closed door right at the beginning, which we will be stuck with for the next 30 or 40 years.

I am often criticised for getting my proportions wrong. Not me, personally, in my shape, but the proportion of when I relate what matters here. When we talked about creating the position of Principal Deputy Speaker, I spoke about it being another nail in the coffin of democracy.

I go back to the point that I have made all the way through: if we do not do this right and this is just a carve-up, we are putting another nail in the coffin of democracy. I ask everyone to keep that in mind always when we look at the changes in councils. We want good, democratic government here.

I am also concerned about the financing of councils, something that has not come up today. I am not talking about resources; I am talking about the great opportunities that will exist in the future. We have put legislation in place to give them finance officers, but we still have not necessarily found our way. At a recent RCIS presentation, we were shown how the Scottish federation trust or fiscal trust, I think it was, had allowed the Scottish Government to gear up great loans and borrowings so that they could do public realm, large infrastructure projects and others, such as schools and hospitals. We have in the future of the councils a magnificent mechanism to do that. We must look at upskilling councils and their finances and, at the same time, not give them too much in their borrowings and in their loans in the future, so that they cannot make the best of their way forward. My concern is that, if we do not give them the resources, they will borrow more, and, when it comes to doing bigger projects and working together in the future, they will not be able to do it because they have already borrowed too much or have locked themselves into payments that stop them finding a way forward.

Today is phenomenally important. We have got to get it right. We have got to have a good change in our public administration, but I do not like the borders and the boundaries that we have got today. The UUP will, therefore, be against today's motion.

3.30 pm

Mr Hazard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support today's motion. Power and democracy must be devolved locally, but such devolution must be enshrined within firm principles of equality in participation and access to local services. Citizens' access to the existing services delivered by local government and the additional services that are to be delivered by local government under RPA must

be delivered on a value-for-money basis and by ensuring that no additional burden is passed on to the ratepayer, without marked and identifiable improvements to the services being provided.

Within the RPA process, the ratepayer should not have to countenance any increase in local rates without any marked increase in the delivery of cost-effective and efficient local services. With that in mind, the review of public administration presents local government across the North with an important opportunity to design optimum models of service delivery for the 11 new councils.

Since the outset of the RPA process, Sinn Féin has gone on record time and again to state that it is in favour of a significant reduction in local councils and local councillors, particularly now, in the climate of a functioning Assembly and difficult economic times. Our preference was to reduce local councils to seven. For their own reasons, many of which were about little more than protecting their members' positions, other parties had different views. Agreement was reached on an 11-council model. Despite Mrs Kelly and Mr Dallat's depictions of carve-ups and side deals, I remind the House that the SDLP backed the 11-council position in its 2011 PFG document:

"In the next mandate the SDLP will press for radical reform of Government, including: ... Implementing RPA with an 11 Council model".

In order to get on with the business, as the Minister put it earlier, can we leave the party political posturing behind and get on with this much needed local government reform? Such reform will see a reduction in councillors and an overall reduction in allowances and expenses. It will also see greater efficiencies and a much better service for the public. That is a welcome move that is supported by the vast majority of ratepayers throughout the North.

The new structures will ensure better governance and equality at local level, but, as the Minister has outlined, it has been calculated that reducing the number of councils will provide savings of more than £570 million over the next 25 years. Moreover, despite the political gymnastics of some in the House, the current financial situation is proving no ally for the procrastination that is being displayed.

Sinn Féin recognises that, due to the different nuances within the new councils, it may not be possible to have a one-size-fits-all model. Because of the different priorities and uniqueness of each of the council areas, there may need to be some flexibility in how those areas deliver or share their services. We believe that there are obvious opportunities for cost-effective benefits to be made through savings, via such avenues as joint procurement and the sharing of services within new councils. Functions such as IT and payroll systems are examples of local government functions that could also benefit from being shared within the councils. With an ever-increasing strain on the amount of available public funding, the opportunities for improvement in service delivery associated with the merging of the new councils will become increasingly important.

We believe that the delivery models for the new councils should be designed in a way that will allow not only for the transformation of existing services within councils but for collaborative solutions being sought between councils. Furthermore, preferred models should be equality proofed

on the basis of models of best practice to provide for maximum efficiency savings and collaboration.

It is time to move beyond the flip-flopping on the number of councils and get on with the job of establishing an equitable and democratic system of local government.

Mrs McKeivitt: We are asked today to approve the draft Local Government (Boundaries) Order, which has been a long time coming to the Floor of the House. It has cleared many hurdles, but there are still deep divisions around the Chamber on what the final council maps should look like. I do not wish to get into that debate or a debate on the number of councils; other colleagues in the Chamber will. I wish to raise an anomaly in the ward boundary proposals that should be addressed and modified prior to the order being approved.

The anomaly that I speak of is the seaside resort of Warrenpoint. In the published electoral register on 1 July 2008, which was the required date for the basis of the Boundaries Commissioner's calculations, Warrenpoint had an electorate of 4,500 and a population of over 7,000. Today, the population has increased significantly. The new configuration in the order means that nearly 40% of Warrenpoint's current urban electorate will be resident in the new rural wards of Rostrevor and Burren. The commissioner had a legal responsibility to ensure the proper representation of the rural and urban electorate in the district, but he did not ensure that it happened in Warrenpoint.

The Local Government (Boundaries) Act 2008 also gives the commissioner flexibility to increase or decrease the number of wards per district by up to five, taking account of the size, population and physical diversity of the district and of the representation of the rural and urban electorate in the district. He chose not to increase the number of wards significantly to address that injustice, even after his assistant commissioner recommended 43 wards in the new Newry, Mourne and Down council area.

I do not wish to sound like I am in commissioner-bashing mode; I am not. I recognise the enormous task that he faced and commend him for the courteous and professional manner in which he conducted this exercise. However, he has made two mistakes. First, he did not ensure proper representation of the rural and urban electorate of Warrenpoint. Secondly, he did not amend the boundaries when the error was pointed out to him. He could and should have accepted the new layout as proposed by Newry and Mourne District Council and Down District Council through their local Warrenpoint representative, Michael Carr.

I should say that this stage that, in September 2009, I was deputy mayor of Newry and Mourne council and accompanied Mr Carr and a cross-party delegation of councillors from both councils to give a presentation to the then Minister of the Environment, Mr Poots. He, I believe, was convinced by the argument and had a lot of sympathy for the case for an extra ward in Warrenpoint. The current Minister, Mr Attwood, was also convinced by the argument but was unable to persuade his Executive colleagues to adopt the modification. In fact, the Boundaries Commissioner recognised the argument, and, in his final report, he said:

"The case for an additional ward in Warrenpoint has merit."

I was astonished this morning by comments from the Chair of the Environment Committee, which were completely inaccurate. She stated that it was not inside the rules. In fact, rule 17(b) was never mentioned at the meeting on 17 May, and that included the urban and rural. I have to express my disbelief that the Committee was actually briefed as indicated, and I suggest that Hansard shows that Mr May said that he would simply answer questions from the Committee. I would like clarification of that. Both councils were very disappointed that the request at the meeting on 17 May 2012 to address the Committee was refused. This is the time to put it right. I acknowledge the comments from Tom Elliott that there is time to put this right. The good people of Warrenpoint should not be brushed to the side in what I see as a carve-up.

The case for Seaview in Warrenpoint is non-political, has cross-party support, has unanimous support from both councils, has been accepted and acted on by the assistant boundaries commissioner, has been accepted in principle by the Boundaries Commissioner, had understanding and sympathy from Minister Poots and was accepted and recommended by Minister Attwood. Yet, it is not included as a proposed modification to the draft Local Government (Boundaries) Order, which has been laid in the Assembly today. I wonder whether there has been a carve-up.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank you for your patience through such a long and arduous debate. It has been said that you have the patience of a saint, and I think that you have demonstrated some of that today. I also pay tribute to the Members who have spoken so far, because in the Minister's opening remarks he outlined that he wanted to breach his record of one hour and 40 minutes. He has been kept quiet for quite some time, so another record has been breached today.

I welcome the long-awaited progress of the order. In my county of Fermanagh, there is genuine fear and deep apprehension among the business community and many households about a potential rise in rates as a result of the amalgamation of Fermanagh and Omagh district councils. As a Fermanagh-based MLA, I am keen to ensure that any potential rates increase is mitigated as best as possible and that businesses and households do not feel the burden of the much needed reorganisation of local government. As my colleague Mr Hazzard said, if there is to be a rates increase for households or businesses, individuals or businesses need to see a marked improvement in the services that they get from their local council. From the information that we have received to date, I do not see that as a clear option.

To date, there has been significant local speculation about the impact of RPA on ratepayers in Fermanagh. However, it is much too early for anyone to speculate on the potential financial impact on Fermanagh ratepayers, except to say that the differential between the rates in Fermanagh and Omagh will be reduced. Talk of an 18%, 20% or even 25% rise in rates in Fermanagh is neither helpful nor accurate. The purpose of RPA is to reduce bureaucracy, inefficiency and, indeed, the overall cost of local government across the North. That is what we as an Assembly need to ensure happens, but it cannot be done at the expense of ratepayers

such as those in Fermanagh. What we need to aim for is a fair and acceptable solution to the problem before us.

There has been much talk in Fermanagh about the levels of historical debt in Omagh District Council and about the higher level of rates at present. So there is reluctance among some people in Fermanagh about the potential merger with Omagh. That is not downright opposition to the proposal, and I want to make that perfectly clear to the Minister. It is an acceptance that Omagh District Council has spent more money than Fermanagh District Council in the past. Citizens and businesses in Fermanagh do not resent that. Omagh District Council, through a series of strategic investments, has rightly delivered a wide range of community services for its ratepayers. It could be said that Fermanagh District Council did not invest quite so heavily, but those reduced investments also resulted in reduced services for its ratepayers. That decision was taken by both councils and by elected councillors. We cannot change the past.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Flanagan: I will happily give way.

Mr Beggs: The Member said that processes have to be put in place to minimise any increases. Looking at the figures, we can see that there are considerable differences in rates, particularly between those in Omagh and Fermanagh. I am not aware of any facility that can change that in the long term, other than to equalise the rates by significantly increasing the rates in Fermanagh, perhaps by 20% or 25%. Can the Member tell the ratepayers of Fermanagh how he proposes to alter that?

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for his intervention. I will continue with what I have outlined here, and, if the Member is not satisfied that I have addressed his point by the time I have come to the conclusion, I will happily let him in again.

Certain people in Fermanagh seem to believe that Omagh District Council simply threw bars of gold into the River Strule in an effort to spend as much money as possible. That attitude is not helpful. That is definitely not the case, and it can be seen very clearly in the community services that are available in Omagh. The differential between the rates in Fermanagh and Omagh is mirrored by the difference in services. The decision on the level of services in the new council area will be a matter for that council, when it is constituted, and its elected councillors. So it is much too premature to predict what the rates will be. There are several issues. There is the historical debt level and the difference in rates levels. The primary reason for the difference in the rates is the annual expenditure of a council that delivers services.

3.45 pm

It is up to the Executive to deliver on RPA, but the Minister must take the lead. The Minister needs to bring the issues that have been raised by an awful lot of Members in the House to the Executive. He must seek investment from the Executive to offset issues such as the differential in rates and historical debt between Fermanagh and Omagh.

Before the debate got up and running again, my party colleague Michelle Gildernew asked the Enterprise Minister for her assessment of the potential impact of Fermanagh District Council and Omagh District Council amalgamating.

As a local MLA, the Minister will be aware of the issues. However, responding as Minister, her only comment was about the collaboration and co-operation between Fermanagh and Omagh on the Survive and Thrive project. She made no reference to a potential rates increase for businesses, which is quite disappointing. It is clear that the Minister needs to bring the issues to the Executive and seek investment to address them.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Flanagan: I happily will.

Mr Beggs: Is the Member aware that, if additional moneys can be found from the Executive, that may smooth the initial process, but, in the long term, the rates charged must reflect the expenditure in that council area? In the long term, that will mean a very significant increase for the ratepayers of Fermanagh. Does he accept that?

Mr Flanagan: I accept that that is one possibility, but, if you look at where the differences lie, you will see that the rate of debt in Omagh is much higher than in Fermanagh. If investment from the central pot were to address that, it would mitigate any potential rise in rates in Fermanagh. The other issue is that of a council's annual spend, but it will be up to the new councillors to decide how that is spent. The new council could address that, but it will take significant funding from the centre to address those issues. Nobody is standing here saying that rates in Fermanagh will not go up as a result of RPA, but there must be a fair and acceptable solution for ratepayers there.

Neither ratepayers nor any local council can be expected to take the hit for much-needed reform. It is completely unacceptable for any Minister not to take that seriously on board and provide answers on how they plan to address these issues. Earlier, the Minister said that he had received correspondence from several business organisations in Fermanagh. I received similar correspondence, and I share many of their fears. Those correspondents articulately outline their concerns about the impacts of RPA.

The Minister also said that he had received correspondence from me on that matter through written questions. It is not acceptable that he refuses to answer those concerns or provide us with any kind of solution. It is time that the Minister stepped up to the plate, showed some positive leadership and sought a resolution to the many problems in the RPA process, because the Executive have agreed that we are moving forward on an 11-council model. We all need to row in behind that and ensure that it is a fair process for every ratepayer in this state.

Mr Hussey: The Minister made it clear that today's discussions not only cover the draft Local Government (Boundaries) Order but relate to the reform of public administration. I believe that what we have here is a dirty deal that was negotiated between the coalition partners, Sinn Féin and the DUP, to carve up Northern Ireland into political fiefdoms that suit their political strategy. In the past, it could have been suggested that such a concept was negotiated in a smoky room, over beer and sandwiches. However, given the participants, it may have been buttermilk and sandwiches, and not the devil's buttermilk.

The idea of the reform of public administration was to create a series of coterminous local authorities in line with

parliamentary and Assembly constituencies. There is no doubt that this shoddy deal does not reflect any form of local government that I can relate to, neither parliamentary constituencies that exist today or that may exist in the future. "Local government" is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as a system of administration of a county, parish, etc, by the locally elected representatives of the people who live there. The Minister went further when he described councillors as being able to represent the society for which they act.

In my constituency — I am disappointed not to see other Members from West Tyrone here — the entire district council areas of Omagh and Strabane are brought together as a parliamentary constituency. Common sense would dictate that anyone looking at West Tyrone with at least one eye open and with any local knowledge would see the bond between Omagh and Strabane.

If we are looking at boundaries, let us look at the towns of Strabane, Newtownstewart, Castlederg and Sion Mills together with the villages of Ardstraw, Victoria Bridge, Plumbridge, Killen, Killeter, Clady, Bready and Magheramason. They come together under the auspices of Strabane District Council, which is located in an area of County Tyrone. The churches, youth organisations and other clubs all form part of the culture of the county, and there is absolutely no allegiance in that part of the world to County Londonderry or the city of Londonderry. The proposed unholy alliance that would force Strabane District Council to merge with Derry City Council would create a scenario in which the minority unionist community would become virtually irrelevant and this part of Tyrone would become no more than the tail wagged by the dog that is based in the city of Londonderry.

I again declare an interest as a member of Omagh District Council, and, until last Thursday, I had the honour to be the vice-chairman of that council. The idea that the county town of Tyrone should be amalgamated with the county town of Fermanagh would obviously mean the demise of the status of one of the towns. Make no mistake: forcing the amalgamation of Omagh and Fermanagh councils would be like forcing chalk and cheese together. Here we have yet another unholy alliance.

I am sure that Members from Fermanagh and South Tyrone will have already seen the posters up in Fermanagh. It is clear that, locally, the proposals are unacceptable. I was born in Omagh and am a proud Tyrone man. The proposal before the House today would, in effect, destroy County Tyrone and split it in three. The surrounding towns of Fintona, Dromore, Drumquin, Beragh, Sixmilecross and Carrickmore — I do not see Mr McElduff in the distance — and the villages and hamlets of Greencastle, Gortin, Mountjoy, Trillick, Killyclogher and Kilskeery are all proud of their Tyrone roots and their association with Omagh. Strabane —

Mr Flanagan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hussey: Not to you, no. You accused us of throwing gold into the River Strule. Sit your ground. *[Laughter.]* You will find gold in the Strule, but I will not give you the opportunity to throw anything else at me.

Strabane and Omagh District Councils have already taken steps to share a chief executive, an indication of the close

ties that already exist in the county between these two local authorities. The proposed new parliamentary constituency of Mid Tyrone clearly still shows the majority of Strabane and Omagh councils remaining together, with the addition of parts of the existing Cookstown District Council. Why, then, has someone decided that coterminosity is to be abandoned and political skulduggery is to be the main driver in this push for local government reform?

I feel sorry for the Minister of the Environment today; I genuinely do. I hope he bears that in mind when he tries to push this thing through. He is being forced by the Executive to put forward proposals that he does not agree with. When these plans come in for public criticism, Minister, I can assure you that the DUP and Sinn Féin will run for cover and point their joint two fingers — if you will pardon the pun — at you.

I cannot see how other West Tyrone MLAs can nod this through without murmur or discontent. The proposals tear the heart out of County Tyrone. They tear down Omagh as the county town. I know there will be some who will say that I am being defeatist and that this will not happen, but I am a realist. The proposals are not good for my constituency of West Tyrone, and I will continue to oppose them.

When Strabane finds itself getting the scraps from the city of Londonderry, if it is lucky, and when the small towns in the Omagh district find that a Fermanagh/Omagh council is not as generous to local groups, small towns and villages as the previous Omagh council was and that the leisure facilities that Omagh had to pay for because it does not have the natural waterways that Fermanagh have been blocked by the council, it will be too late to complain. In fact, the Member who spoke previously accepted that Omagh council was very generous to the people of Omagh.

Omagh has no natural affiliation with Enniskillen or Fermanagh. Omagh has a strong affiliation with Strabane. Strabane has no natural affiliation to Londonderry. It has a natural affiliation to Omagh. The county-based groups that I have already mentioned — the loyal orders, the GAA, the churches and others — will find themselves and, at times, their parishes split by unnatural boundaries that the Assembly seems hell-bent on enforcing.

I find it sad that the DUP, which continually supported the 15-council model until it eventually did the dirty deal with Sinn Féin, could find only the name "Derry" as a stumbling block to an amalgamation of Strabane and Londonderry city.

Sinn Féin is destroying the county of Tyrone. Maybe it does not like the O'Neills; maybe it is because Tyrone won the Sam Maguire a couple of times more than some of the other counties it has political strength in. I do not see any valid reason for it, but Sinn Féin is determined to push this through.

The 15-council model would have suited the 18-parliamentary constituency model. Even a 14-council scenario could have been produced very quickly on the basis of the 16-parliamentary constituency model. Here we have a ragtag approach that will demoralise and destroy any allegiance to local government. In fact, on the basis of these proposals, I suggest you stand up and say sorry, and leave the 26 councils as they are.

Local councils, Minister, are putting forward proposals to attack you because it has been realised that there is no money to pay for RPA. As I said, you will be blamed for that, and the two coalition partners will sit back and smile. Sinn Féin councillors on Sinn Féin-controlled councils, supported by DUP councillors, are tabling motions that call on the Minister to set aside money for RPA, so that no cost is attributed to local councils. Yet, they know, Minister, and publicly acknowledge that there will be a cost implication, and they know that it will be borne mainly by the ratepayer.

Ms Lo and Lord Morrow said that RPA is no longer up for debate and that the matter has been decided. Nothing is decided until the House agrees the review. I, as a public representative, have a moral duty and a right to put forward the view of my constituents, and I am sure that everyone here will agree that that is my duty. My colleague Mr Elliott made reference to the fact that many do not yet realise the consequences of the review and how it will affect their lives.

I will not support the proposal before the House. Those of you who do, whether you are whipped or not, will have to live with that decision, and hopefully the electorate will see you for what you are. I am proud to be from Tyrone, and, on this occasion, even if it means I am on my own, "Come on, Tyrone".

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate on the draft order. I start by setting in context some of the previous decisions and discussions on the matter, given the comments that have been made across the Chamber about alleged delays by my party colleague, Minister Attwood.

The review of public administration was launched in June 2002 and was designed primarily to streamline local government and make it more efficient. It also aimed to strengthen local government by transferring significant powers and functions from central government to a reduced number of larger councils. That is a subject I will come back to. For most of the time, the initiative has been under the management of direct rule or DUP Ministers. In the last mandate, it was the responsibility of Sammy Wilson, Arlene Foster and Edwin Poots. At their meeting on 14 June 2010, the previous Executive were informed by Minister Poots that he was unable to agree a way forward to allow the RPA restructuring plan to go ahead by the then target date of May 2011.

Although there had been some movement towards an 11-council model, other fundamental issues remained unresolved, including who would pay for RPA — local or central government — the names of the new councils and the boundaries. A number of areas were disputed between the DUP and Sinn Féin. In his opening remarks, the Minister referred to some of those areas. One of those areas is commonly known as Forestside, and the dispute was over the rateable value of that asset. There was also the situation in Lisburn City Council over Dunmurry Cross. After nine years, there was still no agreement. So, Mr Flanagan and other newcomers to the House would do well to bear in mind that the delay was caused by disagreements between Sinn Féin and the party opposite. The delay has been caused primarily because of the dysfunctional relationship between the two main parties in government. That is just one example of the delays that there have been.

Some nine years later, there is an SDLP Minister, who has made substantial decisions over the past year. That is resonating with the public. Hence, the considered, orchestrated and concerted attack, both in Committee and on the Floor, on Mr Attwood. He has shown up the inadequacies of your ministerial colleagues.

4.00 pm

Mr Flanagan: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: Not at this stage, but I will shortly.

From May 2011, Minister Attwood had a round of consultations with all the RPA stakeholders. He made an assessment of what had changed during the nine-year delay that might be reflected in a new comprehensive RPA package that he will bring to the Executive in October or November. That package will hopefully get the whole RPA project moving forward again.

As we all know, the councils had been mandated to work in collaboration voluntarily in the meantime. That initiative was commenced by Minister Poots and will hopefully see significant payback in the interests of the ratepayer in the next two or three years. Indeed, if it were allowed to be developed further, there could be considerable savings, even higher than those forecast in the PwC report. Mr Beggs referred to the huge costs. However, there are potentially £500 million of savings under the ICE project as opposed to, I think, the £478 million over a 25-year period as per the PwC report. However, what is undisputed is the fact that the upfront costs will be high. The PwC report estimated those to be £118 million.

Mr Hussey referred to the debates that are going on across the council chambers. Those are conducted primarily by Sinn Féin councillors who know full well that their own Executive Ministers have yet to support Minister Attwood or others who seek the money to implement RPA. They are speaking out of both sides of their mouth, but we are well used to that from that quarter. However —

Mr Flanagan: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: Of course I will. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for giving way. Perhaps the Member who furnished us with quotations from the Oxford dictionary would do so again to let her know what "shortly" means.

I want to take the Member up on her point that no Ministers have supported Minister Attwood's claim for extra money through the Executive. Am I not right in thinking that he has not actually gone to the Executive looking for funding? If I am misadvised, he can correct me.

It is interesting that the Member is giving glorious praise to the Minister for his hard work on RPA and taking tough decisions. Given that she is the deputy leader of the SDLP, is it still the SDLP's position that he will be taken out of that job in a number of months? Given that decision to take him out of the job, is he best placed to take RPA forward, or would it be better to let somebody else do it?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has had quite a bit of latitude on this issue in the House today. Interventions

should be about the business that is before the House and the motion. Let us all be careful as Members of the House.

Mrs D Kelly: Those people who played hokey-cokey with the institutions are well known by the public. When there were good economic times, Sinn Féin — the republican movement, I should say — refused to decommission —

Mr Speaker: Order. That also goes for the Member who has the Floor. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs D Kelly: I will get back to my script. Funnily enough, somehow or other, some magic deal then appeared on the horizon. Rather than the inclusivity of power sharing and government, which Sinn Féin and the DUP say that they aspire to and are part of, Sinn Féin and the DUP did a deal over the local councils. Indeed, by September 2011, the DUP and Sinn Féin had resolved their differences. As Minister Attwood referred to in his opening remarks, that was evident in the changes around the Lisburn, Castlereagh and Belfast boundaries.

I move on to some of the comments that have been made by others. I think it was Mr Hazzard who talked about a functioning Assembly and called into question the leadership given by Minister Attwood. However, if we had a functioning Assembly, education would be sorted; dealing with the past would be sorted; a shared future would be sorted; and the North/South review might even be published after five years.

We might actually have a decision on the North/South Parliamentary Forum, two years on from the conference that was held in the Slieve Donard Hotel. We might actually hear something about participative democracy and why the review of the Civic Forum has not been published. What are you all afraid of?

There is something around participative democracy. As the Minister rightly put on record, many people contributed on local councils over 40 years of violence by stepping up to the plate and providing some democracy for, and lead to, local communities. Participative democracy was something that we cherished when others were targeting local representatives, and it should be the standard by which this place is judged in terms of RPA, legislation and any review of departmental structures that is committed to under the terms of the Programme for Government. In addition, the number of boundaries and the number of Assembly Members are to be agreed on under the terms of the St Andrews Agreement. I believe that that agreement has to be reached by the end of 2015, although the Programme for Government states December 2012. Again, the St Andrews Agreement was another agreement between the two big parties, Sinn Féin and the DUP, not necessarily in the interests of the wider community but certainly in their own interests.

Another concern that many Members have raised in the debate is the cost to the ratepayer. Mr Flanagan was at pains to point out that there should be no additional burden on the ratepayer. How is that going to be? Does he know of a pot of money that exists or some bank loans that we can get that could ensure that it will not be a burden on the ratepayer? Frankly, unless central government stumps up, it will be a burden on the ratepayer. We know that some councils have been prudent —

Mr Boylan: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I will in a moment, or shortly.

Mr Flanagan: Shortly — very good, Dolores.

Mrs D Kelly: I will send you a dictionary definition, if you wish. *[Interruption.]*

The point is that local councils will have to bear the cost, because central government has not yet stumped up. That was one of the reasons that Mr Poots, when he was Minister of the Environment, could not get this over the line.

Mr Boylan, I will give way to you now. Perhaps you will tell us where the money is.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member for giving way. She was asked this earlier, but can she clarify whether the Minister went to the Executive and asked for any money? In my contribution, I asked the Minister when he was bringing a business case. Maybe the Minister can clarify this, but it is you who is speaking and it is you who brought it up, so can you clarify whether the Minister went to the Executive and asked for funding, because I do not believe that he did.

Mrs D Kelly: One thing about our Minister is that he is well able to speak for himself, unlike some who probably need scripts sent into the Chamber on their behalf. *[Laughter.]* Or get someone to speak for them. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs D Kelly: What I do know is that Mr Boylan, as a member of the Committee, has already supported the Minister's bid in the June monitoring round for additional funds to start off the initiative. Some nine years later, did the Executive not think? Sinn Féin agreed to a four-year Budget that did not set aside money for RPA. Our party voted against it. Sinn Féin Members had the opportunity to put it into the Budget over the four years, as did other Members, but this party was the only one that highlighted that particular matter as a point of concern. There are a number of others, but this is not the day for them. Mr Flanagan and others come in as johnny-come-latelys and tell us how there should be money set aside, but they need to reflect and question some of their party colleagues about how they fell asleep at the wheel on this matter, along with a number of other matters.

Mr Molloy: Any word on the boundaries order?

Mrs D Kelly: I will talk about boundaries, because this is about gerrymandering. There are two debates in the House today on gerrymandering. Shame on Sinn Féin for not standing up for the people, when over 100,000 nationalists are moving into unionist-controlled council areas, when we see what happens on unionist-controlled councils in terms of power sharing and partnership. Therefore, Sinn Féin need not give the SDLP any lectures on gerrymandering. At least we are being consistent. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs D Kelly: Mr Speaker, one of the — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mrs D Kelly: One of the remarks made was about the level of powers that were to be devolved. One would have thought

that, nine years on and given the collaboration and the experiences of this devolved institution, we might take the opportunity to reflect and see what additional powers could be handed down to local councils. That makes sense. What is the point of change for change's sake?

In recent weeks, I asked a question of each Minister to find out what additional powers they would devolve and what review had been done. If I may, I will highlight a few. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) has no plans to devolve any powers or functions to local councils, and this is in line with its previous commitments. So, then and now, none. The Finance Minister said that:

"No powers or functions within my department have been identified for transfer to local councils under the Review of Public Administration either at the current time or previously."

Now, this is interesting. The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure said:

"My Department is not devolving any powers to local councils as part of the Review of Public Administration."

However, the functions that she does plan to transfer include this:

"Armagh County Museum will transfer to the Armagh/Banbridge/ Craigavon Council."

As a representative for that area, I have tabled a question to the Minister to find out the cost implications of that. Is the money going to follow? We all know that these facilities cost money; they do not make money. So, there is some devolving of functions, but no powers.

Members will be pleased to hear that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has agreed to devolve some powers, and, rather than take up time this afternoon reading it out, I refer Members to the written answer in Hansard. Essentially, they are powers around tourism, social entrepreneurship and youth entrepreneurship programmes. I know that the Minister is in discussion with the Minister of the Environment on some other matters.

The Minister for Social Development is also devolving some powers. However, those were agreed under the previous Administration, when the SDLP held that Ministry. His answer states:

"As the overall list of functions to transfer from central government to councils was decided upon over 3 years ago, it is now being subjected to review."

Let us hope that that review does not mean that fewer will go but that more will go. The Minister finishes by saying:

"Ultimately, the Executive will decide the way forward and the package of functions to transfer."

The Education Minister states:

"My position is unchanged. I do not plan to devolve any powers or functions to local councils."

Sinn Féin is not giving up very much, sure it's not?

The Minister for Employment and Learning says:

"I have no plans" —

Mr Speaker: Order. I have given the Member quite a bit of latitude. If I were to be really strict, this debate has very little to do with the devolving of functions to local authorities, but it has certainly a lot to do with boundaries. I am trying to be as fair as possible and am trying to give as much latitude as possible to Members and even to the Minister because I do think that the scene needs to be set. However, I warn Members to be careful because this debate has very little to do with the devolving of functions to local government.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Speaker for his ruling. The other answers are available in Hansard, and I draw Members' attention to them. Members who spoke earlier said that although this is the beginning of the boundaries order, there was an opportunity, as you rightly said, to set the scene. One thing that is not good in any change management system is having change for change's sake. It has to make good sense, particularly in these austere times.

The other arguments that I wish to make are around some reflections on Fermanagh in particular. Fermanagh does not have any council in its boundaries at this stage and will have to go into partnership with Omagh. I ask the Minister to confirm, when he has had time to reflect on the earlier comments, the representation that he has had on that. In particular, what representation has been made by political representatives? I am sure that the Minister, like others, is well aware that, at Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) level, all the parties except Sinn Féin supported the 15-council model.

4.15 pm

I will finish by saying that local councils, in essence, give communities a local identity. When I look at some of the arguments that have been made and some of the changes that have been made, I find it difficult to understand why, for example, it has been accepted that Castlereagh Civic Centre should remain part of Lisburn when it is very clearly in east Belfast? I find that quite —

Mr Spratt: It is in south Belfast.

Mrs D Kelly: Well, whatever. At least it is in Belfast, not Lisburn.

There is, as we know, another boundary report in relation to the Westminster boundaries. It will be interesting to see how that develops. One would have thought that it might make sense to have some sense of relationship between the two, at least in our assessment and analysis. Given the nine-year delay, one wonders what the rush is now. In the absence of delivery on any other widespread decisions that are part of the Sinn Féin/DUP logjam, one wonders why they just pick on the portfolios of other parties. It is something that they can agree on. It is not, obviously, in the interests of the wider community or for the greater good; it is very much in their partisan party interests.

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest, as my dad is a councillor on Larne Borough Council.

My Ulster Unionist colleagues and I had expressed a preference for a 15-council model based on the 14 existing Westminster boundaries and the four Belfast constituencies.

However, the boundaries being debated here today follow the 11-council model agreed in a DUP/Sinn Féin carve-up. We learned today that additional commercial rates and 10 houses will pass from the new Belfast council area to the Lisburn/Castlereagh area, which already has a lower rates base. I seek an explanation of why that has occurred. If I were a Lisburn ratepayer, I would be well pleased at getting additional commercial rates. However, if I were a ratepayer in Belfast, I would be concerned that that base has moved. There ought to be a transparent process to explain why that late deviation occurred. Is it just part of some deal concocted by the DUP and Sinn Féin?

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: No, I will not give way. Perhaps I will later.

The boundaries that this regulation will set for my constituency will not be the best boundaries for the people of Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey. There are natural community linkages along the east Antrim coastal strip, through youth football, churches and general community linkages, but they will be broken, with Newtownabbey borough moving in a different direction and Larne and Carrickfergus being linked to Ballymena. There is, of course, a natural communication linkage along that east Antrim coastal strip, where the A2 travels right through Larne and Carrickfergus and on to Newtownabbey. That is a perfectly good means of communication. There is also the A8, which travels inland between Larne and Newtownabbey. However, the linkage to Ballymena is different and somewhat fraught. Larne also has a railway line between the three areas. I would have expressed a natural preference for Newtownabbey to form part of any boundary proposal. Sadly, if the regulation goes through today without further reconsideration, the opportunity to change that will have gone.

I also have concerns about the communication from Carrickfergus to Ballymena, which, based purely on population numbers, will be the urban centre of gravity in the new borough. The road linkages are atrocious. On public transport, getting from Carrickfergus to Ballymena requires a 60-mile return journey, probably via Larne or Belfast. A return bus journey will cost £13.50, and a return train journey will cost £14.50. Those who may have to travel to that new council centre to make, perhaps, a presentation to the council will be faced with a considerable cost, rather than travelling 10 or 15 miles along the east Antrim coastal link, as I said earlier. Ratepayers who wish to engage in council committees will face unnecessary costs in the future.

In addition, common sense tells us that if we create new council boundaries that are based on urban populations that are relatively close together, we will have more efficient structures. There is a natural geographical boundary between Larne and Carrickfergus and Ballymena; it is called the Antrim hills, comprising Agnew's Hill, Shane's Hill and the Collin. It is not only a geographical feature; it adds considerable costs, because employees of any new such council, should they have to travel between the other centres, will have to travel considerable and unnecessary distances at unnecessary costs, which will have to be paid for by the new ratepayers of that new council area. As a ratepayer, I think that we should all be looking carefully to minimise costs. I still think that it would be best for everyone if the Larne, Carrick and Newtownabbey model had

been pursued. As has been suggested by other Members, there is still an option to do that, even at this late stage.

There is a particular issue in the Ballynure and Ballyclare area. Interestingly enough, in order to travel by car from Carrickfergus to the new Newtownabbey area, linked with Antrim, you would have to travel around Ballynure and Ballyclare and then further along relatively poor roads, over the Collin Hill towards Ballymena. You will actually travel into the other council area and then back into your own council area unnecessarily. Why were those couple of wards not transferred across? Even if we were to go with the 11-council model, it would have tidied things up and improved them if those wards had been transferred.

Why not Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey? There are some very practical reasons why it would be better for my constituents, none more practical than the future cost of their rates. Looking at the current poundage levels for non-domestic rates, I see that Ballymena's costs are 4% higher than those in Larne. Carrick's are 5% higher and Newtownabbey's are about 2% higher. The increase to businesses in Larne and throughout the area would have been lower if Larne and Carrickfergus had been linked with Newtownabbey rather than Ballymena. There will be considerable increases in business rates because of the choice, which will be set in stone by this draft boundaries order, to link Larne and Carrick with Ballymena rather than Newtownabbey.

Turning to domestic rates poundage, the figures for Ballymena and Carrickfergus are slightly higher than those for Larne. Ballymena is about 1% higher and Carrickfergus is 1.6% higher. Interestingly, Newtownabbey is about 4% lower. Again, if Larne and Carrick had been linked with Newtownabbey, there would be lower rates levels for householders. Those who vote for the boundaries today are voting for unnecessarily high rates for my constituents in East Antrim from Larne and Carrickfergus, because they have chosen to link Larne and Carrickfergus with Ballymena rather than Newtownabbey, where rates bills for businesses and households will be higher.

There are other important costs that have not yet been addressed. We are proceeding with the new boundary. I would have thought that it would have been vital to get the business case settled at a much earlier stage. We were told that, because of the finances involved, that was one of the reasons why the original PwC model was not pursued. However, to come up with a savings figure over a 25-year period is highly unusual. No business would use such a model. You need payback periods of three to five years to justify investment, or, perhaps, a little bit longer if you are certain of the returns. Certainly, however, I did not have clarity from the original model that those savings would be achieved for the ratepayers, and I would have thought that that business case ought to have been finalised before pursuing this local government reorganisation. It seems to be a political deal that is proceeding regardless, without a clear and current business case having been established.

I say to those considering supporting the order that they do so at their peril. Do not come running to me in the future, blaming me, my colleagues or the Minister. This will fall on those who vote in favour of the order today. The decisions will fall on you, and the boundaries set by the order will fall

on you. Do not try to pass the blame on to anybody else. I express my concern —

Mr Molloy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Molloy: Does the Member acknowledge that the person who started this process was Mr Nesbitt, as the then Minister? Had he been in control of the situation and finished the job, we would not have to deal with the problem.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Member for his contribution. Perhaps if Sinn Féin had divvied up the guns a lot earlier, that may well have happened. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind Members of their language in the House. Let us get back to the debate that is before us on the Floor.

Mr Beggs: The original boundary review fell because of the instability in the original Assembly caused by the failure of some to act on their responsibility.

Some of the costs really ought to be nailed down at current prices, reflecting changes that may have happened over the past number of years. What will be the cost of establishing the new councils? What additional costs will face ratepayers as a result of reorganisation? Senior officers might be made redundant and seek redundancy packages. The ratepayers need to know — we all need to know. We need to ensure that this is for the better and makes sense. So who is aware of the figures? They have not been made available, but we really ought to know what they are. What central support will be available to assist the process?

It was clear to me in the original process, in which I had some involvement through contributions in council and other bodies, that the Executive had to make seed money available to encourage the development of new efficient models and to encourage collaboration, not only among the one, two or three councils going through the transitional model, but over a larger area. Seed funding is an important element in encouraging local government to bring about more efficient processes for the long term, to invest for the long term and to secure returns that will reduce the costs to their ratepayers.

It would be helpful if the Minister advised whether anything has yet been built into the current Budget. I have not been made aware that it has. However, for the record, I state that it is important that seed funding is built in to encourage councils to collaborate, work together, bring about much more efficient models of processing and produce a better level of performance and customer care for ratepayers and everyone living in those areas.

This is a once-in-a-lifetime, certainly in several generations, opportunity to reorganise local government. The last time was in 1972. When it happens, we should take the opportunity to bring about significant improvement in the processes in a way that reflects the technological changes that have happened since. Seed funding is an important element of that.

I have some sympathy for the Minister. Today, we are looking at the 11-council model in the order, which is based on boundaries agreed by Sinn Féin and the DUP. Of course, Sinn Féin and the DUP also set the Minister's budget. Yet,

in many council areas, we have Sinn Féin councillors and, perhaps in some areas, even DUP councillors, blaming the Minister for potential rate rises. However, it is those who vote for the order today who will set the boundaries and the costs that will ultimately flow from it. It is also the DUP and Sinn Féin who set the overall Budget that we will debate in a number of weeks' time. That will determine what help will be available for local government in this process.

It is important that people take responsibility for their actions, and when they cast their vote today, they should not blame the outcome on others. I ask everyone to think very carefully about what they are doing and to take responsibility for their actions. I do not believe that the case has yet been made — I doubt whether it can be — to go with this 11-council model. If it has to be 11, there are better models that would improve outcomes for my constituents, and I will argue for those.

4.30 pm

Mr Byrne: I wish to speak on the motion because this is a fundamental issue about the future of local democracy and government in Northern Ireland.

The reform of local government is the primary issue that we have been dealing with for some time. Local government, essentially, is about district councils that represent and reflect local communities, social and spatial relations, and cultural and sporting interests. In Tyrone, those things are important. In the west, we have strong Tyrone and Fermanagh identities, and the GAA and the Orange Order are good examples in my county. So, the sense of belonging and connectivity is crucial. Fermanagh people need and want a county identity and affinity that is protected and reflected by a Fermanagh district council. That is a legitimate desire and aspiration. Fermanagh people feel aggrieved and hurt at being aligned with Omagh council. Financial consideration of the rates is an issue, but it is not the fundamental issue that drives their concern.

In my county of Tyrone, we have strong community, cultural and sporting interests. A west Tyrone council, as Mr Hussey spoke about, is needed and is sensible for the Omagh and Strabane districts, geographically, socially and economically. If Derry City Council becomes what is proposed and stretches from the Donegal border beyond Castlederg and Pettigo up to the top of the Glenelly valley at Sperrin the whole way to Derry city, that will be not a great cultural, social and economic region for a district council. There are conflicting interests and there are concerns. Strabane people feel that Derry city interests will override their interests, and Omagh District Council people feel that the Fermanagh interests will override the Omagh interests. As we have said on many occasions, west Tyrone is a natural configuration, with two main towns at either end, and that would reflect a west Tyrone council that could serve the people's needs to maximum advantage.

My party supported the 15-council model, which would be much more reflective of the social, community and spatial connections. We have all agreed that the Macrory report served the interests of Northern Ireland very well, and it was based on geo-spatial consideration, analysis and evaluation. This configuration of 11 councils has been done on the back of an envelope. It is nothing more than a geo-spatial gerrymander drummed up by a political gerrymander

between the DUP and Sinn Féin. I ask the Minister formally: what academic research has gone into the model? I do not think that any has. Surely something as important as a completely new system of local government requires a research-based academic approach that will be objectively determined and set out and will balance the social, community, economic and cultural interests.

The current 11-council model and its proposed configuration of boundaries is an illogical outcome. It does not reflect what should be the normal considerations of a major reform of local government. FEDO, the Fermanagh Economic Development Organisation, is holding meetings throughout the county of Fermanagh, in Lisnaskea, Irvinestown, Belleek, Enniskillen and other places. I fear that if the outlined proposal is implemented, it will lead to great concerns for the future, and I will be extremely concerned about the discontent and annoyance that people will have. It is so important that the local government boundary review is reflective of the interests of the people. I do not think that it reflects the interests of the people, certainly those in the counties of Tyrone, Fermanagh or Derry.

Mr Flanagan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Byrne: I am finished.

Mr Copeland: Mr Speaker, I promise to try not to test your latitude too far.

Mr Speaker: That would be most welcome. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Copeland: It is much too late in the day for that.

I was born into a house called Tigh Deargh — “red house on the hill” in the Scottish Gallic language — at a place called Carnamuck on the Ballygowan Road in Castlereagh. My address, for all my life, was Lead Hill, Castlereagh, 50 yards from the city boundary of Belfast. That is the local identity that I had for my rates and the council that I eventually served and continue to serve on — local. My grandmother was slightly stranger. She referred to “going to Belfast”. Despite the fact that, for 91 of her 110 years, she lived on the Beersbridge Road in Belfast, she remembered and considered Ballymacarrett as Ballymacarrett and Belfast as Belfast. She was firmly of the view that at least three of the major world industries that were claimed by the city of Belfast were actually resident in Ballymacarrett. *[Laughter.]*

Local government has suddenly become a good deal less local, and there have been curious constructions on its fringes. The council area that I represent — Castlereagh Central DEA — is pretty much to go lock, stock and barrel into the city of Belfast. That is not surprising, since all the roads go to Belfast; all the buses go to Belfast; the taxi companies go to Belfast; and the postcodes are Belfast. What is slightly more curious is the fact that to our left is Lisburn and to our right is Lisburn. To empty the bins in one part of the new Lisburn construction, they will have to go through the bit that is now in Belfast.

No matter what anyone says, I know that there may well be mathematically calculated reasons to establish a rates income. I know that there may be very sensible reasons in the political considerations of drawing lines on maps, and I have heard the term gerrymandering used frequently. I think that the first time that I heard that expression was in a James Young sketch, in which a BBC English-sounding

reporter was interviewing people in the city of Belfast and asking them their opinion on the political situation. He got the usual Belfast answer from a man in a duncher, with a scarf round his neck and a cigarette butt behind his ear. When he was asked what he thought of gerrymandering, he said that he didn't know Gerry Mandering, but he knew Gerry Fitt — and Fitt for Ulster! It was really a most humorous interchange.

The difficulty is that Dundonald, which is a small village on the outskirts of the city of Belfast that was swamped by the growth of Belfast, is now, suddenly, to be linked, for whatever reason, with the borough and city of Lisburn. At the time, I was a councillor without any researchers, pollsters or scientific method of establishing whether the people of Dundonald felt a deep, historic and significant linkage with Lisburn, so I did some private research. I got a phonebook and I phoned every taxi company that operated in the greater Dundonald area. I asked them to tell me the last time that anyone had booked a taxi to go to Lisburn. They laughed at me. They could not remember; it did not happen.

I then wandered round Moat Park, Ballybeen, Davarr, the left hand side of the road, and Coronation Park. I talked to young people. I found Glen men and I found Blue men, but nowhere could I find anyone who had any interest in or knowledge of — indeed, some had never even heard of — Lisburn Distillery. *[Laughter.]* So, we do have an attack on our sense of identity.

I do not want to go into the geopolitics of it. I know that in Israel, for many years, they had a saying, “Next year in Jerusalem”, because they felt that their capital city was in the hands of others. That would be to take a negative approach to this.

As a councillor, I know that many councillors of all parties have and express privately about what they really think of this place, with its “Fancy salaries, high expenses, ministerial cars and government Departments”. They see this as a legislative Assembly that takes a set amount of money from the Westminster Exchequer and bean-counts and divides it, according to the will of those in the Chamber.

Councillors see themselves as having something that they refer to, quite properly in many ways, as a tax-raising power. They see us — I was going to say “youse” there, but I cannot hide behind that term — as looking at them, with their tax-raising power called “the rates”, and they fear that we shall transfer function without ultimate finance from this place to them, and that the responsibility for raising the finance to discharge those functions will reside with them. I have to say that if we think that they will go to the electorate, having raised the rates to cover the cost of functions transferred from this place on their behalf to allow them to assume responsibility for it, I think that within the closed and cosseted rooms of political parties, there may well be some serious conversations.

It is important to remember that although rambunctious political debate and the possession and putting forward of opinions goes with the territory, the truth is that 3,500 people gave their lives for us to sit in here to take matters seriously, and their children and loved ones who remain are entitled to a dignified explanation of why we are forced to do what we do.

For the life of me, I know that Dundonald, Ballybeen and those estates, or the Newtownards Road, lifted from where their families had lived for generations in streets without gardens and, in some cases, without toilets and dumped in the middle of the country with gardens — but no shops, pubs or bookies and none of the fabric of the thread of life that goes to make up a city. The Newtownards Road and Ballybeen are the same place; they are just separated by a ribbon of tarmac. I dare say that the same thing applies to those who were evacuated from the Shankill to Rathcoole and other places. Their hearts, homes and grannies are in those places from which they were moved. We need to bear in mind that the most important word in local government is “local” and ensure that we enshrine that in everything that we do.

A heavy responsibility falls on you, Minister. You are the driver of a bus in many ways, but, unfortunately, the passengers are dictating where the bus goes on this particular issue. You may take it in a certain direction for a certain time, but it will become apparent to them at some stage that they are not going where they want to. At that stage, you must take your own decision.

As I say, the most important word in local government is “local”, and many of us who have a history or grounding in local government know what it delivers. It delivered democracy at a time when places like this did not exist and could not deliver. Although they were not always models of democracy, they were, in very many cases, superb methods of delivery of a reasonable service at a reasonable price. People need to bear in mind the importance of the word “local” in all of this. Thank you, sir.

Mr Allister: We approach the end of the debate. We have been debating this now for something approaching four hours. For me, the most striking aspect of this debate is that in all that time, I have yet to hear a single cogent defence of the core proposition that this House will doubtless vote through: namely, that we should move to 11 district councils. We have heard very cogent, persuasive and eloquent reasons from no less than the last Member to speak as to why we should not move in that direction, but, because it is indefensible, stony silence from those who will use the strength of their numbers to vote through the proposition.

4.45 pm

There is no rational, arguable, cogent, persuasive reason why we should move to this artificially contrived concoction of 11 councils, bearing out the belief of many that this is not about bringing rhyme and reason to government. This is not about bringing some logic to the disposition of local government, but it is undoubtedly about the political expediency that produces, out of the air of expediency, the figure of 11 for our councils. Of course, that expediency is underscored by the fact that it is being driven through by a Minister who does not believe in it.

As others have pointed out, those who claim to believe in the 11-council model will be quite happy to heap the blame on the Minister when things go wrong and when people start to ask why they are aligned in this manner in local government. When the people of Ballybeen wake up and ask why they are in a council with Moira, rather than with the Newtownards Road, and when the people of Omagh ask why

they are not aligned with Strabane, plenty of people will say that that was Mr Attwood’s decision. This is the decision of the DUP/Sinn Féin cabal that governs in Northern Ireland. That is whose decision it is.

It is notable that the DUP, in the main, has sat in stony embarrassed silence throughout the debate. If I recall correctly, there was only one contributor — Lord Morrow. The DUP had no defence to offer and no justification to provide for the proposition that, nonetheless, they will use their votes along with Sinn Féin because they have pledged to Sinn Féin that they will vote through this utterly illogical proposition.

This is a dog’s dinner of proposals for local government. We have heard mention of Castlereagh and Lisburn, and Omagh and Fermanagh. Ballymena, instead of being aligned to its natural north Antrim hinterland of Ballymoney, will be twinned in some bizarre way with Carrickfergus, even though, as Mr Beggs pointed out, it is so geographically disparate from it. There is nothing sensible, logical or necessary about these proposals. They are simply the product of political expediency. Those who vote them through know that, and they will still vote them through, because that is the deal that they have pledged to do with Sinn Féin. Of course, they did not arrive at that instantly. Oh no; we had several months, nay years, of shadow-boxing about the future of local government.

We had Minister Poots, who was going to die in a ditch over Dunmurry because he was not going to copper-fasten a nationalist majority in the city of Belfast. Of course, once the election was over and it had served its electoral purpose, it was jettisoned. In the Executive, there was no more opposition to Dunmurry going into Belfast; rather, they embraced the lunacy of divorcing Castlereagh from its natural attachment to Belfast and putting it in with Lisburn to give in to the Sinn Féin demand for a nationalist-dominated Belfast. What were the great concessions that were then won by the DUP to enable it to endorse the 11-council programme? Well, we hear that there were two. It was to protect the rates base of Castlereagh — yes, that favoured place of the First Minister. It was more important to protect Castlereagh’s rates base by transferring Forestside out of Belfast into Castlereagh.

Surprise, surprise; another Castlereagh concession. Two precious fields that align the leisure premises in Castlereagh — they, too, had to be transferred. With that, all was good and all was fine. The deal was made. Dunmurry? Forget about it. Belfast goes nationalist? Pull down the flag? Complete the process that has already started? Well, so be it. That was the attitude. That is the attitude. They who contrived that attitude will be those responsible for that when it happens, and those who, today, either sit in stony silence or absent themselves from the debate, too embarrassed to try to defend that which they have concocted with Sinn Féin.

Of course, Mr Poots had many interesting things to say about the reasons why local government reform could not proceed back in 2010. Things were nicely dressed up. Things were dressed up financially. In June 2010, he said that it was a matter of cost. He said:

“The cost of amalgamating the councils is 118 million, the interest to be repaid on that over the next ten years is

33 million, bringing that to 151 million. To assist councils where rates were converging would require a further 20 million with an additional 5 million for interest on that to be paid back over ten years. That brings us to the sum of 176 million. The savings over 25 years were 159 million. It is easy to see that these figures do not stack up."

Maybe the Minister can tell us, in Mr Poots's terms, do they now stack up, or was that just so much flannel, so much window dressing, and really of no substance whatsoever? That certainly is what it has the appearance of.

After the sham fight about Dunmurry and all that, we had yet another climbdown by the Democratic Unionist Party to give Sinn Féin what Sinn Féin wanted on councils. They who once championed 15 abandoned that, without any capacity to justify it or to say it is sensible, rational or reasonable. That is why we arrive at a proposition that is utter, utter folly. A proposition that sees pitched together communities that know nothing of each other; that are divided geographically and in so many other ways, as was illustrated aptly by the Member who spoke previously about Castlereagh and Lisburn. The product — the hotchpotch — that that has produced is something that we, as Assembly Members, are expected to vote through. I am glad that I for one will not assist in voting it through. I trust that there are many others who will likewise take that course. This draft order does not deserve the support of this House. As someone pointed out, there has never been any empirical research to justify the division that has been come up with. It is, as I have said, simply the product of sheer political expediency.

I move on to ask the Minister about two specific issues. He has indicated that, in due course, when elections to the new councils take place, MLAs will not be permitted to be MLAs and councillors. If my understanding is correct, it is likely that the councils will be initially elected in shadow form. Will the Minister assure us that MLAs will be prohibited from being candidates in elections to the councils in shadow form? I understand that some parties already think that they might be able to run their MLAs as candidates and substitute them thereafter, so will the Minister assure us that MLAs will not be eligible to stand?

I invite the Minister to provide a word of explanation on some of the content of article 1. Article 1(2) states:

"Subject to paragraphs (3) and (4), this Order shall come into operation on the day on which an election under section 11(1) and 11(1A) of the Electoral Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1962(c) is first held after the making of this Order."

Presumably, that is the same day on which the election to the shadow councils will take place. That is an interesting composition in itself.

Article 1(4) states:

"For the purpose of making and levying of rates ... this Order shall come into effect on 1st April 2015."

If the expectation is of elections to shadow form in 2014 and new councils taking over in 2015, and given that article 1(4) indicates that, for the purpose of making the rates, the order shall not come into effect until 1 April 2015, how will the rates applicable from 1 April 2015 be set and by whom? How will rates be made for 2015, if the order, which would

establish the councils that you would expect to make them, does not, for rating purposes, come into effect until 1 April? Maybe there is a very simple explanation, but that certainly puzzled me when I read it. I look forward to the Minister's explanation.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the contributions by all of the Members who spoke. There was criticism of my opening comments, in that I was shown some latitude in my commentary around the RPA. Mr Speaker, I think that the full story of this debate vindicates your judgement, my sense and, clearly, the contribution of many Members, that this was to be the opportunity to discuss, in parallel, the 11-council option that is before us to be voted on today and the other equally important matters that revolve around the issue of the 11 councils and RPA generally. Mr Speaker, I want to acknowledge that, in my view, there were good reasons for the sound judgements that you made on giving latitude to Members. It would have been incongruous if the House had not taken the opportunity today to interrogate the arguments that were being made, of which there were many, and to call me to account for the decisions that I am making and for the decisions that the Executive take on the principle of the 11-council model.

I welcome to the House Mr Spratt in particular. I welcome him back to the Chamber. I thank my colleague Karen McKeivitt for the prompt, but even that will not be adequate for the speech that I am about to make.

I intend to go through the various comments made by Members and, in that way, try to respond to the substantial and material contributions, if not every contribution and specific point.

I acknowledge the work of the Committee. As was outlined, the view of some Members was that there were some issues with how the matter was managed by the Committee. I want to make one thing very clear, and I will check the Hansard report.

I want to verify whether the comments made by the Chair of the Environment Committee reflect the advice and information provided by my officials to the Committee because the Chair referred to matters that were not brought to the Committee's attention by my officials or by my departmental Assembly liaison officer (DALO) in correspondence. If there are matters that the Chair relied upon in her assessment and in the Committee's assessment about the proposal to do some adjustment of the district electoral areas in Warrenpoint, that is their judgement. However, I want to make it very clear that some of the information that appeared to be relied upon in that judgement did not come from my Department or from my officials in briefing, and it did not come from my DALO in correspondence. The Committee is perfectly entitled to make a judgement, to take whatever soundings and to gather whatever information they think is appropriate. However, I want to make it clear that if there were matters that were relied upon as coming from my Department that did not come from my Department, I will want to have the record of that corrected.

5.00 pm

When it comes to the latitude granted under the Venice Commission in respect of the variance between the numbers in each district electoral area, the Venice Commission says

that it can be up to 15%. While it is best not to go as far as that, under international best practice, the variance in the numbers of electors in a DEA can be up to 15%. That matter was not relied upon in what the Committee Chair said.

The Member for South Belfast, speaking in a personal capacity, said that she was looking forward to tangible plans for local government that were robust, rational and expedient and that did not see any further slippage in deadlines. I have to say to the Member for South Belfast that the body of work that has been undertaken by my officials in the Department, working with councils and senior management, and endless meetings that are ongoing with NILGA and ICE advocates demonstrate that, in the past three or four months, there has been a body of evidence of the very aspiration that the Member outlines in relation to tangible plans that are robust, rational, expedient and with deadlines not slipping. I believe that the evidence is there to answer that challenge in an affirmative way.

It is not straightforward, and this debate captures the fact that RPA is not straightforward. The various streams of work that are being undertaken by the work groups involving officials centrally and locally, involving me as chair of the regional transition committee and members from various councils around the North, demonstrates that there is a process that is robust and rational and is trying to work to deadlines, and that the challenge of tangible plans is being lived up to.

I will turn to the comments made by Lord Morrow. Curiously, as Mr Allister pointed out, he was the only contributor from the DUP Benches. I cannot explain why the DUP took that choice, but I think that the scale and character of the details of this issue deserve the fullest contribution in order to test the options and decisions that have been taken. It was curious, as Mr Allister pointed out, that there was only one contribution from the DUP Benches. However, having said that, I acknowledge the point made by Lord Morrow when he referred to the tenacity and bravery of local councillors.

I want to again put it on the record that I recognise the tenacity and bravery of councillors. I and my party have had fundamental issues with the conduct of some councils over the past 40 or 50 years and their internal affairs in business, but that does not discount in any way the tenacity and bravery of members over the years of terror and state violence or the fact that those who upheld democratic practice and principle deserve applause for being tenacious and brave in what they did. Given that fact, is it not highly appropriate, despite what people may or may not think about politicians, that councillors such as John Dallat, who served for 33 years, and the many who served beside him be given recognition? In this moment of fundamental change and reorganisation, do they not merit, more than any other category of politician in this part of the world, some form of recognition as they depart political life? I think that they do.

When I bring proposals to the Chamber in the next number of weeks and when regulations go before the Committee in the near future, I trust that there will not be politicking around the service of politicians from all parties; some a lot more than others over the past 40 years. I hope that there will not be politicking when recognising those years of tenacity, bravery and service and that there will be unanimous support, going out from the Chamber to the public and the media, for the fact that when people leave

public life, they deserve and have fully deserved recognition for those years of public service in very turbulent times. I look forward to that being endorsed.

Lord Morrow quite rightly raised the issue of whether there would be constraints up to and including, as he put it, a moratorium on capital expenditure in the run-up to local government reorganisation in order to ensure that no council is tempted, in advance of RPA, to deploy a capital programme that would have legacy issues for the merged council of which it will be a member after 2015. I do not agree with a moratorium, because, as Belfast City Council demonstrated only a short while ago, it is appropriate in times of growing need that council civic leadership show leadership by embarking on a capital programme to develop opportunities over the next two or three years, including work opportunities for the people of Belfast and beyond. Not only the Lord Mayor but the First Minister and deputy First Minister spoke to affirm their support for the council's, I think, £240 million initiative. Therefore, a moratorium would be hostile to the ambition of Belfast City Council — an ambition that I think is very appropriate.

Having said that, a number of principles have to inform capital expenditure, and I want to state what those are so that councils, in making their capital projections over the next two or three years, realise that this matter will be watched and managed with great vigilance by the Department. If we are not going down the road of a moratorium, these are the principles to be followed. The first principle is to encourage prudence, which is self-evident, but it is something that needs to be self-imposed by councillors and council management. Secondly, the finance working group, which is part of the process of taking forward RPA, will look at whether statutory controls are necessary to reduce the risk of councils embarking on capital projects that may be in conflict with the best interest of local government reorganisation. Thirdly, under current legislation, the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2010, there are opportunities for controls on local government finance, particularly in respect of disposals and contracts.

Although that particular clause in the Bill has not been commenced, if it is necessary in order to send a message out to local councils that they have to show prudence in respect of their capital expenditure, those provisions in the 2012 legislation will be commenced. In any case, beyond the general principle of prudence, there should be some self-control existing between clusters of councils in order to flag up any capital ambitions that any council might have to the other councils with which they might merge in the future.

Beyond all of that, in response to some of the comments made by Lord Morrow and others, I also want to confirm what it is that I am doing in respect of looking for money to help RPA going forward. I will come back to that later, but for now I just want to confirm that my June monitoring bid is for £2·3 million. It has two broad elements — a much larger and a much smaller part. The much smaller part is to seek £100,000 in order to build up capacity, within the Department and external to the Department, in taking forward community planning.

At the end of my comments this afternoon I will try to scope out the opportunity that exists with local government organisation. Behind the politics and the details, important though all of that is, there are enormous opportunities with

local government reorganisation on a whole lot of fronts, including on the issue of community planning, a power that local councils do not have at the moment, and a concept that, with some notable exceptions, is not embedded in the community and planning life of Northern Ireland.

If we are to stretch ourselves over the next three years and develop a robust model of community planning, such as has been worked up by Community Places in its pilot schemes, and as exists in some council areas in Scotland, building up, internally and externally, the capacity around community planning is going to be a vital feature of getting planning transfer right and, on the far side of getting it right, making sure that community planning works in a way that is consistent with the needs of local communities.

More significantly than that, there is a bid in for £2·2 million. Why? Because it is quite clear that, given the scale of the local government reorganisation challenge, there is a need to try to build up transitional support by building change management capacity and personnel into the structures of local councils. That is why, on the far side of the June monitoring round, given the comments that have been made around the Chamber this afternoon, I trust that the Minister of Finance will recommend acceptance of those bids to the Executive. If they are accepted, the £2·2 million will be distributed equally between all of the councils, without fear or favour, in order to build up capacity. Whether or not some councils are more advanced than others in terms of RPA transition, each council will get an allocation, under my proposals, of £100,000 in order to enable them to take it forward. Later in my contribution I will come back to the wider strategy around local government finance going forward.

Mr Boylan asked a relevant question, reflected in the comments made by a lot of other people, namely, whether voluntary transition committees would become statutory. As I indicated, although I think that — as the evidence presented by Lord Morrow and others confirmed — voluntary transition committees can get on with a lot of good work, as they did prior to the political stalemate at the Executive around RPA, I nonetheless accept the argument that something based in statute is likely to create an even higher level of authority and certainty in terms of the transition to RPA. For that reason, it is my ambition that, within this calendar year — this is a very challenging timeline, given that subordinate legislation is going to be required — regulations will be passed in order to put the voluntary committees on a statutory basis. However, that is not to send out a message to our councils that they can sit back for the next six months. Far from it.

They should realise that, if voluntary transition committees are going to become statutory, although that will give them a higher level of authority than heretofore, it will also give them a higher level of responsibility than heretofore; a responsibility that they need to be seen to live up to.

5.15 pm

In respect of Mr Boylan's comments, I confirm — and the Environment Committee Chair will want to know this — that there is a significant roll-out of legislation in respect of local government. There is not simply the boundaries order that is before the Chamber today, the significant piece of legislation on local government reorganisation that will

come in the autumn, or any regulations that I might bring forward in terms of councillors' severance. There will be a significant body of subordinate legislation on issues such as governance, ethical standards, performance improvement and service delivery. All of that is going to come before the Committee during 2013-14. There is a very significant body of legislation, primary and secondary, that is going to occupy the Assembly, the Committee and the Executive on a rolling basis between now and the RPA. A timeline for all those pieces of legislation has been shared with the Executive, the Chair of the Committee and the Committee itself.

Mr Elliott questioned the issue of why there was no coterminosity with anything, which is the way he put it, in the 11 model. The theme was also touched on in other contributions. I will correct one mistaken impression. There were arguments, and research was undertaken, in respect of the seven, 11 and 15 models in previous days when options around local government reorganisation and council numbers were being developed. That thorough research looked at the seven, 11 and 15 models, but if you read the evidence as produced at that time, it is quite clear that the model of seven or of 15 councils fulfilled the ambition of Mr Elliott's contribution, namely the principle of coterminosity, and that 15 or seven works better for the wider public service shape of Northern Ireland.

Many people consider that the 11 model was included because there might be a need for some compromise, given the stated positions of parties at that time. Although compromise has its place, and compromise is the height of ambition of the Executive in this regard, the better argument in terms of coterminosity and other criteria, which was prepared long before I became Minister and long before Edwin Poots became Minister, was for seven or 11.

Mr Elliott also raised the issue of rates convergence. As I indicated in my earlier remarks, it is not my sense that there is going to be a Big Bang approach to rates convergence; that on 1 April or 1 May 2015, there will be rates convergence irrespective of whether there are reduced or increased rates for those ratepayers in the merged council area. My sense is that that is not going to happen.

I want to say, especially to businesses in Fermanagh, that without prejudice to my personal view in respect of 11 or 15, there has been some exaggeration about the potential increases in rates for merged councils where there has historically been a significant differential. These figures of 20% and 25% are probably at the upper limit. The actual differential in rates adjustment will be more on the scale of 10% or 15%, but it is still significant. It is not something that we can bury our heads in the sand about. It will still be a matter of concern and interest and something that has to be resolved. So, how are we going to work through rates convergence over the next three years and possibly beyond?

I referred to the finance working group, which is part of the process of dealing with RPA financial issues. Rates convergence will be part of the work stream of the finance working group, which is due to meet soon. There will be conversations with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), because, never mind the principle of equality, it is clear that there are financial and legal issues with rates convergence. So, we will have to work through very systematically the legal and financial consequences of rates convergence, as well as phasing, if it is appropriate.

There had been some discussion about transitional relief, which was previously on the radar. However, as people know, the Executive have made a policy decision on assistance for local councils through RPA. On the face of it, that is in conflict with the principle of transitional relief, which had been on the radar. I will come back to that decision later.

This is something that I will touch on in my concluding remarks, but local government reorganisation means that there is potential to look for new models of funding for local government services. Given Treasury rules on central government expenditure that is on and off the balance sheet, and, in moving towards RPA, we must ask whether we have the opportunity to engineer new and innovative commercial and financial models that will help councils, through their borrowing capacity and access to various sources of funding, to maintain and develop their services on the far side of RPA.

More than any other, the funding that we should be considering is that from the European Union. The record of the Executive and the Northern Ireland Assembly in drawing down funds from various European funding streams, particularly FP7, is not healthy compared with that of the Republic of Ireland. So, part of the finance working group's stream of work will include scoping out whether there are further European opportunities that, as part of RPA or on the far side of it, may help to create financial assistance and support for local councils.

I reassure Mr Elliott that I will honour the principles that I outlined. With the transfer of functions, most of all planning, the full resource will be transferred in a way that is rates neutral. It will be for the councils to decide in years two, three and four whether they want to enhance or reduce the planning function they have responsibility for. That may or may not have consequences for the rates burden in any merged council.

Mr Elliott: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will in a second.

At the point of transfer, and given that planning is going to be the most significant transferred function, it is my firm intention that the funding threshold for planning will be built back into the Planning Service. That capacity is elsewhere in government at the moment. There are issues with the funding threshold for planning, given the vagaries of planning income on one hand and, on the other, planning resource, which has been moved out of the Department.

It is also my intention to win an argument with DFP, because, given the centrality of planning to growing a sustainable economy, we need to have a funding threshold that cannot be compromised, and, on the far side of agreeing a threshold of funding for the Planning Service, there will be a funding threshold of going to the council along with the transfer of functions.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for giving way. I accept the point that functions will be rates neutral at the point of transfer. However, how will he establish the mechanism to take that forward? Irrespective of what councils do and whether they want to make efficiencies or grow the service — whatever service it may be — how will he transfer the finance that follows on year after year? Will councils be

given that money directly from central government, or will they be able to withhold that from the regional rate?

Mr Attwood: The precise models, options and mechanisms to bring about that transfer will be interrogated by the finance working group working with the regional transition committee and the voluntary and, in the fullness of time, statutory transition committees. However, the ambition is that, at the point of transfer, the threshold of funding will be adequate to deliver the service and will be transferred in full at the point of transfer of the function.

The models and mechanisms of how it will work thereafter will be interrogated through the structures that I have outlined to ensure that we do not create a circumstance in which councils end up with a planning function, which they might be minded to live up to in respect of local planning decisions and development plans and community planning, only to find after a year that the rug is pulled from under their feet because of issues around the maintenance and guarantee of resource. To borrow a phrase that Mr Allister used, it would be folly to give the function and funding and then to see it unpicked over following years. How that will be done is a matter for discussion between central and local government, the finance working group and the regional transition committee. However, that is the model that I am working for. I am pleased to give that reassurance.

Mr Elliott referred to the potential for a single business organisation. That did not find favour with local councils in the previous discussions on local government reorganisation. The alternative that councils and the council management came up with was the ICE programme. Although a single business organisation was recommended as one way of creating greater collaboration and sharing of services to reduce costs but maintain service, the ICE programme was the council's alternative to that model. If it is the alternative, it has to be given a life. There must be a gear change around how ICE is rolled out.

Mr Elliott also raised the issue of the single waste authority. I have told the three procurement groups that I am looking at that matter. As I have indicated in response to questions for oral answer on the Floor of the Chamber, beyond the ongoing issues about waste procurement and the three procurement groups, it is a matter that I remain highly vigilant about. The proposal to enter into 25-year waste procurement contracts, the cost burden that would arise for councils, and the management of all that is, in my view, an issue of very high risk that needs to be managed very actively. I assure the House that it is being managed very actively on an ongoing basis. The issue of a single waste authority has been raised as part of the wider thinking on the management of the procurement strategy. I have raised it at the waste board as an option that needs to be looked at further this year as we decide on the deliverability and affordability when it comes to three waste procurement groups.

I want to acknowledge Mr Dallat again. There are many people in the Chamber and many others who have retired from politics who do not have the years of service that John Dallat has. He has spent 33 years in a council and 14 in the Assembly. It is hard to believe that it has been 14 years in the Assembly — it seems longer. *[Laughter.]* I am sure that the Speaker thinks that it has been long enough.

Mr Dallat made a point that I have heard before — I am managing the 11-council model, but I will step back slightly from my ministerial role — about 100,000 nationalists being under unionist influence. I am sure that there will be a lot of unionists under nationalist influence as well. People need to consider the impact of those sorts of figures moving to a council that may have a particular political pedigree.

5.30 pm

Mr Dallat rightly acknowledged the contribution of the Speaker in his years of service on Derry City Council, during which he showed a high level of independence of thought and action. It because of the actions of Willie Hay and the many other Willie Hays up in Derry that Mr Dallat can make the comment — he is right to make it — that in 2013 Derry will reach out to the world. Derry/Londonderry UK City of Culture is that moment when Derry, already well established across the world, will raise its game and reach out to the world. That is a very eloquent turn of phrase, but I think that it captures the issues around Derry.

I make the point that, in the wilderness years, when there was not this Chamber and when atrocity was being visited on the citizens of this part of Ireland, it was the SDLP at times aided and abetted by others but at other times nearly alone, that argued for partnership and accommodation and a sharing of political office. Although it is very welcome that everybody has now come on to that pitch, it was the SDLP that defined that type of politics. I want to acknowledge that, because it is timely and appropriate to do so.

John Dallat was Mayor of Coleraine; I was never Mayor of Belfast. It is not something that I regret, but there is a great candidate for Mayor of Belfast. In the fullness of time, I hope that my brother, Tim Attwood, who is a long-serving member of Belfast City Council, will have that great honour bestowed on him. I welcome the arrangement on Belfast City Council, but it is clearly not the arrangement on other councils. It is a very small number, but it is not the arrangement on those councils that there is a sharing of political office between political traditions.

Because of the recent publicity visited on some decisions made in one or two councils around the North, I want to confirm that I am taking legal advice on the actions of councils on which the principles of power sharing, equality and political accommodation have, on the face of it, been compromised. I will look at bringing into the legislative time frame earlier new standards for governance and ethical behaviour in councils so that those might be in place prior to 2015. If there are other ways in which I can intervene to exhort or compel councils to live up to the standards of partnership that this Chamber in many instances — not in all — lives up to, I will look at them.

Mr Molloy referred, without attributing blame, to delays and to the fact that this debate was belated. I will not revisit all of that, but I can confirm that, on the far side of today, if it is the will of the Assembly to endorse my recommendation on the boundaries, I will write to the Secretary of State forthwith and invite him to fulfil his statutory function, which is to appoint a DEA commissioner — there is none at the moment — who would then take forward the work on district electoral areas and produce a report with recommendations. That report would then be published and subject to

inquiry. On the far side of that, law would be passed by the Westminster Parliament giving effect to all that.

I also acknowledge the point that Mr Molloy and others made that there is an enduring issue about central government giving up more powers to local government. So far, there does not appear to be anything on the table that was on the table previously. I regret that. I think that this once-in-a-political-lifetime opportunity for local government reorganisation should see Ministers and government grasp the nettle of transferring functions that should be legitimately in the hands of local councils and councillors. However, I have to say that there have been some more positive signals, maybe even beyond the Assembly questions that my colleague Mrs Kelly referred to, that one or two Ministers may be more inclined to transfer more functions on the far side of RPA. I would like to encourage that.

I thought that there was a useful comment on whether, as part of the review of arm's-length bodies, besides potentially taking back into government that which should be taken back, there is an opportunity to transfer to councils some quangos' functions that would be better part of the life of councils going forward. I had not heard that point before, but I thought that it was useful.

I concur that there is an ongoing argument about whether, while it is proposed that councils should have the power of well-being, they should not also have a power of general competence. There is a tension between central government heretofore being reluctant to potentially transfer powers that might be transferred and the argument that central government would give to local government the power of general competence. If we are going to give the power of general competence, let us also give more significant powers to local councils. The Member was right to raise the issue of the power of well-being as opposed to general competence. That is an issue that I continue to consider and take forward.

There was a contradiction in what Mr Molloy said in that, on the one hand, he rightly asserted the primacy of democratic interest, but, on the other hand, he said that it was the responsibility of chief executives to lead. The democratic interest should prevail. The political interest should prevail. Chief executives and other council staff should accommodate that and enable that to happen. In as much as that means they should lead, they should do so. However, that is and should always be subject to the wishes of the council and the democratic interest, because that is where good authority comes from.

Mr Kinahan said that my heart was not in what I was proposing. I would not put it that way. Clearly, I have a conviction that 11 is not the right number, but I have a commitment to manage 11 going forward. This is how I would put it: my conviction might be otherwise, but my commitment is to 11 councils. I would like to assure people again that that is my job as a Minister. As a Minister, your job is to put into practice the decisions of government. Otherwise, you should not be in government. That is where my mind is settled at the moment.

Mr Kinahan was quite right to talk about the ratepayer interest. This is all about the ratepayer interest. Ultimately, central and local government politicians are the servants of the citizens and the community. He also rightly raised the

Scottish borrowing structures, which are different from those here. They have created the Scottish Futures Trust, and that has proven to be a way of drawing down tens of millions of pounds that otherwise they might not be able to draw down. That works its way through councils, housing and many other aspects of public policy. There is something in the Scottish model that may have application in local government reform and in general.

The comments of Mr Hazzard made me realise that he has still a lot to learn. He made the comment — it was scripted, not off the top of his head — that the comments made by other parties, and I think he was referring to my colleagues behind me, were little more than protecting their own interests. It seems to me — *[Interruption.]* That is probably some Sinn Féin apparatchik ringing up to brief Fra on what the rebuttal to that point should be. *[Interruption.]* I missed that point, but I noted that only one party laughed, so I am sure that it was not that good a joke. *[Laughter.]*

All the time, whatever the issue, the standard reply from Sinn Féin to a contrary view is that it is about other parties protecting their interests. I draw the conclusion that that reveals the thinking in Sinn Féin. When it claims about others that their political position is to protect their interests, it reveals that too often, too much, too regularly the mindset of Sinn Féin is about protecting its own position. In visiting upon others that claim, it makes a statement about itself. A standard issue of reducing nearly all politics to that level is not dignified, respectful or credible. Sinn Féin might want to think about that.

Why did the SDLP endorse 11? I have to be careful. I am the Minister of the Environment, and I recommended to my party that it should adopt the 15 model, having previously argued for 11. It was a situation in which you had to try to break the political stalemate. The credibility of politics and the institutions would have been compromised by that stalemate. In those circumstances, the compromise of 11 was the politically better option. It was not that it was the only option, but, in circumstances of stalemate, when the issue was not being moved across the line and when people, the media and others were rightly critical of government for failing to address it, you make choices and you go to 11.

When I went in to DOE and interrogated the information — maybe I have a more privileged position because I have that inside track — it was transparent to me that 15 was a better model. After the failure of even the 11 compromise in the previous mandate, could we not step back for a moment and think about the 15-council model? Could we not say that the game had changed because the councils, last August, after the elections in May, brought forward proposals for savings of £570 million over 25 years through sharing and collaboration? In those circumstances, given that we had failed to get even to the compromise of 11, was it not timely, to get the thing moving forward, to step back for a moment, look at the consequences of the proposals and ask whether there were some deeper issues that we needed to get our heads round in terms of local identity and character? In those circumstances, was it not appropriate to look at that?

The most disturbing — if that is the right word — moment in the debate was the comments made by Mr Flanagan about 11 and the essential reply from Mr Copeland about 15. Mr Copeland's comments showed intuition and a

sense of where people are, their sense of place, character and identity. He spoke about the people whom he knows and represents in East Belfast. What did Mr Flanagan say earlier in the debate in that regard? He said — Hansard can check this — that the purpose of RPA was about inefficiency, bureaucracy and cost. Think about the contrast. Mr Copeland spoke about people, communities, identity and a sense of place, community and identity. What did Mr Flanagan talk about? He said that RPA was about inefficiency, bureaucracy and cost. He is the technocrat, and Mr Copeland is the politician. Mr Flanagan is the person who reduces things down.

5.45 pm

Dr McDonnell: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will, in a second. This approach reduces politics simply to a matter of inefficiency, bureaucracy and cost. If you follow the logic of Mr Flanagan's position, what is the point of having county borders or GAA club games or townland names? What is the point of having that which gives character to our sense of being people of this island if you reduce RPA to simply a matter of inefficiency, bureaucracy and cost? The purpose of RPA was to do what was right for the citizens of this part of this island. Yes, it was about making things better — better services, better value and lower costs — but that was always subject to the interests of citizens and communities and their sense of themselves and their future. The contrast between the technocrat and the politician — maybe Mr Copeland does not like the word "politician", because he brings a different flavour to politics from many politicians, including me, and I want to recognise that — was quite remarkable and stunning.

Dr McDonnell: Is the Minister suggesting that Mr Flanagan is out of touch and has not been listening to the voters of Fermanagh? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Dr McDonnell: Is the Minister suggesting that Mr Flanagan is flying in the face of the interests of the voters in Fermanagh for some ulterior purpose?

Mr Attwood: Mr Flanagan, who I see has not asked to interrupt me — *[Laughter.]*

Mr Flanagan: Give me a chance.

Mr Attwood: Give you a chance? I will give you all the chances that you want to work out your argument. It is not going to be a very good one. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Flanagan was up and down like the proverbial so-and-so before lunch, and now, after lunch, he is as quiet as a dormouse. I wonder why.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to make all their remarks through the Chair.

Mr Attwood: Yes, sorry, Mr Speaker, I apologise. I am just pointing out that those were the words used by Members in the House. In the words that were used, a view, a mentality and an attitude were revealed, and that tells a big tale. I want Mr Flanagan and others to go back to the people of Fermanagh and tell them that RPA is all about inefficiency, bureaucracy and costs and is not about the very issues that

Mr Copeland so eloquently and powerfully spoke about. I will give way when Mr Flanagan wants me to give way.

Mr Flanagan: Are you ready to give way now?

Mr Attwood: Yes.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Minister for giving way. I, too, welcome Mr Copeland's comments. There is a view being put forward that people take their cultural identity from their local council, but that is not the case. People take their cultural identity from organisations such as the GAA or, as Mr Byrne from West Tyrone said, the Orange Order or other organisations. People do not take their cultural identity from local councils. Mr Attwood talked about 100,000 nationalists being transferred into unionist councils. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Flanagan: How do nationalists in Castlereagh, if any really exist, take their cultural identity from Castlereagh Borough Council? You have those anomalies right across the North. People do not take their cultural identity from their council. It is much wider than that.

I find it amazing to see that Mr McDonnell has actually joined us in the Chamber. It is great to see him coming back from Britain to this Chamber to say that Sinn Féin is out of touch with voters in Fermanagh. The SDLP has been reduced to three councillors in Fermanagh. It does not have a single MLA. It is the party that is out of touch with what is going on in Fermanagh.

This issue is to do with finance and the potential increase in rates in Fermanagh. The people of Fermanagh are not concerned about the loss of their cultural identity. People in Fermanagh are proud to be from Fermanagh, and the amalgamation of Fermanagh and Omagh district councils will not impact one bit on the cultural identity of Fermanagh people.

Mr Speaker: Order. Once again, can we get back to the motion and the debate that are on the Floor? That goes for all Members.

Mr Attwood: Can I just reply, Mr Speaker, to the latter points? No argument was made by me that local identity, character and culture were singularly expressed through the local council or the number of local councils in the North of Ireland, but surely it is the obligation of politicians with regard to political institutions to give expression and shape to local identity and character.

When the Good Friday Agreement was negotiated, Denis Haughey, a man of great eloquence, said something that was beyond politics. It was an argument of the soul and spirit. He said that the nationalist community in the North wished to share in the life of the rest of the island. I have not heard a more eloquent expression of what it means within nationalism or of its intuition and wish to be part of the rest of Ireland. He did not express that in terms of political institutions; those were to come. He expressed it in terms that political institutions have to give shape and meaning to the will of the people of the North, particularly the nationalist people, to share in the life of the island. Institutions gave expression to political inclinations, intuition and identity. It is the job of politicians to shape that,

including when it comes to local councils. If you have a local council that is spread very large and wide, Fermanagh people — a proud, resilient people — will not lose their identity; nonetheless, you will have an institution of political life that may not best serve their political needs and wider identity. That is the point, and I think it is a self-evident one.

When it comes to SDLP representation, it was not you, Mr Flanagan, it was your colleague behind you, Mr McCann, who, as normal when it gets down to these sorts of issues, relied on the democratic will in order to justify the position being adopted by Sinn Féin and its position vis-à-vis the SDLP. I am an Irish democrat. I accept that. We would not be having these debates today, because the issue of local government reorganisation would have been dealt with generations ago, if Irish democracy had not been compromised during the years of terror and state violence. We would be in a much more advanced place, and our people would have had so many more of their needs answered if our history had not been traumatised by that.

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: Yes.

Mr F McCann: It goes back. This debate has, obviously, been going on for quite a number of years, but given the poor election results, is it —

Mr Speaker: Order, order.

Mr F McCann: Well, Chair, he —

Mr Speaker: Is this relevant to the motion?

Mr F McCann: Yes, it is indeed. What I am trying to do is to make the point that the only reason that SDLP Members are arguing for the 15 councils is to protect their council base, which is diminishing in front of their eyes.

Mr Speaker: I say to the Minister and the whole House that, as Members will know, I have been very patient. All sides of the House have had a contribution to make to the debate. I say this to Members and to the Minister: let us get back to the motion. I am really trying to get the House out of Fermanagh, if I can do that. I have found it very difficult. *[Laughter.]* However, I urge the Minister and Members to come back to the motion.

Mr Flanagan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: Yes.

Mr Flanagan: It is just a quick point. The Minister said that there is the potential that, if Fermanagh and Omagh merge, some decisions may well be taken that are not in the best interests of Fermanagh people. That is fine. He is entitled to that opinion. Many people share that opinion. It is possible that that may happen, but, ultimately, it will be a decision for the newly elected councillors of that council to take. There is an opportunity with RPA for a benefit in economies of scale and greater savings for councils, but that can also be translated into much improved community services and delivery of community services, where people are actually out on the ground in rural areas, such as Fermanagh, that have been neglected historically.

Mr Attwood: A valiant effort. I think the argument has been won and lost, and I know what side I am on. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Attwood: Mr Speaker, if I could now move on.

One other comment that I want to make in respect of Mr Flanagan's contribution is about the argument that weaved through his commentary that I had not stepped up to the plate, there needed to be significant funding from the centre and so on and so forth. Let me deal with those issues. My colleague Mrs Kelly put some people firmly in their place when she pointed out that Members in the House, including myself at the Executive level, voted against last year's Budget. Others voted in favour of last year's Budget, and that vote prevailed. However, when they raised their hands to vote in favour of that Budget, they voted in favour of no budgetary cover for anything around RPA. So when people say that the argument has been taken to the Executive about budgetary support for RPA, let them explain to people how, on a critical issue such as this, they raised their hands in March last year to vote for a Budget that did not give a penny of cover in budgetary terms to anything to do with RPA. Let them explain that. People have been saying that the arguments about budgetary cover will be turned against me, but let them explain why they raised their hands and did not vote for any budgetary line for RPA. I do not think that there is an answer to that. They raised their hands to not give a penny to RPA because there was not a penny of cover in the Budget at that stage.

If I rushed into the Executive and said that I now wanted £50 million for RPA, what would Sammy Wilson and DFP say to me? What would all my ministerial colleagues say to me? They would say, "Where is your business case? Do you want us to give you money for your troubles?". That is not politics or responsible government, and Ministers in government and in power cannot say, "Give me £50 million for my trouble". To make an argument for money, especially in the times that we live in, you need to have a business case. That is why, on the far side of a decision being taken about the 11-council model, the business case is now being worked up, and we will see where that business case will take us.

I need to have a business case to make an argument for money, if that is what I am inclined to do. To do other than that is reckless, bad government, bad politics and a silly way to look for money, because you could end up spending that money in a silly way. Irrespective of that and of the fact that parties in this room put their hands up for a Budget that had no budgetary cover for RPA, I will still ask for money, because there is a good argument coming from the councils to give some money at this time without prejudice and independent of what might happen in the future. That is the better course of action, and any other course of action would mean that not a penny will be provided for RPA. I will build up, if I can, an argument of authority to try to help RPA.

If I am prepared to do that, are other people, as I asked in my earlier contribution, prepared to look again at some of the spending commitments in the Budget that they put their hands up for? Money is not being spent, there is duplication of effort, no structures are in place to appraise or manage money and, by the end of this year, a penny will still not have been spent on the social investment fund. If you are to challenge me, as you are entitled to do, to account for how money might be secured for RPA, others have the responsibility to question the wisdom of how we

have decided to spend some money, including the social investment fund.

I note Ross Hussey's sympathy in his thorough and thoughtful contribution. He said that he genuinely feels sorry for me and that other parties might point their joint finger in my direction. That does not concern me one iota. I believe that I am taking forward the RPA initiative in a responsible manner. I am not being reckless or throwing figures at the Executive and saying, "Give me your money. Stand and deliver". That is, essentially, what some people in the Chamber are saying.

So, to go back to some of the comments that have been made, I think that that is a position of leadership, and the evidence backs that up.

6.00 pm

Dolores Kelly's contribution was interrupted —

Mr Speaker: Order. I think that the Minister is in full flow and is maybe only getting started, so I do not want to interrupt him, but I ask the House to take its ease for about three minutes. Let us suspend for about three minutes.

The sitting was suspended at 6.00 pm and resumed at 6.04 pm.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us return to the business before the House. I ask the Minister to continue.

Mr Attwood: I am bringing my comments to a conclusion —

Mr Flanagan: You are a long way short of your record.

Mr Attwood: I am going to be.

Dolores Kelly gave way to Mr Flanagan, and, in my view, his intervention was one of the most bizarre that I have heard in the Chamber. He asked whether, if I am not going to be Minister for much longer, I should be taking this forward or whether I should leave it to a future Minister. Think about that principle. Sammy Wilson might not be Finance Minister for that much longer, or Mr Poots might not be Health Minister for that much longer. The DUP's stated ambition is to rotate its Ministries — I see a Member who may be the beneficiary of a rotation — and it said that it supports rotation and that Ministers might be moved some time in the next phase of politics. If that is the principle, and given all those points, I trust that Mr McGuinness, Mr Flanagan or his party are writing to Mr Robinson or the DUP to flag that up and to say that surely their Finance Minister, Health Minister and others should not be taking any decisions and that somebody should come along subsequently and make those decisions. That is the logic of that argument. If the argument is that I might not be Minister for much longer and that, therefore, somebody else in my party should be taking responsibility for this matter, the same argument applies to Sammy Wilson, Edwin Poots and to any other DUP Ministers whose ministerial lifetime might not be as long as they hoped. That is how bizarre that point is, and it demonstrates how good government, good politics and good decision-making are misunderstood. That someone would deploy the argument, on the Floor of a political Chamber, in a parliament in this part of Ireland, that because you might not be the Minister for ever and a day, you should not make decisions, is so preposterous, ludicrous and reflective of living in some other world —

Dr McDonnell: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: No. OK, I will. *[Laughter.]*

Dr McDonnell: I assure the Minister that his position is secure and that I will not be taking Mr Flanagan's advice on the matter. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Attwood: Promises, promises, promises. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Flanagan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: Yes.

Mr Flanagan: The Minister just received a vote of confidence from the board, and I think that that is very disturbing for anybody in his position.

To take him back to my point, I was not implying that he abdicates responsibility and allows a future Minister to take it forward. I was suggesting an alternative Minister. I will leave that in his head and see how it stewes for the next 10 minutes.

Mr Attwood: That was not clear from your comments. In fact, far from it. The Hansard report will show that when Mr Flanagan rose to his feet, he explicitly asked whether, given that I might not be a Minister in the future, I was the right person to take this forward, and he asked what the consequences of that would be. I notice that Mr Flanagan looked behind him; maybe it was to get a bit of advice from some apparatchik about how to reply to my point. The point is valid. The Hansard report will confirm it, and no amount of dissembling by Mr Flanagan will take away from the fact that he made a ludicrous point and that he knows he made a ludicrous point.

Mr Beggs made a lot of comments. I have to say that I had not heard the narrative that he outlined about the configuration of councils in east Antrim. It was an interesting argument. I have to concede that I had not heard the scale of that argument before. It was a well-made case for the configuration of local government boundaries in that part of Northern Ireland. However, I have to say to the Member that I do not argue against the principle of RPA. I do not argue that the 26-council model should not be reduced. I do not argue that the 30 or so housing associations should not be reduced to a dozen or so. I believe in radical reform of public policy moving forward. That has served us well in the past, and it will serve us well in the future. In my view, the fact that radical reform of public policy is not part of the political narrative shows that the Government are not measuring up to all their responsibilities or to the needs of citizens.

I endorse the principle of seed funding. That is why I went to the Executive during June monitoring to look for advance moneys to do particular dedicated work — £2.3 million, which is quite moderate in the scale of things, to enable councils, through seed funding, to move forward on change management, sharing and collaboration.

Mr Byrne made the argument about Omagh and Strabane in particular and, again, articulated the issue of coterminosity and that the better approach was for seven or 15 councils, if that was the principle against which we judge these matters, rather than 11. But we are where we are. I say for the umpteenth time, as I have said privately to the Executive, that I will manage this decision and I will not slow down, sideline or derail it, because I believe in the principle of

radical reform. If the model is for 11 councils, despite its flaws in my view, it is my political responsibility to take that forward. If others want to prevail on others to change their mind, that is for them and for another day. For the purpose of this debate and moving this issue forward, that is where things will reside.

I commented on Mr Copeland's speech, which showed a great intuition and sense of things. He understands that you do not reduce identity and local loyalty to an issue of inefficiency, bureaucracy and cost, and that to do so is hostile to our sense of what makes us this part of the island of Ireland — a wonderful and great people, confirmed through the years of great turbulence over the days of conflict.

Mr Allister nearly replied to the debate by saying that not a single cogent reason was advanced as to why we were going with 11 councils. Others can draw their own conclusions about that. He raised two points with me. I do like to answer Mr Allister if I am capable of doing so. One point was about the setting of rates in 2015 and the other was about the ban on double-jobbing. The answer, Mr Allister, on the setting of rates in 2015 is that the intention is, subject to the Secretary of State's agreement, that the next local government elections will be held in 2014. The — apologies; I cannot quite read the writing. Those elected in 2014 in shadow format will take full responsibility and control in April 2015. The councils, acting in shadow form from 2014 to April 2015, will be responsible for making decisions on and setting the rates for the new councils. The new rates will take account of the new councils.

In respect of the question about MLAs and councillors, I stand to be corrected because I am speaking from memory, but the decision of the Executive was that the ban on double-jobbing would be in law and in force in 2015. The consequence of that, which is what Mr Allister was getting at, is that, in theory, people could stand for election in 2014, when the ban on double-jobbing is not in force, serve for a year, and then, if there is a policy of substitution to the councils, those who are also MLAs could step down in 2015. That is my understanding of the intent of the Executive's decision. However, that has yet to be shaped in law, and, consequently, given that the issue has been raised with me by a number of people, the final shape of the law and the final character of what happens in 2014 may yet be revisited. I do not want to put it any stronger than that. In any case, given the profile of the double-jobbing issue, and given that MLAs who are councillors have already had their allowances cut substantially since April and will be at further financial disadvantage as of July, and given the direction of travel generally on double-jobbing, I would like to think that local people will be given the opportunity to vote for candidates who are going to be councillors only come 2014, and that logic and common sense will prevail.

6.15 pm

Mr McCarthy: Thank you, Minister, for giving way. I have sat all day and listened. I was not going to say anything but I have to say something now. I speak as a serving councillor and MLA, and I make no apology for it. I have been a councillor, on Ards Borough Council, for nearly but not quite as long as John Dallat, and I hear what you say. I did not come on to Ards Borough Council for money — as somebody on the other Benches said. I came on it from 1985 to serve my community. I hope that I have served my community. I

put myself forward at the recent elections as a prospective local councillor and as an MLA, and I am proud to have got a damn good result. So, I am carrying out what my electorate wants. I will do that. I am not interested in the money at all. I want to just put that on record.

Mr Attwood: The Member is quite right to put it on record. Given that he has sat here for most of the day, as have I and the Speaker, he will know that I made it clear that I have nothing but the highest respect for local councillors, particularly those who have served for a long time and during the most difficult years of turbulence, threat and terror. I indicated that I hoped that the House will endorse the regulations that will give those who step down from council a relatively small severance package when, all around them council staff will be getting substantial severance packages that they are legally entitled to and that is a necessary requirement of RPA. However, I hope that there will be a public and political understanding of that and that the media will appreciate that people with a record of great service deserve some level of recognition.

I respect the fact that you, Mr McCarthy, and others stood on a certain day and sought a double mandate. I respect that. As an Irish democrat, I respect the fact that the people speak and choose who they elect. However, politicians have to acknowledge that, in general, the public do not understand double-jobbing and would like to see one-person-one-job escalated across all political life. I think that that is the direction of travel to take to respond to the public mood and adopt the right political principle. I think that that is why the Executive endorsed the principle, after parties in the Chamber opposed a Private Member's Bill on the issue a year ago. That is why, after a short time, the Executive endorsed the principle of abandoning double-jobbing. That does not take away from your integrity or commitment, but it is, I think, recognition of what right practice might be.

I will conclude by slightly changing the shape of the debate. I do so because, as I said, whatever about the politics and details of RPA — important as all of that is — I look to 2015 and the opportunity that it will present. It represents a mighty opportunity and a great challenge, but one that carries some risk. That is because the purpose of this is not just efficiency and the reduction of costs; it is about the need to deliver to our community and our citizens, cities, towns, hamlets and townlands in all parts of the North the government denied to them through no fault of many of the political parties and their leaders over the past 40 years, but because of the circumstances that we faced.

In my view, as I keep saying tirelessly, the next 18 months is the most critical phase for the Government since the Good Friday Agreement was signed. If we shape radical strategy and bold legislative proposals in the next 18 months around the Executive table and in the Assembly, we will reshape the next 20 or 30 years. The Government, including me and involving RPA, have that responsibility and opportunity at the moment. If we can get it right over the next 18 months on RPA, on national parks, on a marine management organisation, on better regulation, on planning reform and all the other interventions from the DOE and other Ministers, we can fundamentally shape our society for the next 20 to 30 years in a way that means that our society will be a lot better. That is what this debate is about.

In moving towards RPA, are we going to get it as big as it should be, as right as it can be, in order to make it a model of local government that is fit for purpose and serves, in a better way, the opportunities going forward? That is what this debate is about. That is why I welcome all the contributions that we have heard. Working through all of that is the challenge that I have set myself. We should set it to ourselves and live up to it.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 59; Noes 26.

AYES

Mr S Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Bell, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCreagh, Mr McElduff, Mr M McGuinness, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Molloy, Mr Moutray, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Sheehan, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr S Anderson and Ms S Ramsey.

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Beggs, Mr Byrne, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hussey, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr McClarty, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McGlone, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr A Maginness, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Byrne and Mr Elliott.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Local Government (Boundaries) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Mr Speaker: I ask the House to take its ease before we move to the next item of business.

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

Committee Business

Standing Orders: 49A

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is the Committee motion to amend Standing Order 49A. The House will know that such motions are not time-limited.

Mr G Kelly (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I note that you said that there was no time limit on this, but let me assure you that I will not be filibustering.

I beg to move

Leave out Standing Order 49A and insert –

'49A. Membership of the Committee for Justice

A person cannot be a member of the statutory committee established to advise and assist the Minister of Justice if that person is a member of –

(a) the Northern Ireland Policing Board;

(b) a policing and community safety partnership; or

(c) a district policing and community safety partnership;

and those words have the same meaning as in the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.'

On behalf of the Committee on Procedures, I am pleased to bring the motion to amend Standing Orders to the House today. The proposed amendments to Standing Order 49A are straightforward, so there is not a lot for me to say, except to explain the background and purpose of each of them.

Standing Order 49A was introduced when policing and justice powers were being devolved. Standing Order 49A(1) includes a requirement for the Committee for Justice to review the operation of amendments made by the Northern Ireland Act 2009 to the process of judicial appointments and removals. The Committee for Justice has completed that work, and its report on the review of judicial appointments in the North was approved by the Assembly on 14 May 2012. Standing Order 49A(1) is, therefore, spent and can be deleted.

The next amendment relates to Standing Order 49A(2), which currently states that a person cannot be a member of the Committee for Justice if that person is a member of the Policing Board, a district policing partnership or a subgroup of the Belfast district policing partnership. Those were the terms used when policing and justice powers were being devolved. Members will be aware that the Justice Act 2011 requires each district council to establish a policing and community safety partnership for its district and for Belfast City Council to establish four further district policing and community safety partnerships for Belfast. That means that the terms in Standing Order 49A(2) need to be changed. The proposed amendment simply reflects the changes in terminology.

Mr Deputy Speaker, they are straightforward amendments, and I commend the motion to the House.

Mr A Maginness: This found full support throughout the Committee's proceedings, so I simply endorse and second what the Member said.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Kelly, do you wish to respond?

Mr G Kelly: No.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

Leave out Standing Order 49A and insert –

'49A. Membership of the Committee for Justice

A person cannot be a member of the statutory committee established to advise and assist the Minister of Justice if that person is a member of –

(a) the Northern Ireland Policing Board;

(b) a policing and community safety partnership; or

(c) a district policing and community safety partnership;

and those words have the same meaning as in the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.'

Private Members' Business

Mixed Housing

Mr 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.

Mrs Cochrane: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses serious concern at the current segregated housing proposals in the Girdwood conceptual master plan, as announced on 21 May 2012; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to conduct a landmark review of segregation in housing to inform a strategy to promote and facilitate equality and sharing in housing in order to eliminate both discrimination and segregation, and to direct the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to promote and protect all housing as mixed.

Northern Ireland's residential sector remains deeply divided, with over 90% of our public housing still segregated on religious grounds. Some of our most polarised estates have more than 80% of residents from the same religious background. Up until the outbreak of the Troubles, most public housing was in entirely mixed estates. However, as the violence worsened, people felt that they had to move into places where they felt secure, which, ultimately, meant moving into highly segregated areas. Public housing estates became more segregated through 30 years of conflict, specifically between 1971 and 1991, with little change in trends between 1991 and 2001 despite the peace process. What is more worrying is that recent figures have shown that segregation is now at its highest level in 30 years.

The fact that an area is perceived as belonging to one side or another of the community results in all sorts of negative economic and social consequences, such as loss of investment, paramilitary economy and people less willing to use basic public services such as libraries, cinemas, shops or recreational facilities. Even worse, that interacts with other aspects of poverty to create pockets of multiple deprivation.

Contrary to popular belief, segregated housing is not just confined to social housing. There is also a very high level of segregation in private housing, so it is not simply a matter of looking at how we deal with it in social housing; it is a matter that spreads right across the board. In 2010, a report by the Independent Commission on the Future for Housing in Northern Ireland stated that integrated housing should be trumpeted as the key ingredient for a peaceful and prosperous future for Northern Ireland, leaving peace lines and religious ghettoisation of housing that was perpetuated by the Troubles in the past.

Indeed, there is significant and consistent support for mixed housing in opinion polls. For example, the most recent life and times survey in Northern Ireland shows that 83% of people here would prefer to live in mixed neighbourhoods

and believe that better relations would result from greater integration.

Housing Executive tenants are also surveyed every year, and those results also show that they want to live in mixed areas. The Alliance Party believes that, in order to achieve that, a landmark review of segregation in housing in Northern Ireland needs to be undertaken, with a view to producing a housing strategy for the next 20 years. Segregation here has emerged as a result of violence, fear and sectarianism over the past decades. It cannot be reversed quickly, and only a radical review of housing policy can provide the practical tools for how to end sectarian division in housing altogether.

So, what would a strategy look like that would promote and facilitate equality and sharing in order to eliminate discrimination and segregation? It will not be a question of setting quotas on every street or house. That would be forcing people to live in artificial environments. We are fully aware that other areas have Chinatowns or Little Italys and areas of ethnic diversity. What is unacceptable is not the specific character of a neighbourhood at a particular time, but the sense that it should be permanent or normal or that it is forced by either fear or poverty. We want to remove all barriers to mixed living in public spaces and protect all minorities, wherever they are.

We welcome the work that has already been undertaken by the Housing Executive around shared housing, such as the shared neighbourhood programme and the signing of shared future charters. No doubt, the Minister will refer to those. However, this is only the tip of the iceberg. A lot more needs to be done.

I want to take this opportunity to raise an issue that is of particular concern. The Housing Executive still states on its website that it supports the wishes of people who choose to live in single-identity or mixed neighbourhoods. That statement is simply not acceptable and undermines a lot of the good work that is going on. How exactly does the Housing Executive support those wishes for single-identity neighbourhoods when their focus should be on supporting people based on objective need? Let me put it another way. Are we to take it that if people asked for a white-only estate, the Housing Executive would support the wishes of people to live there? If people objected to disabled neighbours, would the Housing Executive support these wishes too? Of course not.

The perhaps innocent language of the Housing Executive fosters an acceptance of segregation and discrimination. If applied to any other category of persons under section 75, it would be a matter of international disgrace. This needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. The Housing Executive must promote and protect all housing as mixed. Every house and area should be open to people irrespective of background. Nowhere should be off limits for anyone, and there can be no tolerance of anyone claiming control over territory through the use of flags, etc. This has to be accompanied by a plan to ensure that all public facilities, including schools, shops, parks and workplaces, wherever they are located, are open to all.

6.45 pm

Shared housing standards need to be created in order to promote good relations and create a diverse, inclusive and

aspirational environment in which to live. I appreciate that, for new Housing Executive tenancy agreements, tenants are invited to sign a good neighbourhood agreement, where they pledge to respect and co-operate with their neighbours regardless of their religion, colour or creed. That is a welcome step, but it does not address long-term tenancy agreements, and work needs to be done to amend those existing agreements. When intimidation occurs, the knee-jerk response of authorities should not be to simply move the victim but to confront the perpetrators. New housing should be designed and built in a manner that is most likely to maximise the potential for sharing. New housing developments should be openly marketed as mixed or integrated.

That brings me to the recent announcement for housing on the Girdwood site. To say that we are disappointed would be a vast understatement. There was a real opportunity to do something really different on that site: to deliver a housing mix that included social housing distributed by need, and opportunities for affordable and market-rate housing so that the area could have a vibrant economic life. However, instead of grabbing that opportunity, we have a proposal that will perpetuate the sectarian divide. What a wonderful outcome after six years of waiting. Is that seriously the highest level of vision and change that we can muster for the poorer parts of Belfast? Instead of imagination and change, we unfortunately have the same old, same old from the DUP and Sinn Féin. Why are they continuing to do the same thing over and over and expecting different results? We all know what Einstein said about that.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Cochrane: I have quite a lot to get through, so no.

What we now have is the continued segregation of housing under the rhetoric of sharing. I am not sure at what point those parties will understand that the concept of a shared future is very different from that of a shared-out future.

I firmly believe that social housing should be allocated on need alone. We need to be practical and recognise that that will ultimately mean that there may be more people from one background than another living in an area. That does not mean that the area is not shared. The key task is to ensure that people may live in and use a site freely without belonging to the numerically dominant resident group. The focus should be on making spaces more inclusive and welcoming. That means having a robust policy on flags, emblems, murals and paramilitary memorabilia. Provision should also be made for equal access to any site for those living in and coming to the site, so that there are no chill factors to any access. That is what was required for the Girdwood site: a plan, matching the commitment of parties in Belfast City Council's application for Peace funding, that talks of a site that is genuinely open and shared throughout. However, that sort of permanent change will happen only when communities, politicians and statutory bodies work together to demonstrate a united policy on what is and is not acceptable. The Minister needs to lead the way on that and deliver results.

I accept that shared housing is only one of the ways in which we can tackle our segregated towns and cities, but changing the neighbourhoods in which people grow up would make huge inroads into building a truly shared future. Political

carve-ups must stop. Building a shared future must be at the forefront of ministerial decisions.

In response to the SDLP amendment, I have already stated that all housing should be allocated according to objective need and that the Girdwood site has the potential for so much more. I have also called for a review to inform the housing strategy in order to promote and facilitate equality and sharing. So although we can agree with the thrust of the amendment, we do not think that it adds anything to our original motion. Indeed, if anything, it weakens what we are calling for: an end to segregation.

Mr Durkan: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "current" and insert

"housing proposals in the Girdwood conceptual master plan, as announced on 21 May 2012; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to restore the previous programme for at least 200 houses to be allocated according to objective need and to bring forward proposals, as a central feature of the housing strategy, that give weight to the legitimate desire of many social housing tenants and future applicants to live in a shared community."

We are broadly supportive of the sentiment behind the motion proposed by the Alliance Party. As a party, the SDLP is committed to the delivery of a shared future for all citizens and residents of Northern Ireland. That must encompass many areas of life, including education, employment and, very significantly, housing. Indeed, as Ministers for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie and Alex Attwood did much to promote mixed housing. The reason we have chosen to amend the motion is that we believe that it does not go far enough or display enough cognisance of the core principle of social housing, which is need. I also do not share the view that we need a new separate strategy to facilitate equality and sharing in housing in order to eliminate discrimination and segregation.

I believe that segregation should be addressed in the forthcoming housing strategy. Last week saw the publication of the homelessness strategy, and we await an empty homes strategy and, of course, the review of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. We should not need a further strategy to compound this apparent paralysis through analysis.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for giving way. I am not suggesting a completely separate strategy; I am saying that we should be informing the strategy. The problem is that segregation took a long time to happen, and I am not sure how long the forthcoming housing strategy is set out for. It could take 20 years to rectify the problem, at which point it may need to feed in to its own strategy, but I do not suggest a separate one at this point.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for the intervention and take her point on board, as I did when she made her speech.

There is a tried, tested and trusted formula used to identify housing need and, therefore, where houses should be built and how many should be built. If the formula is adhered to, discrimination will not exist. If, or when, the formula is circumvented, that is when discrimination, or the perception of it, might rear its ugly head.

If the policy is outdated or imperfect, let us have an open debate on it, but there should not be any ministerial revisionism or the creation of new measures of housing need, such as regeneration, so that houses are built in areas where there is little demand, without full transparency. The aforementioned housing strategy should afford the opportunity for such a debate.

The Alliance Party's proposal that we commit to creating mixed housing is certainly not wrong, but it is a bit aspirational. Realistically, mixed housing is not achievable overnight, particularly in an area as divided as north Belfast. We are not oblivious to the feeling in that constituency or to the fear and suspicion that, regrettably, still exist between communities. We cannot force people to live side by side, but we must focus on the work that will break down barriers and gradually erode the division that plagues our society.

Mr Bell: I thank the Member for giving way, and I appreciate the remarks about fear and division in society. Will he tell us what contribution to ending fear and division does attendance at funerals, at which paramilitary masks and trappings are worn by members of the SDLP, seek to aid that process?

Mr Durkan: I do not believe that any members of the SDLP wore masks at funerals, although some may have attended golf clubs in their time — I do not know whether that did anything to further community relations either. With that in mind, I welcome the Girdwood plan's proposals for shared space. There is much to be positive about in the plan. In seeking additional housing, we in no way wish to detract from the proposed cross-community facilities. I congratulate those involved in the negotiations to date on their undoubted commitment to improving the area. The breaking down of barriers between communities —

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Durkan: If you bear with me, I will let you in later. The cohesion unit of the Housing Executive was doing sterling work on breaking down barriers between communities, but it is my understanding that it has been dismantled. Perhaps the Minister will enlighten us further on that later.

There is a massive need for social housing in north Belfast, with over 1,300 people — 350 families — in housing stress. It is our duty to ensure that those people are housed. However, given that it is estimated that over 75% of those are Catholic and that houses are currently allocated to individuals on the basis of need, any housing built at Girdwood, regardless of its location on the site, will be predominantly allocated to and inhabited by nationalists. Mixed housing must be central to our thinking, but housing need must guide housing decisions, most of all in areas of acute need, such as north Belfast.

As was mentioned in the amendment, we believe that the housing strategy should look at the allocation system and give due weight to and points for the legitimate desire of many social housing tenants and future applicants to live in a shared community. The Girdwood site has been a political football for too long. There was an opportunity, shaped by the SDLP in its time in the Department for Social Development (DSD), to move decisively forward. Others held back and held up proposals. All this time, waiting lists have grown longer and need has grown more acute.

The SDLP has always been the party of housing and the friend of those in need. The previous programme for Girdwood represented a significant step towards alleviating what can only be described as a housing crisis. My party colleagues, previous Social Development Ministers, worked hard to deliver social housing to the Girdwood site. That was continuously thwarted by the DUP, which then had the audacity to brand the Ministers' respective efforts as electioneering.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Durkan: Go ahead.

Mr Humphrey: Could you tell the House what part of Ms Ritchie's blatant use of Girdwood as "a political football" — your comment — in the middle of a leadership election was not for political expediency? When he was Social Development Minister, what part of Minister Attwood's use of it as a tool to get elected and get his colleagues elected in North Belfast was not political expediency or using the site as a political football?

Mr Durkan: Our policy on it has not changed. The DUP said there would be no housing on Girdwood and now the DUP says there will be some housing on Girdwood.

Mr Humphrey: Answer the question.

Mr Durkan: It is not us who are being politically expedient here.

Mr Humphrey: No answer.

Mrs D Kelly: Gerrymandering.

Mr Durkan: You said it.

Eventually, a plan was taken forward, submitted and approved for the building of 220 units of social housing on the site. The money was in place, the design was in place and a housing association had a planning application at an advanced stage. Then, the Social Development Ministry was passed to the DUP. The common perception is that the current plans for the site involve a much smaller number of units; a number that is not reflective of the need in north Belfast. The lack of transparency and information around the current proposals has only served to heighten frustration and suspicion that something is not quite right. This morning, I received an answer to a written question on the number of houses proposed in the new master plan, and I have been informed that it will be determined by need. Therefore, one would think that 200 is the very lowest number of houses that we can expect.

Regardless of any deal that has been struck or why, the facts are clear: a huge number of families and individuals are in housing stress, and Girdwood offers a real opportunity to help as many of them as we can. That is an opportunity we cannot afford to miss. The SDLP believes that any dilution of the original plans for social housing at Girdwood would signify a dilution of the commitment of this Executive to tackle the housing crisis and to provide homes for those in need.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr Durkan: Gerry Kelly, a Sinn Féin Member for North Belfast, greeted Alex Attwood's proposals last year as a

good start towards providing much-needed homes in the area.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr Durkan: I believe it would be a very good start, and I implore the Assembly to support our amendment.

Mr Humphrey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I want to make a point in the interests of clarity and making sure that the Hansard report is absolutely correct. Mr Durkan said that there was a planning application put forward for Girdwood. There never was a planning application put forward. In the interests of accuracy, that point needs to be made.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your remarks are on record.

Ms P Bradley: I welcome the opportunity to speak this evening because I believe that housing need in Northern Ireland is an extremely important issue. We in Northern Ireland have more peace walls now than we had 10 years ago. If we do indeed have peace, we need to ask why this is. For mixed housing to work, the residents who live there have to want to be in a mixed housing area, and not be forced to do so.

The Girdwood proposals, along with the current strategies and programmes already implemented by the Housing Executive, will move our social housing stock to a realistic scenario where mixed housing can become a reality for those who want it.

7.00 pm

As has been said, 90% of working-class estates in Northern Ireland are segregated on a religious basis. That has come about because of our shared past. Although we are 14 years post-Belfast Agreement and the Assembly is firmly established, for far too many people in our society, the pain of the past is still current and still very real.

Society must move to address the issues behind segregation, and the majority of people in Northern Ireland would agree with that. However, we must not move so fast that people feel they are being left behind; we must only move as quickly as the slowest person. People who work in conflict resolution assert that it often takes as long as the conflict itself for a society to transform from a conflict situation to real peace. By that model, our society is in the early stages of the process, and we must not attempt to run before we can walk.

The Housing Executive's research has shown that many of their residents feel that relationships between the two main communities are not at the stage where they would be comfortable with mixed housing but that the community is moving in the correct direction.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. In her contribution, Mrs Cochrane talked about the community, politicians and statutory bodies working together in north Belfast to try to take the community forward. I assure her and this House that every party, including her own, on Belfast City Council recently voted for the community hub, for which we are seeking £10 million from the SEUPB. That involved elected representatives — MLAs, the MP and the Ulster Unionist Party councillor — working together to ensure that that happened, along with the chief executive

and directors of the council. That is an example of all parties in North Belfast, elected in North Belfast by the people in North Belfast, working together.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention.

Girdwood's current plans support the change that is evolving in our society, because although the two communities will live apart, they will share leisure and community facilities. That could pave the way for the site eventually becoming mixed housing at the pace dictated by the future residents. That evolution cannot be dictated by top-down politics. It must be led by the communities. That way, the change will be sustained and accepted by those most affected.

If the SDLP and the Alliance Party are correct that the majority of tenants want mixed housing, why is it not happening? The Housing Executive policy is to ask all applicants whether they want to choose a mixed-housing area, yet applicants are continually choosing to remain in areas with those of the same cultural identity. It is my hope that shared housing will become the norm and that segregation will be something that our children learn of in history lessons, but the time is not right for a blanket policy. We must wait while those most affected by the changes are ready, and we must address the many other issues in other sectors. For example, in education, our children are taught that segregation is normal behaviour from the age of four.

We have clear leadership from our First Minister in many areas so that we can build a shared future, and we, as a society, should work to further build upon that, albeit at a pace that is acceptable to those involved.

I oppose the motion and the amendment.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. I will speak against both the motion and the amendment, because they were tabled in response to the breakthrough on Girdwood and in an attempt to derail it.

Let me deal with a few facts. First of all, there was a four-party agreement, which involved the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party. Alban Maginness was at a number of meetings. There is a myth going around that Alban Maginness was only at the last meeting, but he was at a number of meetings. These things went on over a period of months. Indeed, Pat Convery, who is also a member of the SDLP, was at the meetings as well, although not all of them. Davy Browne represented the Ulster Unionist Party at those meetings.

As has been pointed out on a number of occasions, there were two SDLP Ministers —

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Mr G Kelly: No. I have only five minutes, and there has been a lot said beforehand.

There were two SDLP Ministers, but not a single brick has been laid in Girdwood; that is a fact. There were a number of all-party steering groups, of which I and others were members, and still not a single brick was laid during that six-year period. Outside politics, there were other groups who tried to move the process forward, but again nothing was done.

It is a fact that Sinn Féin's position is absolutely that it should be based on objective need. That is the basis of our policy. Every single party in the Assembly has now said publicly that objective need is at the core of its policy, as well as being a legal imperative.

Girdwood was never going to, and even now will not, sort out all the problems of housing need in north Belfast. Anybody who argues that it will is wrong. There is a huge waiting list. There are in the region of 2,400 families on it. Over 90% of the families on that waiting list are Catholic; that is a fact as well. However, I will not come here and argue against Protestant houses. If that 10% of the people on the list have the points, they should get the houses based on objective need, no matter what their creed, colour or religion. That is what objective need means.

North Belfast has also suffered over a period of years because of the lack of political agreement. I say that with respect to other areas in Belfast and elsewhere that can access funding because there is political agreement. What was this about? It was an attempt by all the political parties to try to get agreement to bring something into north Belfast. We decided to try to break the stalemate and unlock the potential for regeneration of the Girdwood site and elsewhere in north Belfast. The hub and the funding from the SEUPB gave us the opportunity to do that. Girdwood was always not about just housing. It was about housing, leisure, education, health and culture. In fact, the jail site has also been developed on that basis.

In any other circumstances, people would praise us for having a breakthrough and coming to an agreement for an area of massive disadvantage in north Belfast. As junior Minister, I was involved in the arguments and discussions around the Long Kesh/Maze site. We have succeeded in doing something here that we were not able to do there, which is to get cross-community support for having Gaelic, rugby and soccer on the same pitch. People talk about a shared area. Some 95% of everything that is going on at Girdwood is shared. Three schools, namely St Patrick's, BRA and St Malachy's, have bought into it as well. Let us be clear that if it does not work, we could be looking at a derelict site in the middle of north Belfast and we would badly need regeneration and housing for another 10 years. That is where we do not want to go.

The Alliance Party's position is that housing must be shared. No one here will disagree with shared housing. However, forced shared housing has already been proven not to work. Does the Alliance Party want more interfaces in north Belfast? Is that party even aware of where this area is? It does not have any political representation in north Belfast? We have something like 20 interfaces in north Belfast, and we are trying to improve, as opposed to going backwards.

Mrs Cochrane argued that housing should be based on objective need, as did every party. How does the Alliance Party square the breakdown of 90% versus 10% with saying that it has to be mixed housing? How do you possibly do that?

Mrs Cochrane: Will the Member give way?

Mr G Kelly: No.

Mrs Cochrane: You asked me a question.

Mr G Kelly: I know, but — OK, I will give way.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for giving way. At one point I said that we need to be practical and recognise that just because more people from one denomination than another live in an area does not mean that it is not shared. This is the thing. The concept of shared housing is not about 50:50. The concept of shared housing is about having an area in which people feel safe enough to live. It does not matter if it ends up with 80 people from one denomination and 20 from another. We are talking about sharing.

Mr G Kelly: Then there is no disagreement, I think.

Alasdair McDonnell and different SDLP Members said —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Draw your remarks to a close, please.

Mr G Kelly: Different SDLP Members, including Alasdair McDonnell, said that there are to be 200 houses, 220 houses and 350 houses. We got three different numbers out of the SDLP. We have had three other Members who do not live in north Belfast —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry, but your time is up.

Mr G Kelly: — speaking instead of Alban Maginness, when Alban Maginness —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr G Kelly: — is the person who agreed to the way forward. Sorry about that, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Copeland: I can confirm, unsurprisingly to some, that, on this occasion, we cannot support the motion. That is a matter of some regret. We as a party, and I as a person, have always been totally committed to the principles of a fair and just society, and remain so. That is evidenced to a degree by our continued involvement in the CSI working group.

The motion reads to me like a focused and specific criticism, particularly of the Girdwood conceptual master plan, a plan that has been arrived at by agreement and appears to enjoy a degree of local support, both political and community. The motion draws questionable and, quite frankly, illogical conclusions based on the interpretation of the plan, and it seeks to use those conclusions to the disadvantage of the plan itself. It must be said that that view is in some ways assisted by the vagueness of the plan, which the authors freely admit is a general concept at this stage.

The main failing of the Alliance Party proposal is the requirement implied in the motion, although not there, to apportion housing ultimately on some basis other than the principle of need and to extend, by some unspecified method, that mechanism to all housing. That is not only contrary to the current law but goes far beyond the remit of the Minister or his Department, especially if extended to private property. It places on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, which is responsible for 11.3% of properties, a very high level of responsibility.

The SDLP amendment has, in places, merit. However, it must be seen against the backdrop of the two previous SDLP Ministers, who were unable to reach, or perhaps were prevented from reaching, an agreement based on that very plan. The amendment echoes the totality of the SDLP

proposals. It mentions a figure of at least 200 houses but does not explain how the other social needs — housing is not north Belfast's only social need — will be met within the confines of the site. An examination of the combined waiting list for the lower Oldpark and New Lodge housing areas indicates a requirement on yesterday's date for 143 properties of differing types. For that reason, perhaps technical, and recognising and balancing the other social needs of the district, we cannot support the amendment. Nor can we endorse the dismal view of the Alliance Party that the envisaged shared facilities on the site will simply divide the community, although it must be said that I understand that to some degree, given the previous experience of shared open space at Mountpottinger green in east Belfast.

Mr A Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Copeland: I would rather not. I will at the end.

That shared open space failed because it was not properly managed, and it is now seen as the territory of one side of the community. We will be seeking further information from the Minister to ensure that that failure in facilities management is not repeated. I will bring you in, Alex.

We must advise the Minister that we reserve the right to keep a careful eye on the evolving master plan and the way in which it is outworked, and, if required, to comment further on the plan as it develops.

From May 2011, I have on my computer 14,455 e-mails concerning the apportionment of housing. That figure represents just under 3,000 cases. For those citizens and families, the overwhelming need is for a place to call home. For them, that soars above all other considerations. Those who restrict the supply or attach erroneous conditions to the allocation of social housing will find themselves challenged in future by those citizens and their families.

To echo, strangely, Mr Kelly, a family in need of a home is a family in need of a home, regardless of race, religion, colour, creed, gender or political opinion. That is the duty that we in this House must discharge. In our view, no quota system, no matter how carved up, contrived or fairly arrived at to reflect those differences, has a place in satisfying that need. I will give way to the Member.

7.15 pm

Mr A Maskey: I thank the Member for giving way. I know that he is trying to cover a lot of ground. Would he agree that although Judith Cochrane, in proposing the Alliance Party's motion, fleetingly referred to the fact that people who buy houses also choose to live in particular segregated communities almost, the motion almost seeks to impose quotas on people who would avail themselves of social housing, but it does not want to deal with that for people who choose to buy houses and choose where they wish to live?

Mr Copeland: I would not necessarily disagree with that view. I want to close by saying that I visited that area on Saturday by arrangement. As I drove through those streets, it took me back over 30 years, and I was surprised by the memories of a body found here, or a body found there, or a siege there, or a siege here, going right back to our foreman joiner being evacuated from Ballymena Street at the very

start of the Troubles. The people who live there now have not had much of a crack of the whip, and this investment, no matter how convoluted, is a vote of confidence in them and in that area.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will bring his remarks to a close, please.

Mr Copeland: So, I do believe that it should be given fair and due consideration.

Mr Ross: There are two main thrusts to the motion being debated this evening. The first is around the vision of a shared future and of areas in Northern Ireland where both communities feel comfortable living together. The second is the specifics of the Girdwood site. I will mention both briefly.

I will begin my comments on the back of what my colleague Paula Bradley said about the First Minister making it clear that he wanted to see a society in Northern Ireland where young people went to school together, grew up together, played together, worked together and lived together. I think that we all, right around the House, share that aspiration and want to see that happen. If we are to get to a better place in Northern Ireland, it will not matter to people whether they live beside someone from a different community or their child goes to school and is in a class full of people from different religious backgrounds. That is something that we all want to see.

Indeed, this morning I chaired an all-party group on rugby. The recent success of the Ulster rugby team and the support that it has had from every section of the community and from different areas across Northern Ireland proves that the community has moved on. It is not something that would have happened 10 years ago, but, today, members of the nationalist community feel very comfortable supporting the Ulster rugby team. Many of them made the trip to Dublin or to Twickenham for the final, and I think that that shows progress.

These things do not happen because the Government tell people to do them. They happen because people feel more confident and more comfortable and they have a desire and their aspirations change. That is how the community is coming together in Northern Ireland. There is, of course, a role for politicians and political leadership to play, but it is the decision of the people on the ground themselves to come together that is important.

My colleague also mentioned peace walls. I meet lots of groups here at Stormont, particularly groups from outside Northern Ireland, from England, Scotland and Wales, or from elsewhere in Europe or the United States. They often ask why the peace walls cannot come down if we live in a peaceful Northern Ireland. I do not think that too many people who live along the peace walls would say that their long-term aspiration is to keep those walls up. The vast majority want to see the walls come down. However, we have to be realistic and recognise that many people who live in the communities where there are peace walls have genuine concerns about their safety. When bricks and bottles are thrown over walls in the evenings, they fear for their safety. That is why, in the short term, they want those walls there until the community settles down and they are confident enough for those walls to come down. The aspiration is there, and that is important as well.

I think it is very dangerous for politicians to not listen to the concerns of the people on the ground. It is all very well to show leadership, but if the Alliance Party considers leadership to be telling people that those walls should come down, telling people that they should be living together and telling people that they should not be able to choose for themselves whether they want to live in an area that has a majority of people from their own community, I do not think that that is the role of politicians. People must be given the choice to make their own decisions, and that is fundamental to the way that we operate this Assembly.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: Certainly.

Mr Lyttle: What is the difference between protecting the right to choose a single-identity neighbourhood and giving somebody the right to choose a single-race neighbourhood?

Mr Ross: There was a very specific issue in Northern Ireland over the conflict about political and community background. If the Member wants to try to widen this out into issues that have not been prevalent in Northern Ireland, it shows that he is trying to play games. We need to be realistic about the difficulties that we have had in Northern Ireland. There is a very serious difficulty with community background and with why people want to live in areas that are largely of their own community background. He must recognise that there is a real issue with that. If he does not, I would be very concerned.

I listened to Mr Maskey's point. It is important to say that segregation in housing happens not just in working-class areas. Indeed, he made the point that the Alliance Party seeks to have people living together even if they do not particularly want to but that it would impact only those who are looking for social housing. The fact is that, right across Northern Ireland, whether working-class or middle-class areas are involved, people choose to live in areas that are largely representative of their own background. We do not want to see that continuing into the future; we want to see people moving away from that.

Dr McDonnell: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: Yes.

Dr McDonnell: Is he suggesting that south Belfast is in some way abnormal because working-class and middle-class people choose to live together in mixed areas?

Mr Ross: It is certainly not abnormal; I have not mentioned that area at all. I am simply reflecting the facts, which show that, when we look at areas right across Northern Ireland, we see that the norm is that people want to live in their own communities. We do not want to see that continuing for ever, but it is a simple reality on the ground. Indeed, in areas where mixed housing has been pioneered, over time we have seen that those areas have, largely speaking, changed in composition and that one community has become increasingly dominant over the other. That is a simple reality. I am not saying that I agree with it, but it is a simple reality on the ground. I think that it is important that we recognise that.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: I will not give way. I really need to make some progress. I have 15 seconds left, and I have given way quite well.

On the specifics of Girdwood, I am not from north Belfast, and I was not involved in the discussions that happened there. However, it was a significant and good thing that parties, including the SDLP, were able to come together to find agreement —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr Ross: — on a site that had been left derelict for some time.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr Ross: I think that that was a very positive thing. It is very disappointing that the SDLP is now trying —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr Ross: — to back away from that, for whatever reason or political motivation.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry, Mr Ross; your time is up.

Mr Ross: It is very disappointing.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The issue of shared space has been a topic that all parties have focused on for many years. There have been many different opinions on how we find a solution to what can be a contentious issue.

The motion from the Alliance Party would have placed a duty on the Housing Executive to facilitate the creation of mixed-housing developments. The opportunistic amended motion on the development of a strategic plan for the Girdwood site in north Belfast will be viewed by many as taking advantage of a difficult and sensitive issue. Since the announcement was first made that the site would be available for development, there have been many different attempts to bring together cross-community and cross-political opinion to work on a vision for the development of this substantial piece of land. It will offer leisure facilities, industry and housing, and it will provide substantial employment to what is an area of high social deprivation.

I commend those who were involved in the working group. Over many months of hard work, they came up with a plan on the way forward for this multipurpose site. The group was made up of the four political parties that were elected to represent the constituency of North Belfast: the DUP, the SDLP, the Ulster Unionist Party and Sinn Féin. Of course, the Alliance Party has no elected representatives in that area. I am sure that many in North Belfast will breathe a sigh of relief about that. I am also convinced that, had that party representation on the working group, Girdwood would have remained a wasteland, with little possibility of moving the project forward.

The SDLP amendment is not only a manipulation of the issue but an attempt to cover its embarrassment over how it supported and then did not support the project. My colleague Gerry Kelly more than dealt with its confusing manipulation of the issue.

As for the Alliance Party's extended motion, I am sure that every person would like the opportunity to live in an area that is multireligious and multicultural. Alliance Party Members mentioned surveys that indicated that 83% of the people who were questioned said that they would like to live in a mixed area. That is a great aspiration to have, and we must all work towards the day when we can achieve that.

Alex Maskey said that people choose to live in areas where they feel safe, whether in private or social housing, but in the here and now, it is naive to believe that a motion that is debated in this Assembly will deal with the serious divisions in our society. It will take hard work and commitment to achieve that. At present, the most important things on most people's minds in north and west Belfast and in many other areas throughout the North are growing unemployment, the impact that welfare cuts will have on their ability to provide for their families and the lack of social housing.

I live in and represent an area in which many people are waiting to be housed. In fact, all the available temporary accommodation is full to capacity across Belfast. Many of the people on the waiting list are young parents who will remain in hostels for some years and face an uphill battle to be housed. Waiting lists are sitting at over 40,000, the numbers of those who declare themselves homeless are at record levels, there are over 20,000 applications a year, and there is serious under-provision of social housing. That paints a serious picture.

It is essential that social housing is allocated on the basis of need. To do otherwise will create serious social problems for those families who are affected and the communities in which they live. We have a situation where we could have a mother, a father and their young children living with other members of the same family and their children in the same house. This is a throwback to the 1950s. The Alliance Party motion would condemn these people to a lifetime of homelessness. It does not recognise their plight and the importance of the allocation of resources on the basis of objective need.

In its rush to force communities together, the Alliance Party refuses to recognise the consequences of its demands. The allocation of housing must identify the serious need that exists and allow scant resources to be directed where they are required. In North Belfast, as Gerry Kelly said, over 90% of the housing waiting list is among the nationalist community. Not to allocate resources on the basis of need would infringe on the human rights of those who are languishing in poor and overcrowded conditions. In West Belfast, the area that I represent, the waiting lists grow, problems get worse and fewer houses are being built.

The Alliance Party's energy would be better spent if it focused on the issue of how to build more social housing. This Assembly is in the process of overseeing the biggest change to housing in the North for 40 years. The Housing Executive review gives us an opportunity for a new beginning in housing provision —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr F McCann: — and the possibility of creating new structures that could provide the additional social housing and affordable housing that we require.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr Humphrey: I speak as a North Belfast representative and I oppose the Alliance Party motion and the SDLP amendment. In March 2006, an advisory group was set up by the Government, and in August 2007, the group produced a draft master plan that was launched on 16 October 2007. The plan had envisaged a shared site that was accessible to both communities with a variety of uses for the benefit of the entire community, based on the Dunlop/Toner report produced by those two eminent clergymen. The whole idea was to regenerate residential areas adjacent to the site in lower Oldpark, lower Shankill, Cliftonville and the Antrim Road. Housing was the issue that remained unresolved. Unfortunately, the agreement that emerged from the master plan was torn up by Ms Margaret Ritchie in a most unhelpful way during her hustings for the leadership of the SDLP.

I want to make it very clear to the House that the DUP is committed to building a shared site and a shared future in the spirit of the Dunlop/Toner report. Over the past number of weeks, it has been difficult for me to sit here as a representative for the greater Shankill area and listen to some of the contributions from SDLP representatives, because neither Margaret Ritchie nor Alex Attwood developed the site in any way. Over the past 13 years, the SDLP and Mr Attwood prevented social housing from being built for older people and infirm people on the Somervale site and insisted that a peace wall be built before any housing could be placed there.

During this process over the past number of months, my party has spoken to communities, churches, institutions, schools, education and library boards, Belfast City Council and the SEUPB.

7.30 pm

With regard to Girdwood, I, with colleagues from the SDLP, the Ulster Unionist Party and Sinn Féin, met to discuss issues pertaining to north Belfast — not just Girdwood but Crumlin Road jail, the cultural corridor, the north foreshore and, of course, Girdwood in the general context of the development of north Belfast. We agreed a position to develop Girdwood with regard to sport, leisure, education, the economy and housing.

The SDLP's position re Girdwood is not consistent. It lacks clarity, is partisan and is, frankly, confused. I believe that what you say privately is what you say publicly, and I take real exception to the untruth that was peddled about a trade-off between the politicians around the table in relation to Girdwood and the Maze. That is simply untrue, and the leadership of the SDLP should be ashamed of their comments on that issue.

I have worked with all parties in north Belfast, and local communities in the lower Oldpark and the lower Shankill, to develop that site. The reality, though, is that I live in, work in and represent North Belfast. North Belfast is a deeply divided constituency. It has more peace walls and interfaces than any other and suffered 21% of the murders during the Troubles. It is our job — those elected to serve the people of North Belfast — to give leadership and confidence. Girdwood was a start to that process.

I make it very clear that it will happen whether the SDLP is with us or not. We owe it to the people of the constituency and the people who suffered so much to deliver, develop, and provide confidence, community coherence and

leadership. We must seek to establish and build a normal society across Northern Ireland, but particularly in north Belfast because she has suffered so much. We must build a society that is at peace with itself. That will include looking at issues such as education and the divisions in the education sector; employment; recreation; parks and leisure space; economic regeneration; the environment; and, yes, housing.

This is a great opportunity for north Belfast. Political football would not come in to it in how it has been played and, unfortunately over the past number of weeks, confidence has been damaged. But the people who live in lower Oldpark and lower Shankill — and I met them on an ongoing basis recently — want this to work. They have my confidence; I have their confidence. I will ensure that we will deliver a better place for them to live and for their children to grow up.

Mr A Maginness: I was born and bred in north Belfast. In fact, I was born at the junction of Clifton Park Avenue and Cliftonville Road, not very far from the Girdwood site. I spent all my adult life in north Belfast serving the people of north Belfast over the past 27 years, the past 14 years in this Assembly. I have great affection for those people, Catholic and Protestant, and I want to see them live together as a united community.

I am saddened by the deep divisions that have historically been imposed on those people. I want to highlight that in my contribution. I had two major aims during the course of my public representation. One was to bring an end to sectarian divisions in north Belfast, to heal the wounds and create a reconciled society. The other was to solve the appalling housing problem in north Belfast. That has been evidenced by the Housing Executive. There are 1,300 people under housing stress; 350 families. So, there is a real need for that problem to be tackled. There is a real social need for those families to be accommodated. Without a house, you have no human dignity. That is the reality of the situation.

Girdwood is, in fact, emblematic of the issues that I raised. The division in north Belfast is, at times, so intense that it seems that practically every blade of grass, every brick, every street and every road is contested — that north Belfast itself is a contested space — and we have to end that.

Girdwood has great potential, which, ultimately, can be fully realised, and my party and I are determined to make that a reality by regenerating the Girdwood site. Its lack of regeneration has lasted too long. Girdwood as a site will simply not go away.

As Mark Durkan said, there are positive aspects to the Girdwood plan, such as the community hub, which is supported by the Special EU Programmes Body. That will be a cross-community facility designed to engage both communities and help in the process of reconciliation. In addition, the plans for sports facilities for local schools and mixed development for business units are good, and we support them.

However, the basic weakness in the plan is in relation to housing. It is vague and lacks definition about the extent and number of houses that will be built on the site. That is the central objection of the SDLP to the plan as it stands, and I, together with my party, seek to maximise

housing on that site that is reflective of the plan and the commitment of our two previous SDLP Social Development Ministers. In particular, in 2011, the then Minister for Social Development, Alex Attwood, had a plan to build over 200 houses, and the Housing Executive was at an advanced stage of preparation to deliver that programme. If that plan had gone ahead, we would have no problems today because houses would have started to be built on that site and housing need would have been addressed.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: I cannot.

The fact that the current Minister and the DUP have accepted the need to build on that site is at least a start. I recognise that, and my party recognises that. However, it is not an end point but a starting point for a serious review of housing based on social need on that site. As we know, the majority of people on the housing waiting list are Catholic people who need to be accommodated. It is their right to be accommodated to give them decency and dignity in this life.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: I cannot.

Some have said that the plans —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr A Maginness: — will not solve our housing problem in north Belfast. That may be, but it will make a good dent in the problem.

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

Mr A Maginness: I believe that, eventually, we can overcome the problem and unite our community.

Mr Easton: I am rather surprised at the comments by the Members opposite, especially given that Mr Maginness signed the press release to say that he was supporting the Girdwood plans and took part in the photograph. He said that he recognised that there was a flaw in it. For the past several years, he does not seem to have recognised that flaw, and I wonder what he has been doing for the past two years. Maybe he can explain the previous Minister's proposals for 220 houses.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Easton: No. You would not give way to me, so sit down.

The previous Minister's proposals for 220 houses did not address the social needs of that community. There were no leisure facilities, no socio-economic plans and no community facilities in those plans, yet we have a new proposal that is backed by the local community groups and the vast majority of people in north Belfast that addresses many of the issues that the previous plan did not. The SDLP should be very ashamed of its performance today; its position is unviable.

In an ideal world, all social housing could be integrated, and we could have a genuine shared space. However, sadly, 40 years of conflict have left us with a legacy that means that, for many people, the thought of living with the other side comes with an element of fear and mistrust. Research

by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive indicated that although one third of respondents were open to the idea of their area becoming mixed, there emerged a general sense of uneasiness that our society in Northern Ireland was not yet ready for that. Respondents felt that there was a real need for confidence-building measures, starting with such things as shared facilities, which, I believe, the current proposals include.

We must also remember that although the majority in Northern Ireland have embraced the peace process, we still have a small element of dissident groups that are working to stall the process on both sides of the community. It is important that that small number not be allowed to derail the good work that has been done, but we must remember that for some people living in mixed social housing is simply still not a safe option. Such people have as much right as anybody else to social housing; that is why Girdwood can have a positive impact. Two communities residing in close proximity with no physical barriers and sharing leisure and community facilities can help to work on the relationship building that has been identified as needed.

Girdwood is a small step towards getting two communities residing in close proximity in an area that has seen a lot of suffering during the conflict and has a number of so-called peace walls and interfaces. This housing will help to alleviate real housing need in the area, while supporting and promoting the building of relationships between the two main communities in an environment in which residents can feel safe. Ideally, in time, the future residents may themselves decide whether the housing sections should become mixed. With the continued support from all statutory agencies involved, that ambition can be realised. However, it is not right to force such an idea on the future residents who, right now, just want a house in an area where they feel safe living.

The SDLP and the Alliance Party would like us to be able to jump straight in and remove right away all segregation in Northern Ireland's social housing stock; they would no doubt also like the Minister to use the same magic wand that solves all housing problems. Sadly, the SDLP has forgotten that it was involved in the development of the plans for Girdwood; its Minister endorsed the plans of his own free will. Therefore, totally untrue claims in the press of there being some deal involving Girdwood and the Maze site surprised many.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. I again challenge the SDLP as I did on the radio but they were not able to respond: can the SDLP provide this evening the evidence of a deal over Girdwood and the Maze?

Mr Easton: I thank the Member for his contribution. There is absolutely no evidence, and the SDLP has failed to answer. The Alliance Party just wants us to push everybody together in one fell swoop. However, its Members fail to recognise the deep mistrust that still haunts our communities. They have forgotten that thousands of Protestants were removed from north Belfast in the past. They need to get real and to live in the real world, where my party and I live and which we recognise.

Conflict resolution cannot be done quickly, nor can people be forced to move at a quicker pace than they are prepared to go. To force mixed housing on a social housing sector

could result in housing stock remaining empty if people simply refuse to live in mixed areas. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Department have not been complacent in promoting mixed housing. The current 30 shared neighbourhoods under the Shared Neighbourhood programme house approximately 70,000 residents. There is also the Building Relationships in Communities project, which works in contested areas to promote understanding and reduce tensions.

We must indeed show leadership in this matter, but we must remember to keep checking that the community is following us. We can lead only if others follow. Ninety per cent of our working-class estates are segregated; our education is segregated; our sports facilities and many other things are segregated. Social housing, therefore, is not the only aspect of communities and societies that is segregated. By trying to force people into mixed housing before they are ready to go will create more problems than it solves.

Mr Copeland: Thank you for giving way. Will the Member join me in recognising that when we talk about the socially rented sector, we are talking about less than 15% of the housing stock, and 3.3% of that resides with housing associations and 11.3% with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive? The problem cannot be viewed in isolation, so whatever is proposed will have to take those figures into account.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry, the Member's time is up.

Mr Easton: Thank you.

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): First, I thank each of the Members who contributed to the debate. It is not possible to respond to everything that has been said, but I will respond to comments made by a couple of the contributors, particularly from the SDLP ranks. On other matters, I may write directly to Members.

My initial response to the motion was one of surprise; the amendment also, in some ways, surprises me. Only a few short weeks ago, I had to defend myself against unfounded allegations that I would seek to allocate housing in north Belfast on the basis of community background and not on need. This week, I am being asked to take measures to facilitate and protect mixed housing areas which take no cognisance of need, and all right-thinking Members will understand my bewilderment.

7.45 pm

So let me dispel the myth that the motion seeks to perpetuate. There are no:

“segregated housing proposals in the Girdwood conceptual master plan”.

I emphasise that there are no such proposals. Housing need remains the only criterion in the allocation of social housing, and Girdwood will be no different.

It may be helpful if I place the motion in the context of the housing selection scheme, a statutory scheme which makes provision for determining the order in which prospective tenants of the Housing Executive's dwellings are to be granted tenancy of those dwellings. It ranks applicants on a waiting list used by all participating landlords, including housing associations, on a point basis in descending order

according to housing need. That has been the cornerstone of the allocation process over the last 40 years and has ensured that housing has been accessible to all those most in need of a home.

The motion calls for:

"a landmark review of segregation in housing".

There have been a plethora of studies and reports completed on the segregation that exists in social housing here. I am not clear about the value of yet another review which will tell us what we already know: that at least 90% of social housing here remains segregated on religious grounds. In the case of Belfast, the figure is 94%. There is a reason for that: the majority of social housing tenants here do not yet feel that it is practicable or safe to make housing decisions purely on the availability of a house without considering the identity of neighbours. That is a fact that no amount of posturing or posing will change.

Let me be clear. There are no levers available that can force mixed housing on anyone. Only through the agreement of people to live together, where they believe it is safe and desirable to do so, can that be achieved. All social housing in Northern Ireland, irrespective of where it is located, is allocated in accordance with the housing selection scheme on the basis of need. The legislation is unequivocal on that point. The Fair Employment and Treatment Order (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 do not permit the allocation of housing on any basis other than need. In addition, section 76 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 makes it:

"unlawful for a public authority"

— such as the Housing Executive:

"to discriminate, or to aid or incite another person to discriminate, against a person or class of person on the ground of religious belief".

Legislative change would be required to give priority for housing on the basis of an applicant's religion.

As to the promotion and creation of mixed housing, I have no desire to bring forward legislation that will force people to live together. Given the history of the last 40 years, that would be madness and ignore the reality of life in Northern Ireland. The point was well made by several contributors earlier that this is not an issue simply in the social housing sector, which is one of the smaller sectors. It is an issue that exists right across society in Northern Ireland, even in private housing areas, and it was acknowledged by Judith Cochrane that that was the case, but she seems determined to home in on the area of social housing. I have not yet heard her proposals as to how we are going to produce mixed housing — "shared housing", as she puts it — in the context of private developments.

Mrs Cochrane: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: I will, but it had better be quick.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for giving way. I did talk about the Girdwood site, and I did say that there was an opportunity there to deliver not just social housing but housing of mixed tenure. There was an opportunity to do something different there.

Mr McCausland: I will come back to that point and answer it in due course.

The Housing Executive and housing associations are subject to the legal requirements imposed upon them and the advice available to me remains that article 29 of the Fair Employment and Treatment Order (Amendment) Regulations 2003 prohibits discrimination in the disposal and management of premises in Northern Ireland, regardless of how seemingly desirable the end objective. I would have thought that, rather than expressing "serious concern", the Assembly would have welcomed the ongoing commitment to our objective pursuit of meeting housing need over and above any other consideration. Of course there are clear opportunities for housing to play a fuller role in helping to create safe and sustainable communities where people want to live.

That is why my new housing strategy will focus on creating communities of good neighbours rather than areas of forced coexistence.

If we are genuinely interested in promoting and protecting "all housing as mixed", I believe that we need to consider mixed housing in its widest context. I do not believe that we should continue to build single tenure estates of social housing alone as that can often further segregate people. I want to see how we can develop more social and affordable housing alongside each other so that people can have greater choice and flexibility about where they live and who they live beside. It is not about forcing anything on anyone. We need to allow people to share housing because they want to, not because government says that they must. I want to explore how we can provide choice for people to come together in a more natural way and not through creating a duty that simply will not work.

Section 75(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 already places a duty on all public authorities to promote good relations, and I do not think that we need to add further to that. I share the view that mixed communities are more sustainable communities. However, housing alone cannot address the segregation in our society. We need to be more imaginative if we are to genuinely make a difference and improve not just housing but training, employment and education for people in those communities. Those types of communities will attract people to live side by side.

I will get back to the issue of Girdwood, and some of its history has been identified already by William Humphrey. In 2007, Margaret Ritchie had a document that set out the vision that was agreed on a cross-community basis of a shared site, accessible to both communities and with a variety of uses. The draft master plan acknowledged that there was no agreement on housing, and the foreword to the document, which was a cross-community document and a pan-political document, said:

"It is clear that much greater consideration needs to be given to the issue of housing if communities are to be assured that the site will not become the preserve of one side or the other. ... cross-community support will be vital ... particularly with regard to housing."

It also said that cross-community dialogue on housing should continue. It further said that regeneration of the deprived residential areas adjacent to the site was crucially important.

Mark Durkan absolutely failed to grasp the fact that there is a connection between housing and regeneration. The key issue for me is that there was a cross-community agreement in 2007 and Margaret Ritchie simply took it, tore it up, shredded it and abandoned all the good work that had been carried out to that point. Instead, she sat on the issue for a couple of years and did nothing. She returned to it in February 2010 when she was making a bid to become party leader. The party was meeting in Newcastle and top of the agenda was the election of a new leader. Margaret Ritchie was one of the candidates, and what did she say on Friday 5 February, the opening day of the conference? She said:

"I have instructed the Housing Executive to appoint a Housing Association to commence the work to build at least 200 new social homes ... the housing will now proceed."

She returned to the matter again, and I will come to that in a moment. In fact, she was so well informed that she did not even know the size of the site. She said that it was 27 acres: Girdwood is actually 14 acres. But then, when someone is so cavalier with figures, why would they worry about doubling the size of the site? The following Tuesday, she answered a question from Alban Maginness and said —

Mr Durkan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: No. You are here to listen, boy.

She said:

"I understand that the provision of housing on the Girdwood site remains contentious ... I have instructed the Housing Executive to appoint a housing association to begin working on the development of 200 social houses on the site."

Did she deliver on anything? She could actually deliver on nothing. It was a case, quite frankly, of personal political ambition triumphing over good relations.

The fact is that a lot of work needed to be done, and we need to continue that good work. We need to undo the damage that was one by the SDLP at that time by Margaret Ritchie and by Alex Attwood, who also managed to make an electioneering speech in regard to Girdwood, as was pointed out by William Humphrey, and, at the same time, stand in the way and block the construction of pensioners' bungalows on the Somervale site. Sadly, some of the pensioners who had their names down for those bungalows are no longer with us: they have passed away.

They never got to see one of those bungalows, because Alex Attwood fought and fought to stop them being built.

Let us get back to the site. The housing will be allocated on a sectarian or quota basis. That is what is being said. It would not be allocated on the basis of housing need. Housing need remains the only criterion in the allocation of social housing, and Girdwood will be no different.

It is sometimes suggested that there is a problem in having some houses constructed in lower Oldpark. That seems to be a big issue. Michael Copeland went round and took a look at that area. It is a disgrace, and an indictment of the Department for Social Development in its previous form, that people were condemned, year after year after year, to live in dereliction because Margaret Ritchie and Alex Attwood

did nothing whatsoever for them. You have only to go round those streets to see the dereliction and the rubble on the ground. It was not just in that area. There were other areas in which people were condemned to live in dereliction, year after year. Let us face the fact: the regeneration of those areas is crucial and right, not just because people should live in a decent standard of accommodation and in a decent environment but because — if he listened more, Mark Durkan might actually learn something — if we are going to see the successful regeneration of the jail in Girdwood as an international attraction, you cannot bring international visitors and tourists to a project, a very good iconic project, that is surrounded by dereliction. That is an impossibility. It was pointed out by everybody in the original document that the two things go together.

Mr Copeland: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: Be quick, please; I am running out of time.

Mr Copeland: Thank you for allowing me to put a point to you. You will remember that I asked you to specifically address the management. Do you agree that the management of the open space in between is the key to this? In east Belfast, Mountpottinger green has been nothing but a battlefield.

Mr McCausland: I welcome the Member's intervention. I assure him that there is cross-community agreement on the issue. How the situation is managed is crucial.

Again, Mr Durkan is not listening. He is doing too much talking. First — *[Interruption.]* First of all, he suggested that the cohesion unit was dismantled. That is simply not true. It has not been dismantled, despite your suggestion that it has been. No, it has not. Secondly, he said that a planning application was at an advanced stage. There was no planning permission. Quite frankly — *[Interruption.]* — no planning application was even in, yet we are told by him that it was at an advanced stage.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Dr McDonnell: Chair, will you take them under control, please?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. No more talking across the Chamber. Remarks must be through the Chair.

Mr McCausland: I am quite happy to speak to the Member directly.

There was no planning application there at all. So, that is wrong about the cohesion unit, wrong about the planning application, which does not exist, and wrong in so far as the need for housing in north Belfast will not all be met on that site. It will be met on a variety of sites right across north Belfast, and there are quite a number of them.

Dr McDonnell: Where?

Mr McCausland: Mr McDonnell does not know the geography of north Belfast and has not bothered to read the social housing development programme, which lists all the sites.

Dr McDonnell: Where?

Mr McCausland: If the Member would bother to read —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Mr McCausland: Thank you. I am glad that you put your party member in order.

The fact is —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry. I have to point out to you that I do it fairly for all parties. There is no evidence that I do it otherwise.

Mr McCausland: I encourage the leader of the SDLP to read the social housing development programme. He might find out where the sites are, because they are all listed, one by one, in that document.

The fact is that, regrettably, it is an area in that part of north Belfast that has problems. With this agreement, we are trying to get a site, 95% of which will be shared, to address a lot of needs and improve the situation.

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

Mr McCausland: Sadly, there are people in that area who still have to face trouble at night. A gentleman had his door kicked in —

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

Mr McCausland: There are also problems there of interface violence, which need to be recognised. It is not necessarily the same as some of the other spots. I hope, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I have covered all the points brought up.

8.00 pm

Mr P Ramsey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I allowed the Minister to finish his statement. Will you and the Speaker's Office reflect on some of the comments that were directed towards Mark Durkan? They were demeaning and disrespectful.

Mr Humphrey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can I deal with this point of order first? *[Laughter.]* I am not into multitasking at 8.00 pm. We will certainly reflect on the Hansard report. I will take the second point of order now.

Mr Humphrey: I would like clarification for the House, so that we all know. A number of Members tried to make interventions when the Minister was speaking, and they asked him to give way. Is it not the procedure of the House for Members to stand and ask the Minister or another contributor to give way, and not to remain sedentary and ask them to give way, and then complain when they do not?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the Member will agree that we can strive for perfection and that never a day goes past that we cannot improve. No doubt, other Members have heard your comments.

Dr McDonnell: I am a little bewildered, but not confused; I am absolutely flabbergasted, because the past hour or so has taken us back 44 years to a conflict over housing and the need for housing that led to a very difficult period in our history. It appears that we have learned nothing. There have been many attempts here to create all sorts of sideshows, distractions, fog, myth and confusion, with the sole purpose

of distracting from the facts surrounding Girdwood. This evening, we have seen repeated attempts in the Chamber to deflect from the main issue and the issue that needs to be addressed.

The facts are clear that there is an irrefutable housing crisis in north Belfast, and we should never lose sight of those facts. According to all objective measures and proven need, there is an acute shortage of houses. People who deserve better have no homes. Young families with children have no homes. Earlier, my colleagues pointed out that there is something in the region of 2,400 people on the housing waiting list in north Belfast. Nobody has refuted that. It would have been helpful had someone had the information to refute that, but it appears that that cannot be refuted. More than half of those people are in housing stress or emergency situations. That adds up to 350 families in housing crisis.

We can toy about with the sectarian balance of where the need is and where it is not, but I strongly endorse the sentiment of the original motion with regard to sharing housing and the need to create shared housing. The only response that I am getting from across the Chamber is from Members saying that we should not try to share housing because it might not work or because they think it would not work. We can lay all sorts of claims to sharing all sorts of things in theory, but not in practice.

Hundreds of families in north Belfast are forced to live in hostels that are located not very far from something that is very rare in our city — a large open space. As some of my colleagues behind me have pointed out, there were plans for that space. Yes, we could split hairs about how far advanced those plans were or whether there was a planning application. There were plans for 220 social houses on that site. I want to relieve Gerry Kelly's problem with numbers, because it seems to be the only answer that he throws into the fog. There was room for more than 220 houses on the site. Perhaps there was room on the site for some private development of socially affordable houses that people might be able to buy, but there was a decision made to build 220 social houses on that site. That is where there has been confusion on the number; there was space for more housing.

Responding to the housing stress by using the Girdwood site is about doing the right thing, the decent thing and the honourable thing. As far as I am concerned, settling on some sort of unspecified couple of dozen houses stuck in the corner of the Girdwood site is buying a pig in a poke.

Mr G Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Dr McDonnell: No. I am sorry, Gerry. You were not too keen to give way earlier. I want to make it quite clear that, whatever others may think or allege, and whatever interpretation others might put on it, we are quite capable of speaking for ourselves.

A cornerstone of the foundation of the SDLP was the principle of building and allocating houses on the basis of proven need not creed, and building houses where people needed them and giving them to those who needed them.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is almost up.

Dr McDonnell: That is the same principle today as it was 44 years ago. The blatant denial of a housing programme at Girdwood offends against everything that is there.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr Lyttle: I will start by supporting the expression of concern about the way in which Members of this legislative Assembly have been addressed by some colleagues today, and I look forward to you looking into that, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I thank everyone for their contributions on the motion, some of which have been much more accurate than others. The overriding concern that we seek to express is that the House needs to get real about the residential segregation that exists in Northern Ireland and recognise that this is one of the biggest challenges to peace, progress and a shared future. As the Minister rightly says, it is not just social housing; it is private sector housing as well. Therefore, any response must be overarched by the strongest possible community relations strategy, with a clear vision and targets for tackling division and building a shared Northern Ireland. It might be worth noting, therefore, that, today, the DUP, Sinn Féin and the Ulster Unionist Party seem to have voted down most of the existing housing aims that are in the current CSI strategy.

Grainne Kelly's University of Ulster report entitled 'Progressing Good Relations and Reconciliation in Post-Agreement Northern Ireland' sets out that we remain a very deeply divided society, polarised on some of the most institutionalised structures, including housing and education.

Mr A Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: No, I will not give way. I have a lot to get through.

The report challenges the Government to turn pilots and projects into ambitious and courageous public policy decisions that place integration at the heart of government delivery.

The Minister for Social Development is particularly responsible for residential integration. Although the Housing Executive has made significant progress, it is time, as the Kelly report states, for immediate and profound change in this area. Despite what Mr Ross, Ms Bradley, Mr McCann and the Minister said in relation to housing choice, 80% of people want to live in a mixed neighbourhood. The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey set that out, but, year on year, the Housing Executive continuous omnibus survey sets that out as well. Therefore, there has been some very inaccurate comment in that regard today in this House.

Social housing is 90% segregated, and it is getting worse in some areas, as has been mentioned. Therefore, the Alliance Party has proposed an expert review of housing in Northern Ireland in order to inform a serious housing strategy to tackle that gap. Judging by other MLAs' contributions today, they seem happy to leave that as it is, otherwise people will continue to live apart, not by choice but because there are no alternatives.

We are deluding ourselves if we think that we have done anywhere near enough to challenge the violence and the sectarian principles that have engineered residential division

in Northern Ireland. I will absolutely stand up for my belief that, freed from the threat of violence, intimidation and demarcation of territory, and with the establishment and protection of the principle that all public space, including housing, is shared, we can deliver the fundamental change envisaged by people who supported the Good Friday Agreement.

We have some good examples of work that has been done in that area. The Housing Executive shared neighbourhood pilot programme, as demonstrated by Wallace Consulting, has shown that people from different backgrounds have been brought together under key principles.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. There is a high level of noise, and I am having difficulty hearing the Member. If Members need a prolonged conversation, I suggest that you go outside. Otherwise, give Mr Lyttle a fair chance.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

It showed that people from different backgrounds have been brought together under the key principle and common vision that a sense of belonging for all, regardless of religion, race, age, disability, etc, can be possible. That has led to improved community relations and other benefits for areas. However, only 30 neighbourhoods were originally in that pilot, and approximately £900,000 of the £1 million of funding came from the International Fund for Ireland rather than the Northern Ireland Executive. The new DSD shared communities programme has only another 20 neighbourhoods, and, as far as I am aware, there is no additional government funding outside the existing Housing Executive budget to take that forward.

Most interestingly, the key finding of the evaluation of those programmes was that it was not religious balance that was central to the delivery of a mixed community but the explicit establishment of an area as mixed and the principles of living on which that is founded. That is sound policy justification, if any were needed, for the immediate removal of the Housing Executive policy to support the choice of people to live in single identity neighbourhoods.

As has been said already, we would not accept a government policy that supported the choice of people to live in single race neighbourhoods. There would be international outrage, and it would be a scandalous failure of political leadership in Northern Ireland if that were not addressed by community relations and housing strategies of the Executive.

So, what would a review and a strategy need to bring forward? We want to promote and facilitate mixed housing, and we want an international expert review of housing. We also need to recognise that separated housing in Northern Ireland is at least as deep a problem as any of those that face policing. It is absolutely not a question of quotas or forced integration, despite the misleading comments put forward today, which I am getting well used to from certain sections of the House. It is about removing barriers to mixed and shared neighbourhoods. Removal of the Housing Executive policy to support the choice of people to live in single identity neighbourhoods —

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: I have absolutely no intention of giving way to that side of the House. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Mr Lyttle: The establishment of the principle for the allocation of public housing should be on the basis of equal access and need — again, despite some of the comments made today — with an explicit commitment to promote and protect all housing as safe, shared, mixed and open to all, irrespective of background. There are established principles in the shared neighbourhood programme and the charter for all neighbourhoods that can be drawn upon.

We need strong political support for all agencies to tackle paramilitary control, intimidation and demarcation over segregated neighbourhoods, which serves only to embed fear in those neighbourhoods and to deter inward contact and investment. The Housing Executive has something like 350 incidents of intimidation a year. So, if we are looking for a reason why people are afraid and why they chose certain types of housing, that is it. We need to ask ourselves what we are doing to support the removal of illegal paramilitary flags and emblems and why we have such silence from certain representatives about those issues. We need a regulatory framework for the respectful and time-bound display of national flags.

In relation to Girdwood, in the week that my party sought confirmed agreement from — *[Interruption.]* Mr Deputy Speaker, is there any chance?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry; I was hoping at this late hour that Members would be nice to each other, and perhaps they will be. Can we agree now that shouting across the Chamber will end and that Mr Lyttle will be allowed to conclude his speech?

Mr Lyttle: Thanks very much, Deputy Speaker.

In the week that my party sought confirmed agreement from the CSI working group on the proposals outlined today and that those proposals would be adopted by the Northern Ireland Executive, the political parties that I was working with agreed to what seemed to be two separate housing areas that would be in place for over a generation on one of the few open sites available to us in Belfast, which is not an existing neighbourhood, but a blank canvas.

I fail to see how two separate housing areas, whatever way it is described, is consistent with the recommendation that we made to that working group that all public housing should be allocated on the basis of equal access, need and with the promotion and protection of mixed neighbourhoods.

I fail to see how the DUP and Sinn Féin are serious about mixed housing given their rejection of the motion. There is an opportunity to do something different, but, instead, we see more of the same. As I said, mixed neighbourhoods were delivered by the Housing Executive, and we know that they can be achieved, so it is extremely concerning that the DUP and Sinn Féin have not decided to produce proposals that would have moved a shared future forward.

8.15 pm

The fundamental abuse of the concept of sharing, if plans were to be selectively marketed by the Housing Executive to particular groups, is of particular concern. At present, on the basis of need and the waiting list, it is highly likely that social housing in the area would be taken up primarily

by Catholic residents. The key, however, is that the area is established, as per the Shared Neighbourhood programme, as mixed and open to all on the basis of need; that all residents are safe, welcome and free from any form of intimidation; and that any claims to exclusive control of the territory are countered. Major questions remain about the proposals for Girdwood housing, and they need to be answered by the Social Development Minister and the Housing Executive.

In conclusion, in 1998, 72% of people in Northern Ireland voted for an agreement that stated:

"An essential aspect of the reconciliation process is the promotion of ... tolerance at every level of society, including initiatives to facilitate ... integrated education and mixed housing."

Some 14 years later, I call on the Executive and Assembly to heighten the extent of their ambitions for this community and to start taking the courageous public policy decisions that place integration at the heart of government delivery, which the Good Friday Agreement mandated and the people of Northern Ireland deserve.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 17; Noes 62.

AYES

Mr Attwood, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Ramsey.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mrs D Kelly and Mr McDevitt.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Flanagan, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Mollo, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs Overend, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Sheehan, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms P Bradley and Mr Easton.

The following Member voted in both Lobbies and is therefore not counted in the result: Mr Agnew.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 18; Noes 62.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle,

Mr McCarthy, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone,
Mrs McKeivitt, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Ramsey.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Lo and Mr McCarthy.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Mr Boylan,
Ms Boyle, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland,
Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton,
Mr Elliott, Mr Flanagan, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner,
Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hilditch,
Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy,
Mr Kinahan, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann,
Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr I McCrea,
Mr McElduff, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McKay,
Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey,
Mr Molloy, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín,
Mr O'Dowd, Mrs Overend, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson,
Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Sheehan, Mr Storey, Mr Swann,
Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms P Bradley and Mr Easton.

Main Question accordingly negatived.

8.45 pm

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

Arms Trade Treaty

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

Mr McDevitt: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the strong contribution made by the UK Government as one of the driving forces behind the arms trade treaty; calls on the Prime Minister to publicly affirm his Government's commitment to the establishment of a robust human rights-compliant arms trade treaty in 2012; and further calls on the UK Government to insist, during the July 2012 formal negotiations, that the sale of arms shall not be authorised where there is a substantial risk that it will lead to serious violations of human rights or international humanitarian law.

I thank Mr Agnew, Ms McCann, Mr Wells, Mr McCallister and Mr Lyttle for joining me in co-sponsoring the motion. This is an exceptionally important issue, and the weeks ahead are an exceptionally important time. Next month, when member states gather in New York to negotiate a new international arms treaty, a unique opportunity will open up to increase the protections of ordinary citizens around the world against the damaging, lethal and tragic effects of illegally traded arms.

A robust global arms treaty is desperately needed to stop the irresponsible transfer of arms that fuels atrocities such as the one that we are witnessing in Syria these days. That conflict has already taken the lives of 10,000 people, and its impact never ceases to shock us. Many of the arms being used were procured through what have been, up to now, perfectly legitimate means. A treaty is also needed because we need to do something about the cost to Africa, which is estimated at \$18 billion a year, of armed conflict and because of the corruption of the defence industry, which is estimated to cost some \$20 billion a year. That undermines those who legitimately seek to make a living in that sector.

It is exceptionally important that the United Kingdom Government continue to take a leadership position during the talks in New York next month. It has taken years of diplomacy to reach this point. That diplomacy has been built around a strong and progressive coalition of nations: the European Union in its entirety, the United States under the current Administration and Administrations such as Australia and others around the world. However, states such as Syria and Iran and, to a lesser extent, China and Russia, seek to undermine the opportunity that is opening up. They seek to allow a deregulated arms trade. They do not want the international human rights standards that are available to us today to be made available to every citizen of this globe, particularly citizens who are in conflict zones and are being subjected to the onslaught of illegally traded arms.

I am very happy today to join colleagues and a much wider coalition of very many non-governmental organisations such as Article 36, Transparency International, Saferworld, Amnesty International and Oxfam, to mention just a few, in strongly recommending that all European Union Governments, but particularly the United Kingdom Government, do everything that they should during the forthcoming negotiations to secure a global arms trade treaty that will unambiguously require states not to transfer arms where there is a substantial risk that they may be used to commit or facilitate serious violations of international rights law or international humanitarian law, including gender-based violence such as rape and other forms of sexual violence.

They should secure a treaty that will make sure that we can continue to divert significant resources towards sustainable development and not away from it into arms trade, which covers a comprehensive scope of equipment and material that would fall under its control, including all conventional weapons, related articles and equipment that are used in military and internal security operations, or parts and components, technologies, technical expertise and equipment for making, developing and maintaining those articles.

The treaty should include all types of international trade, transfers and transactions, including imports; exports; re-exports; transits; trans-shipments; commercial sales; state-to-state transfers; loans and gifts; brokering; transport and finance. It should provide for robust mechanisms for prior risk assessment, end-user assurances, brokering controls and criminal sanctions for activities that are not authorised in accordance with the treaty.

It should require that all states keep records of authorised transfers for at least 20 years. It should ensure transparency through annual public reports by states on all transfers and on how they have implemented their obligations under the treaty. Finally, it should ensure that the existing rights of victims of armed violence are recognised, including that states commit to providing them with assistance for recovery, rehabilitation, justice and inclusion.

This is a monumental opportunity for the United Nations and for those of us who live in democracies where we appreciate, uphold and cherish international standards of human rights. It is an opportunity for us to do our bit for young people in particular across the globe in places such as Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, places overrun by the Lord's Resistance Army, which is fuelled by illegal arms. It is a way for us to send a message to Syria and other regimes, which treat their civilians as cannon fodder and which subject their civilians to inhumane treatment and death, that the terms of international trade in armaments are changing.

I am very happy to say that it is a treaty that comes with the sponsorship of those nations to which all in this House feel a greatest allegiance. It is also a treaty that allows us to reflect on our own history. Briefly, I want to recognise the opportunity that I had this morning, with Mr Wells, to meet some of our own victims of conflict. It was a meeting that reminded us of the impact that illegally traded weapons had in our own situation. Let us be a lesson in history to all other parts of the world that are caught up in conflict that illegally traded arms do as much damage and devastation

and are as pointless a tool in the purpose of anyone's political objectives.

I thank Members at this late hour for staying on to make sure that our voice is heard and that we get the opportunity to send a strong message to the United Kingdom Government and the European Union Governments.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. After the dullness of the previous two debates, it is good to have something exciting to talk about. This is a serious issue, and it is not often that we get the opportunity to speak on international affairs in this Chamber. I welcome the opportunity to do so.

There are a number of questions that we need to answer. Is there a need for an arms trade treaty? What can be achieved by states in the UN agreeing to that arms trade treaty? Even if there is agreement, can it be enforced?

So, is there a need? The arms trade is unregulated, and states need to accept that the absence of common international standards on the import, export and transfer of conventional arms is a contributory factor in the outbreak of conflict and abuse of international humanitarian law and human rights.

The arguments for an arms trade treaty from a humanitarian and human rights perspective is overwhelming. One person dies every minute as a result of armed violence. Millions more are injured, while others are displaced and lives ruined. Irresponsible arms transfers prolong conflict, cause poverty and destabilise regions. Conall gave the example of armed conflict in Africa. According to Amnesty International, that costs \$1.9 billion per year, roughly the same amount that Africa receives in aid.

What can be achieved by the UN agreeing to an arms trade treaty? A comprehensive treaty with robust implementation and verification measures can help to prevent the transfer of arms where there is evidence that they will be used to seriously violate international humanitarian law and human rights. Some states and regions have agreements but most are not legally binding and are easily exploited by unscrupulous arms dealers. Quite simply, they do not work. Self-regulation will never work in the arms industry.

Conall talked about illegal arms transfers. It is not just about illegal arms transfers. It is also about what at the moment are considered legal transfers of arms. One of the most important questions is whether an arms trade treaty can be enforced. First, there needs to be willingness among states, and there are indications that most states support the move towards an arms trade treaty.

In 2009, at the UN General Assembly, states voted 153 to 1 to move towards formal negotiations, which will take place next month. So, on the face of it, there is support, but the treaty must have strong enforcement measures otherwise it will not be worth the paper on which it is written. Although the treaty will create an international framework of legal obligation, it will be implemented at a national level. Under an arms trade treaty, decisions on arms transfers will still be made by national governments. In that context, a treaty would help to introduce new levels of transparency and accountability into the international arms trade, particularly with regard to public reporting mechanisms.

The bottom line is that the sale of arms should not be authorised where there is a substantial risk that it will lead to violations of human rights or international humanitarian law. Of course, that does not deny states the right to arm and defend themselves, but every right brings responsibilities. According to the UN:

“arms control, disarmament, and nonproliferation are essential to the maintenance of international peace and security”.

It is for those reasons that the world needs an arms trade treaty, with common international standards on the transfer of arms.

Mr Agnew: I thank Amnesty International for its work in securing this cross-party motion and ensuring that the Northern Ireland Assembly has a say in advance of the treaty negotiations.

Northern Ireland knows only too well the devastation that can be caused by the end use of the product of the arms trade. An arms trade treaty will go some way to ensuring that governments are not sponsoring human rights atrocities in other parts of the world through the licensing of arms to areas where there is a substantial risk that it will lead to serious violations of human rights.

9.00 pm

Whilst there will be advocates in this House and elsewhere of a free market economy, the fact is that we have a mixed economy where, through regulation and taxation, we discourage the purchase of demerit goods, which are goods that are deemed harmful to society. For example, cigarettes now come with the warning “Smoking kills”, which is very true, but a cigarette is nothing compared to an AK-47. I make that point as some in the arms trade will argue against the arms trade treaty or will want a light-touch approach, but we must seek to improve regulation of the arms trade on an international basis. Others may say that existing legislation is sufficient. However, I alert Members to the ‘Dispatches’ programme on the after-school arms clubs, in which comedian and activist Mark Thomas helped two Amnesty International school groups set up as arms brokers, exposing the loopholes in regulations and showing that getting round the regulation was child’s play. I want to make another point using the cigarette/AK-47 analogy. Some will seek to exclude small arms from any arms trade treaty as if they are somehow benign. Weapons such as AK-47s are considered small arms and are far from benign. In fact, they are lethal and can be used as tools of oppression, which is why they must be covered by the treaty.

The focus of the treaty must be on the protection of human rights, and that must override any economic considerations. The success of the treaty will, to a large extent, depend on the definition of the term “substantial risk” in the motion. For example, any treaty that permits the export of arms to regimes such as Libya or Bahrain does not, in my opinion, go far enough. It is worth noting that, while I welcome the work of the UK Government in supporting an arms trade treaty, they have exported arms to those oppressive regimes in the past. Equally, a regime that continues to oppress its citizens but has made small but significant improvements in its human rights record should not be seen as a legitimate recipient of arms exports. That was the language used by the UK Government in justifying the sale of 72 Eurofighters

to Saudi Arabia in 2006, and we must guard against such language. There must also be a responsibility on states exporting arms to track those arms to their end use to prevent the sale of arms to oppressive regimes through a third party state.

While the motion calls on the UK Government to act, we must ensure that our own house is in order in Northern Ireland. In the past five years, Invest NI has given approximately £7 million to companies engaged in the arms trade. When Thales Air Defence, the recipient of that public money, presented to the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I asked where it exported arms to, and its response was at best vague. When I then asked directly whether it exported to oppressive regimes, I got no answer and was informed by the Chair that it was not a legitimate line of enquiry. I must ask this: what oversight do we have of our own defence industry in Northern Ireland and how will we comply with an arms trade treaty, should it be agreed in July?

The motion highlights the failure of our current Prime Minister to give his unquestioning support to an arms trade treaty, and I hope that, in advance of the negotiations in July, he will do that and that the UK Government will adopt a strong position in the negotiations.

Mr Lyttle: I express the support of the Alliance Party for the motion and share the hope that the global conference in New York in July will be a major blow to the unregulated arms trade across the globe.

We know from reports from groups such as Amnesty International and Oxfam that the poorly regulated global trade in arms and ammunition has had a direct impact on increased poverty, human rights abuses and conflict. The treaty must also seek to tackle the horrendous reality of gender-based violence during conflict. There needs to be a focus on prohibiting the trade of arms that could be used to perpetrate acts of sexual and gender-based violence, in line with international legal and moral responsibilities to prevent such atrocities.

The challenge is compounded by the increasing globalisation of the arms trade. Components are sourced from across the world, and production and assembly can occur in different countries that have varying levels of control. This is a global problem that requires an agreed global response, and the opportunity that exists in the July negotiations to achieve that cannot be overstated. It is vital that all involved act to end the lack of regulation in the global arms trade. Unfortunately, we know painfully well in this region how arms can ruin lives and damage communities. We have seen at first hand the cost of a society divided and traumatised by violence. Amnesty recently joined with local victims group WAVE to highlight the impact that illegal arms have had on people in Northern Ireland. I therefore hope that the UK Government will heed the difficult lessons learned from Northern Ireland and take them to the July negotiations.

In our 2010 Westminster election manifesto, we in Alliance stated support for:

“Providing peace and security through a global system that supports democracy, human rights and the rule of law”.

In the same manifesto, we also pledged to support:

"the effective reform of global institutions, to better promote globally agreed objectives"

and we recognised:

"the central role of the United Nations in maintaining global peace and security."

We stated that:

"Alliance looks forward to a world based upon the rule of law. We endorse the work of the UN and NGOs in promoting democracy, pluralism, respect for human rights, and good governance."

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the NGOs and all campaigners who have worked tirelessly to bring about an agreed arms trade treaty. The commitments outlined in Alliance's 2010 Westminster manifesto have been put into action by my colleague Naomi Long MP, who recently signed an early day motion noting deep concern for the damage to human rights and development caused by the illegal arms trade and stating that the arms trade treaty:

"should legally bind the regulation of arms exports and imports, provide international oversight and create the necessary enforcement mechanisms"

to tackle unregulated arms. I welcome that fact and hope that this House also records its support for such action today. The Control Arms Coalition is inviting Members of Parliaments from around the world, including the Northern Ireland Assembly, to send a message in support of a robust arms trade treaty by signing a parliamentarians' declaration. I will add my name, and I urge Members to do the same.

The Alliance Party hopes that all member states will agree a robust arms trade treaty. However, it calls on the UK Government in particular to ensure that this agreement is rigorously effective in preventing the transfer of arms that contribute to heinous abuses of international human law across the globe.

Mr Wells: As the honourable Member for South Belfast Mr McDevitt indicated, we had a meeting this afternoon with some of the victims of the illegal arms trade in this part of the United Kingdom. Indeed, we heard testimony, for instance, from some of those who were terribly injured as a result of Semtex imported from Libya and what was then Czechoslovakia by the Provisional IRA to inflict dreadful pain, injury and destruction on our Province. We also had testimony from those who had suffered at the hands of weapons illegally imported from South Africa under the apartheid regime, weapons that were used to indiscriminately attack members of the nationalist community. So, we in the Province are very aware of the damage that can be caused by illegal weapons. There may even be people in the Chamber who have used such illegal weapons. Therefore, it is important that we support the motion and try to drive out this evil trade.

Some of the statistics are quite shocking. Between 1989 and 2010, there were 131 armed conflicts throughout the world, leading directly to the loss — it is an estimate; we cannot be specific — of between 794,000 and 1.1 million lives. That is over 50,000 a year. Even more shockingly, it is reckoned that, each year, 200,000 people lost their life indirectly, as the result of famine and population movements caused by the use of illegal weapons. The countries involved

include Burma, Sudan, Afghanistan, Syria and Sri Lanka. The list is very sad and very long. Even more shockingly, on top of all that, it is reckoned that, in the same period, 43.3 million people were displaced as a result of those conflicts. So, this trade is causing an abhorrent amount of misery.

We are not here to condemn the arms trade per se. There is a legitimate use of arms. For instance, if the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland, which, by the way, is the ninth highest producer of arms in the world — an extraordinary statistic that I did not know until today — wished to supply arms to Sweden, a democratic state where there are basic human rights and a solid democratic structure, that is fine. The problem arises when arms that are supplied legitimately go astray into less reputable states. That is why we support the need for an arms treaty and welcome the fact that our Government of the United Kingdom are playing a leading role. It is also reassuring that the three leaders of the political parties in the UK — Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats — have all come out strongly in support of the campaign. Indeed, the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic were among the 153 countries in the UN that backed the arms trade treaty. There were 19 abstentions and, interestingly, the only country that objected to the treaty was Zimbabwe, which is hardly a shining example of human rights, democracy or the protection of the freedoms of minorities. Therefore, it is clear that the vast majority of civilised democratic nations in the world want to bring this trade under immediate control.

Many of the Members who contributed to the debate referred to the effects of the arms trade in hostilities. However, it must also be remembered that it is estimated that 42% of global homicides are committed by criminal gangs using illegal firearms. That works out at 199,000 homicides a year. One has only to see the devastating effect of the use of illegal weapons in places such as Mexico, where the evil drugs trade is spiralling out of control, and tens of thousands of people are being killed. So it is absolutely imperative that we back the treaty.

The motion poses no threat to the legitimate manufacture and distribution of arms, but, properly implemented, overseen and enforced, it will reduce dramatically the number of weapons getting into the hands of juntas, gangs, dictators and those who cause such dreadful torment in places such as the Democratic Republic of Congo as we speak this evening. I support the motion, and I hope that, when the negotiations become extremely serious in July, they will conclude successfully, leading to a treaty that is enforceable throughout the world.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the strong contribution made by the UK Government as one of the driving forces behind the arms trade treaty; calls on the Prime Minister to publicly affirm his Government's commitment to the establishment of a robust human rights-compliant arms trade treaty in 2012; and further calls on the UK Government to insist, during the July 2012 formal negotiations, that the sale of arms shall not be authorised where there is a substantial risk that it will lead to serious violations of human rights or international humanitarian law.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Magilligan Prison

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Minister of Justice has advised the Speaker that he is unwell and unable to respond to the debate. The Minister for Employment and Learning will respond on Mr Ford's behalf. The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes, the Minister will have 10 minutes in which to respond, and all other Members who are selected to speak according to the list that we have at present will have five minutes.

Mr G Robinson: At the outset, let me wish the Minister a speedy recovery. I thank the Minister for Employment and Learning for sitting in on his behalf tonight.

I fully and proudly support the retention of Magilligan prison. The Justice Minister must be made aware of important considerations. We must all remember that the loss of the prison will mean the loss of approximately 440 jobs and about £10 million from the local economy. In a written answer to me, the Minister recently stated that 332 of those 440 jobs were in the East Londonderry constituency. The argument that there would be no economic impact does not stack up with that admission, and nor does it tally with the Minister's comment during a recent Question Time, when he told me:

"I do not see how moving a facility from A to B is wiping out jobs or decimating the economy".

In our case, it certainly would do that.

We must also be conscious that, by 2014, approximately £16 million of taxpayers' money will have been spent on the upgrading of Magilligan prison. I am sure that spending approximately £250 million on a new prison at any location is not good value for public money, in the light of the money that has already been spent on the prison, particularly in these harsh economic times.

9.15 pm

Although stating that the cost for greater Belfast families to travel to Magilligan is prohibitive, the Minister must also realise that it will be equally costly for families who live in the north-west to visit family members in a prison on the outskirts of Belfast. A more sustainable argument is needed if we are to spend a vast amount of public money. If Magilligan prison is permitted to close, the loss of employment and the economic devastation on the north-west area will be catastrophic. The Finance Minister was with us in Limavady last week. He is aware of the major difficulties faced by traders in Limavady and other north-west towns. We cannot permit such a loss of employment or damage to the north-west economy. As 332 members of the Magilligan prison staff live in East Londonderry, 16 in Foyle and 71 in North Antrim, the impact would be widespread.

I understand that the site at Magilligan is entirely owned by the prison authorities and, therefore, there would be no cost to the taxpayer in purchasing a new site. That is a significant financial plus point for Magilligan's redevelopment and removes what is a substantial part of any building programme. The redevelopment would also create much-needed construction jobs for the local economy. It must also be remembered that Magilligan was given the go-ahead for redevelopment in 2007 by Paul Goggins, the Minister responsible for justice. In 2009, the Prison Service director, Robin Masefield said:

"This is an important milestone in the Magilligan redevelopment".

That puts the support of the Magilligan site beyond all doubt. Indeed, the redevelopment can go ahead using the current accommodation. That sounds like the perfect economic solution.

The Bain report supported the roll-out of Civil Service jobs, but it appears that Limavady may lose its courthouse, and Dungiven police station in my constituency has already closed. Now, there is the proposed threat to close Magilligan prison. I ask all MLAs to support the debate to ensure that employment is retained and that our economy in the north-west of Northern Ireland is supported in the most practicable and sensible manner. The Minister's legacy can be very positive, not one of creating more unemployment and economic hardship in the north-west. I appeal to the Minister to give every consideration to the upgrading and redevelopment of Magilligan prison.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé breá sásta a bheith ag labhairt ar an ábhar seo inniu.

I am pleased to speak about Magilligan prison. However, I wish that the debate had come slightly earlier in the day.

I support the overall review of the prison estate, and the proposal to close Magilligan is an integral part of it. There are reasons for the justification of the closure of Magilligan, as, indeed, there are reasons to retain it, and it is important to examine both.

When Magilligan opened in May 1972, it consisted of eight Nissen huts. Some of those are still in operation today as workshops in the prison. Two years ago, when I was mayor of the borough of Limavady, I visited Magilligan and was shocked at the state of the infrastructure in the prison. As we know, today's prisoners are held in four of the H-blocks there. A report from eight years ago by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons and the Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice Inspection described the prison then as unfit for purpose. That followed an earlier report from 2001. Prisoners have no integrated sanitation in cells and must slop out at night. Magilligan has one of the highest rates of suicide in any of the prisons.

Magilligan was obviously placed where it was in 1971 for reasons different from those why it exists there today. It is 71 miles from Belfast. Of course, either of the two routes to Magilligan has a bottleneck: the Frosses or the impasse at Dungiven, as it has no bypass.

The prison, which contains upwards of 1,000 people between staff and inmates, has an inadequate sewerage

system and will not have an adequate sewerage system any time in the next two years, when the new Magilligan waste water treatment plant is delivered. Raw sewage goes straight into the dunes or the sea beside a blue flag beach. That is a great tourism deterrent from the point of view of the status and designations that the area has. The Magilligan area is, of course, the gateway to the Inishowen peninsula and the Causeway Coast, and we are rightly proud of it.

The operating cost of Magilligan prison makes it one of the most expensive prisons in western Europe. When the original proposal to close the prison was announced in 2005, an audit report established that, at the time, it cost the taxpayer £25.2 million. That was roughly £70,000 for each prisoner, each year. That was to house low- to medium-risk prisoners with less than six years to serve.

There are, of course, reasons to maintain Magilligan prison. It provides jobs locally. I had a crowd from Magilligan here yesterday, including the new mayor, who is himself a Magilligan man. The number of people from Magilligan working in the prison is somewhere in the region of 12. Another Member, speaking recently on the radio, claimed that 90% of Magilligan employees lived within 15 miles of the prison. I find that very, very hard to believe. I would love to see the travel expenses and allowances for staff.

The closure of the prison would have a negative impact on the parish of Magilligan, as the local parish priest, Father O'Hagan, is chaplain to the prison. If the prison were to close, that may make the parish of Magilligan untenable as it stands. There would also be a negative impact on the village. The local Spar shop, which has a comprehensive range of services, including an ATM and the local sub-post office, and employs upwards of 15 people, would be seriously impacted on.

In fairness, we have to look at the entire project. If Magilligan prison is to close — we have been given a six-year timescale — we need to look now at what we intend to put in its place. We do not want to see it become another Fort George or Shackleton, as it sits empty at the minute. There is great potential there. We are beside the longest beach in Ireland. If the prison closes, I will be looking for the closure of the MoD range and an opening up of that entire area for tourism. As I said, we are ideally located between the Causeway Coast and Inishowen.

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

Mr Ó hOisín: We have wonderful potential for tourism in that area, if, indeed, Magilligan prison is to close.

Mr Swann: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this Adjournment debate. I commend Members for securing a debate on such an important topic.

The Prison Service is going through a period of reform, while the prison review team report of October last year, setting out 40 recommendations as well as the strategic efficiencies programme, is moving forward and making progress.

I will not delay things any longer. I will just put forward the Ulster Unionist position on the case. At this stage, we object to the closure of Magilligan prison and will do anything that we can to support its retention. The cost of such a move

would be huge. I have heard estimates of around £140 million, should a new prison be built at the preferred site of Maghaberry prison. I have to question the rationale behind that expenditure, given the economic climate in which we find ourselves.

George Robinson referred to the number of people from North Antrim employed in the prison. Indeed, many of my constituents are concerned about any closure of Magilligan prison. Indeed, the public in general are more interested in the Executive creating jobs, tackling unemployment, providing an effective health service and fixing our education system, as opposed to building new facilities in which to house those who partake in criminal activity.

There are approximately 400 or 600 — could someone remind me of the number of jobs? I apologise, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr McClarty: Four hundred.

Mr Swann: There are roughly 400 jobs.

Mr Storey: Approximately.

Mr Swann: Approximately. It is important we do all that we can to protect those jobs in the current economic climate.

As was mentioned, the Bain report talked about the devolution of Civil Service jobs. We should support that, and we should not look to recreate a centralised facility. A number of areas have been mentioned for the building of a future prison. Magilligan is ideally situated, and it has served a purpose for a long period of years. We should support the retention of the prison at Magilligan at this stage.

Mr Dallat: I am sitting here wondering why I am involved in an Adjournment debate to keep a prison open, especially one with "Her Majesty's Prison" in the title. I will tell you what influences me: it is my 30 years in the teaching profession and what I experienced when I went into that prison to meet the staff and to talk to the inmates. I saw at first hand something unique. It was something that could not be transplanted to Maghaberry or to the greater Belfast area. That is primarily the reason why I support the debate that has been put forward by Mr George Robinson.

The third dimension that was mentioned — the support from the voluntary sector and from the chaplains — is unique. However, what really made up my mind was a graduation ceremony that I was invited to. Young people who had gone into prison, who had failed society and been failed by society, had got enough qualifications for entrance to university. Those people were going to go back out into the world able to contribute something, which, I think, was very special because of the experience of being in jail and of meeting very humane staff. The staff were very strict, but, at the same time, the prison did not have that awful empty clanging feeling or the empty shouting and such things that you very often associate with prison. It symbolised to me some of the things that St Francis of Assisi said. It replaced hatred with love; it replaced loneliness with affection. It had all of those things being translated into something extremely positive.

Magilligan is probably no different from other institutions, in that a very high percentage of the young people who go

in there have serious literacy and numeracy problems, but the service that is provided there is second to none. The greatest wish of the inmates whom I talked to was that they would not transfer to the next generation the problems that they had and which, perhaps, the previous generation had. Very often, it was those problems that brought them into contact with drugs and criminality and so on.

One experience really made me think. It occurred on an occasion when the prison inmates and staff were out together raising funds for some very deserving cause by doing a sponsored walk from Coleraine to Kilrea. At some stage, I decided that I was not doing the walk, so I got the car. I spotted the minibus sitting along the road, so I got in for a yarn with a member of staff, as I thought. I started to ask him how long he was in the Prison Service and so on, but he told me that he was an inmate. That showed me something that I had not known existed: the trust was there, the minibus was not driven off, and the inmate did not escape. From what I hear, you will certainly not get that kind of behaviour in Maghaberry. You do not get it in other prisons.

I suppose the same argument could be applied to universities. You do not uproot a university, plant it somewhere else and expect all the support services to come with it. Why should a prison be different? I do not think that the new prison would have to be on exactly the same site. There has been concern about the route to the ferry service and Donegal and so on, but the north-west, in particular, desperately cannot afford to lose any jobs. There is prison reform. In the future, many more people will be employed in the Prison Service; people will need those jobs. The local businesses that are struggling against big supermarkets and so on could also do with the work.

The disadvantage of families having to travel a greater distance does not outweigh the tremendous opportunities that exist and the ethos of that crumbly, knock-down prison, from which people leave different from how they were when they went in.

9.30 pm

Mr Storey: I commend my colleague George Robinson for securing the debate. One might ask why a Member for North Antrim has an interest in ensuring that Her Majesty's Prison in Magilligan is retained, and the reason for that is not because we want to see the retention of another prison. Although it is a sad reflection of our society, it is a reality that we need places where those who have breached and broken the law can be placed so that they can pay their debt to society.

There are many things that the Member who spoke previously said about Magilligan that we concur with, and I speak as someone whose brother-in-law taught in Magilligan for a number of years. My brother-in-law will concur with many of the comments that the Member who spoke previously made, and I know that the time that he spent working in Magilligan prison was very useful and profitable.

People should not go away with the idea that it is a prison that is somehow unlike any other. Unfortunately, however, it still is a prison, and it is still a place where, if you are locked away in it, you will pay your debt to society in an environment that is not the most becoming. There is an issue about the humanity of what goes on there for the prison officers, the

inmates and the community that has built up over the long number of years.

Not that many years ago, in my own town of Ballymoney, we benefited as a result of a scheme under which, in conjunction with the council, the inmates did some work to tidy up a number of properties in the town. That was very much appreciated.

I mean this about the Executive and Departments across the piece, but there now seems to be the idea that, to resolve a problem, you build everything bigger and centralise it. That is being done with schools. The sustainable schools policy has been thrown out of the window, and we are now talking about having schools of 2,000-plus children in some cases, rather than 500 pupils in post-primary schools.

The same is happening in health. We are told that we do not need all the hospitals, and that we need to build larger hospitals. Now it looks as though they are telling us that we can do away with Magilligan and build a bigger prison somewhere else and that that will be a great benefit. I do not think that that is the best way for us to go. For a variety of reasons, I caution any decision to move the prison from Magilligan. That includes those reasons that Member who spoke previously gave, as well as the local economy, which is vital in an area that has suffered over the years. Also, from a North Antrim perspective, it has been mentioned that the prison officers have had a very decent travel-to-work distance, and if they were to move to some other location, whether it be in the greater Belfast area or wherever, that distance will greatly increase.

Although I trust and pray that, as a society, we are moving into better days than those we came from, there is also the issue of Magilligan being a secure prison. It has had a number of incidents in the past, but if I recall correctly, I do not think that it ever had any massive breakouts or similar events. Therefore, it is relatively secure, and I think that that still has to be taken into consideration.

When I commenced, I said that, in an ideal world, we would not be building more prisons but that we would be trying to reduce our prison population. However, there is another element to the work at Magilligan that has been useful, and that is the purpose that it serves for inmates who are serving the last years of their sentences. It prepares prisoners for the transition from prison into society in a way that I do not think happens in any other prison in Northern Ireland. Therefore, for that and many other reasons, it is illogical to consider moving Magilligan to any other location. I think that Magilligan should be retained. I support the topic for debate, which my colleague Mr Robinson brought.

Mr McClarty: I know that the hour is late, but I am delighted that Mr Robinson has secured this debate and that I have been here to witness a unique occasion: a public representative arguing for unemployment in his constituency — a constituency that has already been devastated by the loss of a great number of jobs in recent times. I have never heard anything more ridiculous. I, of course, firmly oppose the Justice Department's proposal to close HM Prison Magilligan. The decision promises to be an absolute economic disaster for the north-west and a ridiculous haemorrhage of public money. I urge the Justice Minister to consider the severe consequences of the proposed closure.

HM Prison Magilligan helps to feed the local economies of Coleraine and Limavady, and although the Minister admits that he is not capable of seeing how moving the facility from A to B would wipe out jobs and decimate the economy, he is very capable of trivialising a situation to suit his means. If this were a simple case of moving from A to B, we would not be having this debate this evening. The closure of Magilligan will wipe out jobs, which does decimate the economy.

I am astonished that one of the reasons for the proposed closure is that it will benefit the families of prisoners from the greater Belfast area. What about the families not from the greater Belfast area? Although I appreciate that most prisoners in Magilligan probably come from that area, the move will have a negative effect on more people than it will benefit, particularly if you consider the 400 staff who live within a 20-mile radius of the prison, as well as the prisoners not originally from the greater Belfast area. The Minister's prison reform is proposing to uproot 400 families of honest, hard-working staff to benefit the families of prisoners. Prison is a punishment; it is not meant to be convenient. Prisoners knew the consequences of their crime and the impact that it would have on their families when they made the decision to offend. It is not rational or fair to accommodate those in prison for crimes at the expense of those who work honestly for their living.

It is claimed that Magilligan prison is not fit for purpose and needs radical refurbishment. Many of my constituents would argue that their living arrangements are not fit for purpose, but they simply make do. Some of our hospitals, schools and care homes are not fit for purpose either, and yet the Executive are reluctant to equal the money proposed here to fund those necessary projects. I appreciate that the Minister has a budget to spend. If it is necessary, spend it on a new security facility at Magilligan rather than taking it to Belfast.

I believe that the proposal is a ridiculous haemorrhage of money. What sense is there in investing £4 million in a facility, with a further £2 million proposed, only to eventually tear it down? It is absolute nonsense. Furthermore, why spend a ludicrous sum of money buying new land at Maghaberry when we already own perfectly good space at Magilligan? I would ask the Minister to be mindful that we are spending money from the public purse.

The Justice Minister claims that he is working to best meet the needs of everyone in Northern Ireland. He has yet to convince me and many others how moving the facility to Maghaberry will do that. It seems that it will suit the population of greater Belfast, but no one else. West of the Bann has suffered greatly since the beginning of the economic downturn. The area does not need this. I just want to remind the Minister that there is life, an economy and another place beyond Glengormley.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Dr Stephen Farry, the Minister for Employment and Learning, to respond on behalf of the Minister of Justice.

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): First, I congratulate Mr Robinson on securing this Adjournment debate and bringing the issue to the House, and I thank the other Members for their contributions. In doing so, I want to pass on the apologies of the Justice Minister, David Ford, for his absence from this evening's debate. It is certainly no reflection of his attitude to the matter and should not

be seen as diminishing the importance of the issue. He is, unfortunately, unwell and has asked me to stand in. Hopefully I am a somewhat adequate replacement for him.

I will endeavour to respond to the debate as best I can. If there are particular issues that I do not cover during my remarks, officials from the Department will be taking a careful note of everything that has been said and will respond to Members in writing to address those outstanding issues.

The effective management of offenders in custody and the subsequent benefits for society in improved public safety and reduced levels of reoffending are matters that affect all of us here and, indeed, the people we represent. That is why the Minister of Justice has committed his Department to fundamentally reforming the Prison Service. It is why he established the independent review of prisons led by Dame Anne Owers and why he is driving forward the implementation of that team's recommendations. It is why, last week, he launched the Northern Ireland Prison Service's outline estate strategy, which sets out the proposals for the strategic development of the prison estate in order to ensure that our prisons are best equipped and configured to provide not only safe, secure and decent accommodation but a physical environment that can support work to rehabilitate offenders and to enable individuals to change.

No doubt Members will already be familiar with the range of proposals included in the strategy. Those proposals have been informed by the Executive's priorities and by the Department of Justice's strategic objectives, and they represent the Northern Ireland Prison Service's assessment of how the prison estate can be best developed in respect of specific prisoner population groups, whether they are young or adult, female or male offenders. The strategy needs to be seen as a package of proposals that, taken together, represent what the Minister of Justice believes is the most effective configuration to meet the aims of the Prison Service, to reduce the risk of reoffending and, in doing so, to improve public safety.

I am sure that the Minister of Justice would want me to acknowledge the very good work that is being done at Magilligan. Indeed, that work has been commended by Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland and the prison review team. However, Members will recall that the review team also considered that the effectiveness of that work is limited by its location. I certainly want to put on record that we fundamentally recognise and respect the good work that is being done at Magilligan.

Mr Dallat referred to universities. Universities and prisons are not polar opposites. They have a lot of common ground in what they are trying to do to improve people's lives and contribute to society. I can also comment directly on my Department's work with Magilligan through the North West Regional College's partnership with it. In doing so, the point I am trying to make is that although Magilligan is the most successful of the current establishments, and, indeed, the prison review team recognised that, it attributed it to the fact that it has a single task, which is to hold what are essentially low-risk men who will soon be returned to the community.

The strategic efficiency and effectiveness programme aims to address any imbalance and to embed cultural change

across all the Northern Ireland prison establishments. It is about trying to create a new focus on rehabilitation. Rehabilitation is not the polar opposite of punishment. Of course, punishment is an element of why we send people to prison, and the loss of liberty is, itself, a major punishment. However, that must go hand in hand with rehabilitation, because people are ultimately going to be released into society and we have to focus on reducing the level of reoffending.

It is also about trying to introduce new, effective working practices. It is about a revised focus on training and the development of staff. What I am trying to get across in making those points is that the Prison Service is not trying to lose the culture of Magilligan but to build on it and ensure that that type of culture is more effectively reflected throughout the existing estate.

9.45 pm

Research has identified a number of clear factors or pathways that can support the effective resettlement and rehabilitation of prisoners and has emphasised the importance of strong family links and employability. The review team stressed that Magilligan is too dislocated from the families and communities of most prisoners. Indeed, records show that the home locations of almost 50% of the adult male prisoner population are within 20 miles of Belfast, and a further 25% are within 40 miles of Belfast, making a total of 75% that are within 40 miles of Belfast. Again, the review team also observed that Magilligan is too far removed from the large-scale sustainable employment opportunities to realise the full potential for effective rehabilitation work. That is why the future accommodation model that is proposed in the strategy includes the development of a new medium-security prison in a central location.

It is important to stress that this is not simply about providing for the convenience of prisoners and their families, as some have suggested, nor should it be about providing for the convenience of Prison Service staff, although the Minister accepts that more detailed equality and economic impact assessments will be needed in relation to these proposals. This proposal is and should primarily be about what is best for society in Northern Ireland by providing what is the most effective environment to tackle offending behaviour, and, in doing so, to make society safer.

There are other considerations. The physical deficiencies of Magilligan have been well documented. Criminal Justice Inspection has criticised the physical environment as oppressive and not fit for purpose, and has condemned the continued use of the H-blocks. The Prison Service assessment is that the prison has outlived its useful economic life.

Magilligan prison was never designed to provide a long-term solution for the accommodation of Northern Ireland's prison population. The prison complex was opened in 1972, and has been periodically added to over the course of its lifespan. It now consists of a collection of buildings. The most recent addition to its accommodation is Halward House, which was opened in 2008, but it also includes former army Nissen huts and the H-blocks that were built in 1979. They are difficult to supervise and have no in-cell sanitation. Much of the infrastructure is in need of

replacement, resulting in inefficiencies and excessive utility and energy costs. Outdated design also means that many parts of the prison, such as the H-blocks, are costly and resource-intensive to staff.

Moving to a new, purpose-built prison would enable the Prison Service to take advantage of the latest thinking in technology and design in order to create an effective and efficient built environment. It would also afford greater flexibility in managing evolving prisoner populations.

I understand the concerns that have been voiced about the impact of these proposals on the economic life of the area around Magilligan prison, as does the Minister of Justice. As Members will know, he launched a public consultation on the strategy last week, and, subject to the outcome of that exercise, he is committed to carrying out full economic and equality impact appraisals on the proposals as they are progressed. However, he is ultimately confident that the proposals set out in the strategy for the development of a new prison and the subsequent decommissioning of Magilligan constitute an important investment in public safety for Northern Ireland. Indeed, the economic appraisals of the outline case to date suggest that the costs of a rebuild on the Magilligan site are significantly more than those of a build elsewhere. It is important that that is factored in when we are considering the overall case, particularly because of the pressures on public money.

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

Dr Farry: I will leave it there, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Adjourned at 9.49pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 18 June 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

New Assembly Member: Ms Maeve McLaughlin

Mr Speaker: Before we begin business, I advise Members that I have been informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Ms Maeve McLaughlin has been returned as a Member of the Assembly for the Foyle constituency to fill the vacancy that resulted from the resignation of Ms Martina Anderson. Ms McLaughlin signed the Roll of Membership in my office this morning and entered her designation. Ms McLaughlin has taken her seat, and I wish her well.

Speaker's Business

Public Petition: Suicide Awareness and Prevention Project, Poleglass

Mr Speaker: Ms Jennifer McCann has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. She will have up to three minutes in which to speak.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am very honoured to present this petition. It was compiled by young people who are involved in the Bytes Project in Poleglass and has over 5,000 signatures.

There are 30,000 people in the Colin area, which is where those young people live. There is a large number of young people there, and it is an area of multiple deprivation and disadvantage. Over the past 10 years, over 100 people in the area have taken their lives. The majority of those were young people. About 18 months ago, there was a particular cluster of suicides in the area, where 20 people took their own lives over a period of 16 months. So, this is a very serious issue.

The young people involved in the project came together to do something about the problem, because the people who died were their friends from school and elsewhere. The young people got together, and, over a period of weeks, they went to all the different shopping centres across west Belfast and into schools to get people to sign the petition. They also visited the Speaker's Office, and my colleague Sue Ramsey worked with them to highlight and raise awareness of this very serious issue and ask for the services needed for the people of not just the Colin area but across the North to try to tackle this issue.

So, I want to present this petition on their behalf and say a very big thank you to them for getting together, having courage and giving their time. The Assembly appreciates them doing that.

Ms J McCann moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will forward the petition to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and send a copy to the Chairperson of the Health Committee.

Public Petition: WAVE Trauma Centre Research

Mr Speaker: Mr Mike Nesbitt has also sought leave to present a public petition. The Member will also have up to three minutes to speak on the subject.

Mr Nesbitt: Mr Speaker, thank you. WAVE Trauma is one of the largest and most respected organisations providing support and services for victims and survivors of the Troubles. With offices in Belfast, Derry/Londonderry, Armagh, Ballymoney and Omagh, it has a geographical spread that has assisted in the collation of this petition of 10,000 signatures. I would like to be clear, Mr Speaker, that the petition was not handed to me or my party alone but to representatives of all five parties of the Executive. It reads as follows:

"We, the undersigned, call on you to carry out an urgent review of the past provision made and, in some cases, not made to those bereaved or injured in the Troubles, and to put right all unfairness and shortfall in those provisions."

WAVE has also given us a route map to identify those unfairnesses and shortfalls by commissioning research that highlighted what it describes as a staggering shortfall in services for the very many people physically injured in the Troubles. It highlighted another staggering fact: there is no robust figure agreed for the number of injured.

Much emphasis has been placed on the dead, and rightly so. Much resource is also, rightly, devoted to the dead. For example, the Historical Enquiries Team (HET) reviews the files of every killing and seeks to address specific questions posed by families about the circumstances of their loved one's death. However, there is no HET for the injured. The dead are remembered in books such as 'Lost Lives', but there is no book of damaged lives for the injured. If that research were to be undertaken, it may take more than a dozen volumes the size of 'Lost Lives' to cover everyone who suffered lost opportunities because of the Troubles.

In short, we sometimes focus on the dead at the expense of focusing on what we can do for the living injured. This petition is a clear call to put that right. WAVE contends that there is not only a lack of attention to the injured but also a lack of knowledge about the consequences, not least for the disabled and their carers.

This petition is a call to look again at key issues for the injured of the Troubles and their carers across areas that include pain management and medical service provision; lost opportunities with regard to the type of work and level of income they would otherwise have reasonably expected to attain, and the consequent impact on occupational pensions; compensation top-ups to address those whose life expectancy and/or needs were underestimated in the original awards; and how short-term funding of support groups undermines their ability to attract and retain professional staff, who would provide the services required on a long-term, ongoing basis by the victims and survivors of our conflict.

I commend this petition to the House.

Mr Nesbitt moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will forward the petition to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and send a copy to the Chairperson of the Committee.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, this will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Colum Eastwood replace Mr John Dallat as a member of the Committee for the Environment. — [Mr P Ramsey.]

Mr Speaker: We now move to the second motion on Committee membership. Again, this will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Ms Caitríona Ruane replace Ms Jennifer McCann as a member of the Business Committee. — [Mr P Maskey.]

Executive Committee Business

Supply Resolution: Main Estimates 2012-13

Mr Speaker: As the next two motions relate to Supply resolutions, I propose to conduct only one debate. I shall call the Minister of Finance and Personnel to move the first motion. Debate will then take place on both motions. When all those who wish to speak have done so, I shall put the Question on the first motion. Before putting the Question without further debate, I shall call the Minister to move the second motion.

The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to four hours for this debate. The Minister will have 60 minutes to allocate as he wishes between proposing and his winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have 10 minutes.

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves that a sum not exceeding £8,203,787,000 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 the 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 £8,424,156,000 be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the 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 3(b) and 3(a) of table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2012-13 that was laid before the Assembly on 11 June 2012.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that resources not exceeding £13,004,918.26 be authorised for use by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department for Social Development for the year ending 31 March 2011, as summarised for each Department in part II of the 2010-11 Statement of Excesses that was laid before the Assembly on 11 June 2012. — [Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Mr Wilson: As you set out, Mr Speaker, the debate covers two Supply resolutions. The first resolution seeks the Assembly's approval of the 2012-13 spending plans of Departments and other public bodies as set out in the Main Estimates. The second resolution seeks the Assembly's approval of Excess Votes for two Departments for 2010-11 as detailed in the Statement of Excesses for that year. The Main Estimates and the Statement of Excesses were laid in the Assembly on Wednesday 6 June 2012.

The first resolution relates to the supply of cash and resources for the remainder of the current year, 2012-13, as detailed in the Main Estimates. The Assembly passed a Vote on Account in March 2012 that provided initial allocations for 2012-13 to ensure the continuation of services until a Budget was agreed and these Main Estimates could be presented to the Assembly for approval. The first resolution and the Budget Bill, which I will introduce later today, now request the balance to complete the total cash and resource requirements of Departments and other public bodies for 2012-13. The balance to complete amounts to over £8 billion of cash and over £8 billion of resources. These requirements reflect the second year of the Executive's Budget 2011-15, which was approved by the previous Assembly on 9 March 2011, as well as the demand-led annually managed expenditure (AME).

The second resolution seeks the Assembly's approval for Excess Votes for 2010-11 on behalf of two Departments. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) exceeded the resources approved by the previous Assembly for 2010-11 by almost £3 million, and the Department for Social Development (DSD) exceeded its resources limit by £10 million. I draw Members' attention to the explanations that are given in part 2 of the Statement of Excesses for each Department. Those excesses were reported by the Comptroller and Auditor General, and the Public Accounts Committee has considered the reasons for them and has recommended that this Assembly now provides the necessary sums by Excess Votes. On behalf of the Executive, I request and recommend the levels of Supply that are set out in these two resolutions under section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

I want to turn to the issue of accelerated passage for a few moments. First, I place on record my disappointment with the Committee for Finance and Personnel for its failure to, so far, grant accelerated passage. Indeed, I challenge the Committee to do so on Wednesday. Quite frankly, I am staggered by its belief that it has not been adequately consulted on the public expenditure proposals that are contained in the Bill.

12.15 pm

Let me make it clear: the public expenditure proposals for this financial year — 2012-13 — did not suddenly materialise three weeks ago, nor did we suddenly wake up on 1 April and decide what Departments should spend on public services. The public expenditure proposals that cover this financial year, the very proposals that are contained in the Bill and the resolutions that are before us, were not created in a vacuum. The reality is that the public expenditure proposals that are contained in the Bill find their roots in the Budget that was agreed last March.

I remind the Assembly that the Chair of the Finance and Personnel Committee outlined in the House how the Finance Committee had provided a co-ordinated report on the Budget; had taken evidence from a wide range of witnesses, including business and voluntary sectors, economists, academics and trade unions; and had received submissions from each of the Statutory Committees, the Audit Committee and the Assembly Commission. To top it all, it then arranged a take-note debate on the Budget. If that is not satisfying itself of the necessary consultation on public expenditure, I do not know what is.

Do not forget that the Budget Bill that is before us today is essentially 95% the same as the Budget that was agreed back then. Any non-technical changes have been agreed by the Executive, and my officials took the Committee through all the changes in full detail and answered all the questions that members had on the changes to the Budget since it was agreed in March. Therefore, I fail to see how any member of the Committee can say hand on heart that the Committee has not received sufficient consultation on the public expenditure proposals for 2012-13. Indeed, the norm in the past was that one evidence session with my officials was sufficient to grant accelerated passage. The Committee has had that, so what is the difference this year? Once again, I challenge the Committee to consider the evidence of the consultation that I have outlined and agree to the accelerated passage of the Bill. It is vital to ensure that Royal Assent for the legislation is given before the end of July.

It is a sign of the collective maturity of the Assembly, in stark contrast to the Committee, that Members recognise that the Estimates process is the culmination of a lengthy Budget process and that the stages are to provide legislation to cover a Budget that has already been extensively debated and approved by the Assembly. That having been said, I have no doubt that one or two Members have still not fully grasped the nature and nuances of these debates. I expect that the debate today will ebb and flow, moving from the relevant to the perhaps not so relevant, or maybe to the totally irrelevant.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: Yes.

Mr Allister: I take the Minister back to what he said about accelerated passage. On this occasion, I am not unsympathetic to the Minister's position, but I ask him to elaborate. He said that he exhorted the Committee on Wednesday to agree to accelerated passage. However, the situation is that we supposedly have the Second Stage of the Budget Bill tomorrow. That cannot happen without the Chairman of the Committee affording consent between now and then. Will he cast some light on whether tomorrow's business is likely to proceed? If approval for accelerated passage is not given, does he agree that the power in the 1998 Act for the permanent secretary to grant 95% of the budget authority will not be appropriately used in circumstances in which there is a supposedly working Assembly and Executive?

Mr Wilson: As usual, the Member puts his finger on a number of key issues. I was not going to mention it but let us make it quite clear that, as the Member for North Antrim has outlined, the irony of the Committee remaining truculent, petulant and carrying on in — this will probably not help my case much, but I do not mind — infantile mode will be that, instead of having the opportunity to scrutinise and debate the issues on the Floor of the Assembly and through the Committee, an official will decide what money is allocated. That will happen if we do not get the Bill through under accelerated passage in time. If we go down that route, we will be £500 million short in the allocations, because only 95% of the Budget can be allocated on the basis that the Member has outlined. While there is a functioning Assembly, one would expect us to not go through that process, as he has quite rightly pointed out.

There are two ways to get out of the situation. First, during the debate, having received the information and been reminded that it has looked at the information in quite a lot of depth on previous occasions, the Committee may well decide to accede to accelerated passage. If it needs some more time to think about the error of its ways and repent at leisure, we may have to wait until Wednesday. That would mean, of course, that tomorrow's business on the Budget Bill would fall. If accelerated passage was agreed on Wednesday, that would mean that the Second Stage of the Budget Bill will happen next week, and it is my understanding there would still be time in the Assembly session for us to push the matter through by accelerated passage.

I am sure that, during the ebb and flow of the debate, we will hear explanations from those who have taken the stance that they have, but I hope that, in the interests of the public good, they will make the right decision. It is not in anyone's interest for, first, this Assembly not to do its business and, secondly, as a result of that, for us to have to go through the unusual process of the permanent secretary making budget allocations, which would be 5% less than what is in the Estimates in the Budget Bill. That would leave Departments with £500 million less to spend than would be the case if the Assembly had done its job properly.

I will move on. The 2010 UK spending review outcome for 2012-13 provided a resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL) that was 4.3% less than the 2011 baseline, and capital DEL was over 32% less than the 2010-11 baseline. However, it must be remembered that a lot of difficult decisions on curtailing public expenditure were taken in 2011-12, meaning that we entered this year better prepared for the level of public expenditure available. Indeed, with further allocations from Her Majesty's Treasury through its budget process, along with some changes to our own public expenditure position, we will be in a position to provide some additional funds to Departments in the first monitoring round of this financial year.

As an Assembly, we must continue to be mindful of the issues that face our economy as we seek to provide the optimum level of public services. Rising oil prices and ongoing inflation levels have constrained our economy in general, whilst the failure of Project Merlin in the banking sector has not helped our private sector to lever in much-needed finance. I am happy to note that the national loan guarantee scheme, which many see as the successor of Project Merlin, has been signed up to by Ulster Bank, and that will hopefully allow local businesses easier access to finance.

We face some difficulties in 2012-13. However, it would be misleading to end there. This is only part of the story, because 2012-13 also provides significant opportunities for the Assembly to improve our economy and assist our society. The year provides many opportunities to promote Northern Ireland as a major tourism venue. We have already had the Titanic centenary and seen how government can contribute to major projects such as the Titanic signature project, which we should be proud of. The Irish Open is just around the corner and will provide a significant boost to our tourism and sporting reputation and provide much-needed tourism income.

Over the coming months, a number of critical discussions are to be had with Treasury Ministers on public expenditure issues that are strategically important to Northern Ireland.

Foremost among these strategic issues is the implementing of the UK Government welfare reform agenda in Northern Ireland. The key challenge will be to ensure that national decisions are applied appropriately to Northern Ireland and that we are not disadvantaged, particularly on issues such as the operation of the social fund on housing benefit relief. In general, we can expect HM Treasury to exert greater control and scrutiny on the drawdown of annually managed expenditure, and we need to ensure that our reporting to Treasury in all aspects continues to be robust and timely. We are working with HM Treasury officials on that issue.

The challenge facing us is to nurture our economy and appropriately support the significant milestones and events of 2012-13, blending the provision of public services with maximum opportunities for enabling private sector growth. It will also be critically important that we take measures in this financial year to ensure that our Departments are prepared and ready to adapt to an even greater tightening of the Treasury purse strings. The latest Office for Budgetary Responsibility forecasts, which go to 2016-17, two years into the next spending review, show that the UK Government envisage further cuts, particularly on the resource departmental expenditure limit allocations. We cannot wait until then to decide what we are going to do. We have to make preparation for what we are being told we will have to face in three years' time. Therefore, we need to do all to facilitate regional economic growth while ensuring that our central government Departments are focused on delivering greater efficiencies while protecting front line services. I believe that the Estimates before you today will facilitate that process.

I look forward to the debate on the expenditure plans, the Main Estimates and related issues. I look forward with some interest to see how some Members will attempt to contort the Estimates to provide a platform for issues that they wish to raise today. I am sure that you will rein them in sufficiently, Mr Speaker. I request the support of Members for the first resolution to approve further supply in the 2012-13 financial year to enable vital public services to continue beyond the current provision in the Vote on Account. I also ask for the support of Members for the second resolution to regularise the excess expenditure of resources in 2010-11 by DCAL and DSD.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Committee for Finance and Personnel has a track record of engaging positively and constructively with the Minister and the Department. It is disappointing, therefore, that my contribution to this important debate has to focus on unprecedented, inexplicable and yet to be explained shortcomings on the part of DFP in conducting its engagement with the Committee on the Main Estimates 2012-13 and related Budget (No. 2) Bill in a timely and proper fashion.

DFP officials had been scheduled to brief the Committee on 30 May and 6 June, and that is in line with what has happened previously. The Minister was incorrect — I hope not deliberately so — when he said that one evidence session had been the norm. Although I was not on the Committee in previous years, my advice from the Committee staff is that having two evidence sessions was the norm in 2010-11. The officials were due to brief the Committee on two consecutive weeks. However, the Estimates, Budget Bill

and associated DFP briefing paper were not provided to the Committee in time for the first scheduled evidence session in line with normal practice. As a result, members were unable to engage with departmental officials.

12.30 pm

The Committee was told that the papers were being considered by the Minister, that the Minister was aware of the urgency of the matter, and that there were no significant delays on the part of any other Departments. Indeed, it is still unclear whether the Minister had any issues with the papers. On 30 May, I also drew the Committee's concerns to the attention of the DFP permanent secretary, who was in front of the Committee on that day on another matter.

Another week passed, and at the scheduled evidence session on 6 June, the departmental officials were again unable to explain the reasons for the delay in the papers' being cleared by the Minister. Fortunately, the Committee had allowed an additional week in its work programme that would facilitate a further attempt at engagement with DFP. The papers were eventually provided after the Committee meeting on 6 June, during which members had discussed inviting the Minister to a hearing on 13 June. Although evidence was received from departmental officials on 13 June, this whole episode raises disturbing questions on how and why DFP conducted itself in the way that it did on this occasion and on such an important piece of Assembly business.

In response to the Committee's request for a detailed explanation for the delay, the Minister wrote to advise of an "oversight within the Private Office". To date, that is the only explanation that we have received, and I note that while lambasting the Committee this morning, the Minister did not at any stage attempt to explain why he kept the Committee waiting for two weeks as he sat on the papers that were needed for our scrutiny function. Members were not content with the Minister's explanation, however, and the Committee has invited him to its meeting on Wednesday to provide a full explanation. Again, he has not, as yet, communicated with the Committee to say whether he will or will not attend.

It was also agreed that a decision on whether to grant accelerated passage under Standing Order 42(2) would be taken in light of this meeting with the Minister, and when the Committee is satisfied — as it has a statutory responsibility to the House to be — that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the Bill. The engagement on Wednesday will allow the Minister to explain any mitigating factors for delaying the papers and to account for how he and his Department have conducted consultation on the Budget Bill.

The decision made by the Committee on 13 June was not taken lightly, and I have to say that, in today insulting the Committee members who took that decision, and in knowing their view and their annoyance at the way in which we were treated by the Department of Finance and Personnel — in particular by the Minister, over his lack of explanation for the delay in providing the papers — the Minister has been rapidly talking himself out of the Bill being granted accelerated passage. It would be much better, in terms of constructive engagement with the Committee, if he were to wind his neck in, come along to the Committee on Wednesday and offer a proper explanation for any delay in this, and allow us to get back to normal business rather

than seeking to confront and insult Committee members on this issue.

Clear legal and procedural advice has been received to inform the Committee's deliberations, including on the consequences of not granting accelerated passage to the Bill. DFP previously advised that, should a Budget Bill not be granted accelerated passage:

"Departments would not have the authority to spend and all services would have to stop."

In my view, this advice could potentially have the effect of misleading the Committee.

More recently, the Department has acknowledged that fail-safe mechanisms within existing legislation would allow the DFP permanent secretary to authorise the payment of sums out of the Consolidated Fund and the use of resources in the absence of a Budget Act. However, DFP highlighted two main concerns in that regard. It first argued that the mechanisms allow only for the use of resource of up to 95% of the amount authorised by the previous year's Budget Act and that, as a consequence, some £540 million would be "lost". Indeed, the Minister repeated that this morning. Again, that is inaccurate. The same point was also made in the press release that the Minister managed to issue on 13 June, while he was not communicating with the Committee. Nevertheless, as I said, it is not accurate. It neglects to acknowledge that expenditure will be limited to 95% of the previous year until the Budget Bill is passed, when the full amount of expenditure, as set out in the Bill, will be authorised.

Secondly, DFP stated that £2.1 billion of accruing resources would be lost to the Executive if the Bill did not pass by accelerated passage. Again, this assertion is inaccurate. The Committee is clear in its understanding that the Budget Bill does not authorise the use of accruing resources but instead sets upper limits in this regard. Authorisation for the use of accruing resources is made separately by direction of the Department, subject to the limits set in a Budget Act. In the event of a delay in passing the Budget Bill, it is entirely possible for DFP to make a direction that might, for example, reflect the sums set out in the Bill and the resource use authorised by the DFP permanent secretary. Therefore, the £2.1 billion need not be lost to the Executive if a Committee Stage were to take place.

The Department stated that the Committee had been consulted on the Budget 2011-15, upon which the Estimates and the related Bill are based. That assertion needs to be treated with caution. The Budget 2011-15 was agreed during the previous Assembly mandate, and the consultation took place with a differently constituted Committee. Therefore, although the Committee might have regard to that consultation, it can be afforded only limited weight. Budget Acts for the issue of sums from the Consolidated Fund, their appropriation and use are made annually, and the Committee must be content that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the expenditure proposals in the Bills that are introduced each year.

During the debate on the spring Supplementary Estimates in February, I pointed out that, as there is only one week between those complicated financial documents being laid and debated, there is no opportunity for all the Statutory Committees to scrutinise the departmental estimates.

Therefore, if a Committee Stage of the Budget Bill were to take place, the value of the exercise would be in giving Committees an opportunity to consider the cumulative effect of changes in the 2012-13 figures from the Budget 2011-15 to the Budget (No. 2) Bill. Although some of those changes were contained in last year's monitoring rounds, Committees will not have had an opportunity to examine those in their entirety, and some changes have also taken place since the Vote on Account in February last. In anticipation of today's motions being agreed, a Committee Stage of the Bill would focus on obtaining detailed explanations of the figures, rather than proposing amendments. In many ways, that might serve a more useful purpose than a Second State debate tomorrow.

I turn briefly to the motion on the Excess Votes for DCAL and DSD. Following consideration of the Minister's correspondence of 14 May, the Committee requested the views of the two Statutory Committees on the issue. Both Committees subsequently confirmed that they were content with the position for their respective Departments. Members are also mindful of the recommendation of the Comptroller and Auditor General in that regard.

To conclude, I reiterate my disappointment that, due to the approach taken by the Department, the Committee is not yet in a position where it can decide to grant accelerated passage to the Budget (No. 2) Bill on the basis of having been appropriately consulted. I trust that the Minister will respect the position of the Committee, although from his earlier comments, I think that that seems unlikely. I urge him to attend the meeting on Wednesday — he has yet to communicate to us whether he intends to — and to provide the necessary clarification and assurance. In his winding-up speech, he has an opportunity to explain why he sat on documents for two weeks, denied the Committee an opportunity to properly scrutinise them, embarrassed his own officials, who turned up two weeks in a row without any papers, and continues to insult the intelligence of the Committee and lambaste it for acting responsibly on behalf of the Assembly. It is our statutory duty to assure the Assembly that we have been appropriately consulted and, in this case, quite clearly, we have not.

Although I support the motions before us today, I must indicate that that support is without prejudice to any further explanation of the figures contained in the Estimates and the Budget Bill, which might be required if a Committee Stage of the Bill occurs.

Mr Girvan: I support the motion. As has been outlined, consultation seems to be a major issue in relation to why we are in this position this afternoon. Members are well aware that it is not that long ago since we looked at our budgets for 2012-13. I appreciate that a few months have passed since then. However, to regularise and make major changes, the monitoring rounds have taken place during that process, and the reallocation of funds and how those could ultimately impact on the way forward have to be taken into account.

I appreciate that we are dealing with an £8.2 billion cash allocation and an £8.4 billion resource allocation that needs to be approved to allow spend to go ahead. I agree that it is somewhat ludicrous for the Assembly to have the power to discuss the Estimates and move them forward, and then not move ahead but allow civil servants to take the decisions on behalf of the Assembly, as opposed to ourselves. As has

been said, if a Budget or the Estimates are not agreed, only 95% of that spend could be made up until March 2013. That is something —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Girvan: Yes.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that 95% could be spent before a Budget Bill was approved?

Mr Girvan: I appreciate that it is probably correct that 95% could be spent before a Budget was approved. However, I think that some Members are starting to get a little precious about what they believe to be their consultation. Last week, in Committee, I asked how many changes had been made to the Estimates in all the times that they had been presented to the Committee. The answer was that no changes were made in previous years. I agree that the Committee is looking for transparency. It is vital that we have transparency, openness and accountability for all. Unfortunately, some Departments have, in their Estimates, put in headings such as “Miscellaneous”. I am talking about the Department of Education, which seems to use this as a catch-all, and I appreciate that I may be going into another debate, which could take place on another date. The Committee is attempting to deal with those sorts of issues and create more accountability in the process. However, I believe that what is happening now is just a bit of point scoring on the Northern Ireland draft Estimates, as we have already agreed the budgets and, with very little change, are moving ahead into 2012-13. There is very little change from what was approved.

The Excess Vote deals with a combined unaccounted spend in 2010-11 of some £13 million by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and DSD. The Committee was satisfied with the explanation for that, as was the Public Accounts Committee, so I feel that I can support that.

The Committee has been given its opportunity. The Estimates were laid before the House on 11 June this year. Members were given an opportunity. I believe that, should issues arise, we still have time to move this through. I hope and pray that we can grant accelerated passage to allow us to have proper accountability and move forward as a mature Government. That would be sensible. I am in favour of the motion and the Excess Vote.

Mr Cree: It is that time of year again when we struggle through this huge chunk of paper, with figures that do not facilitate direct read-across, do not provide transparency and do not afford the Assembly the opportunity to adequately scrutinise what financial plans are intended for the year ahead. We call it the Budget process.

In the previous mandate, the Committee for Finance and Personnel worked hard to have the process improved. The current Committee has continued to stress the need for an accountable and transparent process and it provided a report, which was debated in the House. So what has happened in the past year? To the Minister's credit, he prepared a paper, which was sent to his Executive colleagues.

Mr Wilson: On time.

Mr Cree: He gets it right sometimes.

The paper was placed on the agenda, but was not discussed because the Education Minister did not agree with it. That is totally unacceptable. We need to move forward with an improved financial process that is accountable. One-line descriptions are no longer acceptable, such as the already referred to, “Miscellaneous Educational Services”, for which £13 million appears in the Budget.

Today, we are considering the Main Estimates for 2012-13. We are told that this is the second year of a four-year Budget agreed in the previous mandate. I do not believe that previous expenditure proposals are relevant. They are, in fact, of very limited relevance. Each annual Budget deserves scrutiny of every detail. However, this year is different, in that the Committee was unable to examine the departmental documents, because the Department failed to produce any in the vital two weeks. The Committee, therefore, faced a dilemma. To support accelerated passage of the Budget Bill, it must be satisfied that appropriate consultation has taken place with it on the public expenditure proposals. We also know that other Committees have raised concerns about the lack of engagement by their Departments in the monitoring rounds.

12.45 pm

The Minister has been invited to attend a Committee for Finance and Personnel meeting this week to provide a satisfactory explanation for the inordinate delay, on his part, in providing the necessary papers. We were told that a fault had occurred in the private office. I do not know where the private office is; I do not know whether it is in Honolulu, Belfast, even at his home or somewhere else. However, as the Member who has just spoken said, there is sufficient time, given proper consultation, to be in a position to grant accelerated passage to meet the anticipated 31 July deadline for attaining Royal Assent. However, the Minister will be aware that, in the event of a Bill not being in place by that date, the legislation exists, as has been referred to, to enable the DFP's permanent secretary to authorise the payment of sums out of the Consolidated Fund and the use of resources. That is in the region of 95% of the previous year's figure and would be more than sufficient to ensure the smooth running of government until a Budget Bill were passed. That, in fact, would allow for the extra 5%, as has been talked about, and it could take place any time from October to 31 March 2013.

I turn now to some detail in the Main Estimates. In part II of each of the Main Estimates, a breakdown is provided on requests for resources against DEL and AME. Administration is a significant cost to all Departments. How has the request for resources for administration developed over a period? What has been the trend over, say, the past five years, relative to gross total resources required? That could help Committees to build up a picture of the overall balance between expenditure in administration against expenditure on services and programmes. Are Departments becoming more efficient?

Similarly, how has the other current heading changed as a proportion of gross total resources over time? Have resources under the other current heading changed, relative to the requests for administration? Has the level of grants changed significantly over the past few years? What is the Department's explanation for that? What are the consequences of reduced grant-making for departmental

priorities? Is there increased grant-making? Are there implications for what Departments are doing?

What is the pattern of the level of accruing resources identified as a proportion of gross total resources? Are Departments bringing in larger or smaller amounts of income, relative to their total resource requirements? All those points could be supported by the provision to Committees of tables and charts over an appropriate time, which could identify the trends in the figures. Committees could then be empowered to ask Departments for an explanation of trends and/or apparent relative shifts in resource requirements. Committees would be better equipped to understand more about Departments' financial prioritisation and enhanced consideration of the Bill.

I understand that the Second Stage of the Budget Bill will be postponed until next week and will not be debated tomorrow, so we will have more time to scrutinise the figures that continue to be produced.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht ar an rún atá romhainn. I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Supply resolution, etc. Listening to the Minister here pouring scorn on the Committee was, as someone said, *déjà vu* all over again. The only difference is that it is usually the SDLP that he is pouring scorn on, so it is a nice relief to have that scorn shared with others in the Chamber. In any case, I detected a certain arrogance in his attitude to the Committee and in his disregard for the Committee's responsibility to carry out its scrutiny functions. I have to say that it seems that the Minister was somewhat lacking in his responsibility to provide the Committee with the papers in a timely fashion so that it might perform adequate scrutiny. I hope that he will agree to come to the Committee meeting on Wednesday so that whatever misunderstandings have arisen can be sorted out and the Bill can be advanced without any unnecessary delay. We are approaching Wimbledon time, and the ball is in the Minister's court. It is up to him to play it now, and I hope that he makes the right shots.

To return to the Estimates and the debate, there is no doubt that this budgetary period has been among the most difficult faced in Northern Ireland, with a £4 billion cut to the block grant. Added to that, we also had the ending of end-year flexibility, which presented another challenge. That has been replaced by the Budget exchange scheme, which has helped the situation. I commend the Minister for his role in ensuring that the scheme was agreed with the Treasury.

There have also been indications that there were considerable underspends in Departments, and at a time when resources are scarce, that is very worrying. Those underspends will have exceeded the scope of the scheme and may have led to finances being lost to us here. Moreover, the reduction in the number of in-year monitoring rounds from four to three has required Departments to make submissions on underspends earlier than was previously the case. They are now made in October. That change requires much more exact financial monitoring and planning and is a huge challenge for Departments.

As a result of departmental overspends, the Minister has launched a review of departmental spending, which, it is hoped, will ensure that resources are directed more closely

at where they are needed and that spend will be effective and efficient. I have no doubt that the Minister will want to update not only the House but the Committee on the progress of that review to date.

As the Minister said, the capital side has been hardest hit, with a reduction of around 32%. It is important that we continue to push the Westminster Government and urge them not to renege on the £4 billion in capital funding that remains to be paid in the final two years of the investment strategy to 2017. That is in line with the previous Government's commitment.

The SDLP has fully engaged with the budgetary process. We are trying to take every possible step to ensure that the effects of the cuts are mitigated, especially for our most vulnerable citizens. The Minister mentioned the further cuts that we will face owing to changes in welfare provision. Therefore, it is important that the most vulnerable be protected from the severity of the cuts to the fullest possible extent. We have always passed our proposals on to the Minister. We have had robust engagement with him here on many occasions, and I hope that he continues to give our proposals due consideration.

The Minister has said on a number of occasions that the Budget is not set in stone. We all must work to continue to mould and shape it to ensure that it best fits Northern Ireland's needs. Mr Cree mentioned the need for reform of the budgetary process. The SDLP certainly agrees with and supports that proposal. It is important that we attempt to align the Budget with the Programme for Government to the greatest extent possible and ensure that strategic policies are driving financial allocation, not the other way around.

We have been told on previous occasions that £1.6 billion in revenue could be raised. On a previous occasion, the Minister told us that of that £1.6 billion, he would include £862 million in the Budget because he was confident that that could be realised. I wonder whether he still has that confidence and how much of that £862 million has been or will be realised.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for raising the point. He raises it continually and is quite right to do so, because we set targets. We have exceeded the amount of money that we proposed to raise in capital this year by about £29 million. I cannot remember the exact figure offhand, but we have raised almost £200 million through capital asset sales this year, which is above the target set. Even in a difficult time, we are achieving what we set out to achieve.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Minister for his intervention. I welcome the increase in the amount of asset sales realised. However, that certainly was not the case earlier in the year, when realisation was much lower. If we can increase the amount of asset realisation, we will go some way to mitigating the effect of cuts, particularly those resulting from reform of the welfare system.

Much faith has been put in the Budget review group to deliver further revenue. I urge the Minister to do all in his power to ensure that we continue to raise revenue where possible. A further £738 million of the £1.6 billion has not yet been considered. I ask the Minister to consider that figure and to investigate the possibility of further revenue coming from it.

I do not think that we can afford to sit back and view the Budget as done and dusted for the remainder of the Budget period. We must continue to enhance it at every possible opportunity and ensure that we follow every possible measure to mitigate the effect of cuts, through further revenue-raising options; capital asset realisation, as I said; alternative sources of finance; and preventative spending. Most of those ideas have been advanced by the SDLP

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

Mr D Bradley: I hope that the Minister will give due consideration to those proposals. A Cheann Comhairle, go raibh míle maith agat as an deis a thabhairt domh labhairt sa díospóireacht seo.

Mrs Cochrane: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motions. As others said, the onus is on us as Members to consider carefully the cause and effect of the detail set out in the documentation evidenced and interpret how the consequences not only of the Estimates but of the impending Budget (No. 2) Bill might serve to improve and develop our local economy and what impact that will have on our constituents.

The first motion relates to the supply of cash and resources for the remainder of the current year, 2012-13, as detailed in the Main Estimates. The impact of the cuts from Westminster is evident throughout the figures, and this Administration have had to make difficult decisions across almost all Departments that will affect the people whom we represent. There will be further significant impacts as the coalition Government progress the welfare reform programme.

1.00 pm

The financial difficulties that we find ourselves in must be handled maturely and innovatively and with a corporate approach. The Alliance Party believes that we now have an even greater responsibility to tackle the costs of division, which we still estimate to be around £1 billion every year. That is an unjustifiable burden, even at the best of times. I welcome the fact that other parties are now coming round to the Alliance way of thinking and are providing plenty of shared future sound bites, but are we actually making any headway on creating a cohesive, shared and integrated society and achieving the resulting financial savings?

When 'A Shared Future' was published back in March 2005, it recognised that there was a strong financial and economic imperative to build that shared future. Indeed, it declared that the concept of separate but equal was unsustainable, and it argued that parallel living and the provision of parallel services are unsustainable, both morally and economically. It also stated that policies that simply adapt to segregation, rather than challenging it, result in inefficient resource allocations. For example, in the education sector, a failure to move towards a shared system has resulted in Northern Ireland still having the highest spending on education per capita of any part of the UK. However, less is actually spent per pupil than anywhere else. It is estimated that the benefits of shared education could amount to savings of £300 million in the longer term, but, instead, too much money continues to be eaten up through overadministration and the overprovision of partially empty buildings. Budgets are becoming skewed, and, with too much money locked up in capital, the pressure for cuts falls on teachers, pupils, transport, support and special needs. As well as the

potential to use resources more efficiently and effectively, there are conceivable hidden benefits to young people and society as a whole.

Also related to education but within the remit of the Department for Employment and Learning is the issue that initial teacher training education in Northern Ireland is still provided through five higher education institutions. There would be potential savings through administration costs if that was reduced to just one. I welcome the fact that the Minister for Employment and Learning has instigated a two-stage review of teacher training institutions. Phase 1 is looking at the financial viability of the teacher training colleges and is due to be reported on shortly, and phase 2 is to explore models of sharing.

It is important that the Budget and Estimates reflect the fact that the costs of maintaining a divided society manifest themselves across all Departments and spending areas, not just education. We must ensure that the provision of goods, facilities and services at least reflects the changing attitudes to and preferences for sharing and integration.

I now turn to the second resolution, which seeks the Assembly's approval for Excess Votes for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department for Social Development for 2010-11. Departments really should make sure that expenditure does not exceed the limits and restrictions set by the Assembly. The Public Accounts Committee has already considered the excesses in advance of today's debate and found no objection to the granting of such excesses.

The excess resource expenditure of almost £2.8 million by DCAL was due in large part to the unexpected impairment charge levied against land and buildings following the year-end valuation. The excess resource expenditure of approximately £10.2 million by DSD is rationalised by the Department's commitment to increase its spending by up to £11.5 million on promoting measurable improvements to housing in Northern Ireland. It may be worth noting that, in the Estimates, that same area has also seen the most significant cut in comparison with previous years in DSD.

In view of the current constraints on public expenditure, there may be some concern that the risk of overspending will increase and the Assembly will be required to give retrospective approval to more Excess Votes. Our Committees can play a vital role in scrutinising the financial management performance of their respective Departments. The Finance and Personnel Committee, of which I am a member, has been actively involved in the review of the financial process. That should, hopefully, ensure the provision of timely and accurate information by all Departments in order to assist in the scrutiny role and to ensure better financial management across Departments, which can minimise the risk of overspend and significant underspend. The Alliance Party supports the Supply resolutions.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I rise as Chair of the Education Committee to inform the House of the Committee's position on the 2012-13 Main Estimates. I am on record as stating previously in the House that education provides the basis for the personal development in intellect, skills, competencies, personal attributes, values and knowledge that can equip

our young people to succeed in their chosen professions. Although there is much success to be proud of, there is still a significant body of educational underachievement that must be addressed. I remind the House that, in some respects, dealing with that issue sits in the context of how we spend the money that is given to us and the allocation made through the Budget process.

I come again to the House to iterate one issue, which is how the Education Committee receives its information from the Department. I listened with great interest to what the Chairman of the Committee for Finance and Personnel had to say and his outlining of how badly the Department had performed in giving information to his Committee. He should come and sit on the Education Committee for a week or two — he and the members of his Committee, including the former member of the Education Committee who spoke earlier about timely papers. It is not timely to receive a Budget paper on the morning of the day on which you are going to discuss the issue.

There are many people outside the House who would question the ability of Members to do their job. None of us has the ability to take what are, in many respects, challenging and difficult papers on budget allocations, especially from the Department of Education, and find a budget line from one month to another. It is very difficult. I notice Members, including the former Education Minister, who has now been elevated, I understand, to another position of relevance in the House, making comments. If they have any particular issues, I will take interventions — *[Interruption.]*

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

Mr Storey: Committees can scrutinise only on the basis of relevant information that is given to them. I will give you a prime example: the Department of Education has failed over a period to give the Committee information on the allocation of the out-turn. I had to get that information by asking a private Member's question. What does that tell us about the budgetary process that the Department of Education carries out?

Departments, arm's-length bodies, education and library boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and the Youth Council were all given allocations from 2009-2010 through to 2011-12. Their original allocations are stated, as is what they received. In each of those three years, there is an additional £67 million, £91 million and £96 million. I would love to know where that money came from. That is why the Minister is absolutely right in pursuing the issue of a review of the financial process. It is absolutely clear that we need to know where money is allocated and how it is spent.

The Committee has welcomed the additional funding announced by the Department, and I place on record my appreciation to the Finance Minister for his part in that. He has worked extensively to ensure that any additional allocations that could be secured for the Department of Education are secured, and I welcome the fact that that has happened. However, the Committee notes the Minister's recent review of the Budget allocation and calls for better planning in future to assist the Committee with its detailed scrutiny of the Budget throughout the year. I ask that monthly out-turns are forthcoming. That will provide a clear

picture of spend and pressures. In short, the Committee would be the beneficiary of transparency in regard to how the Department of Education deals with its finance.

We all recognise that there are financial constraints on all Departments in how Budgets are allocated and how they are spent. However, the process would be greatly enhanced if the Department of Education, in conjunction with the Department of Finance and Personnel, were able to give information that clearly defined where those budget allocations were being spent.

On 15 May, Members thought that we were to receive £72 million of new money. We were not: that was a reallocation of money that was already in the Budget. Some of us have serious concerns about a new initiative that appeared on a budget line. I am referring to the Belfast initiative. We await information about what that initiative is, as well as information on where the money will be spent and how it will align with policy objectives. It is that type of issue that the House deserves answers to. However, to date, neither the Education Committee nor the House has received adequate answers.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. If we were to reflect on the Assembly's experience over the past mandates, we would see that it demonstrates that the Finance Committee has taken a fairly responsible and flexible approach. The review of the budgeting process was the result of a substantial body of work by the Committee which it reported to the Assembly and got support for. Like other Members, I welcome the fact that the Finance Department and the Minister have responded positively to that work. However, I think that we have come to a situation.

I listened carefully to the Chair of the Education Committee's comments. If ever a presentation argued for a detailed examination of budgetary processes, it was that one, and the Chair of the Education Committee's remarks bear that out. The Finance Committee has always progressed on the basis of co-operation with the Minister and the deadlines that he must operate within, and it has always attempted to respond positively when asked to take exceptional measures.

We have a difficulty. We got an explanation for the failure to produce the relevant documentation — the 2012-13 Estimates. It is not the lightest booklet, nor does it make the lightest reading. It takes a bit of time and consideration. On the first scheduled meeting, during which we were to receive the material and a briefing, the Minister failed to produce the document. The meeting was rescheduled for the following week, and the Minister again failed to produce the document until one hour after our meeting had ended. The document had obviously been prepared. The explanation that we got was that there had been an oversight in the private office. I would like the Minister to explain whether there was an oversight two weeks in a row. Did the Department forget for two weeks to send the material to the Committee that it is statutorily obliged to consult? I also ask you, Mr Speaker, to consider whether it is proper for the Minister to come here and tell the scrutiny Committee what it should do. It is our decision, not the Minister's, how many evidence sessions we require, how much detail we want in answers from the Department and whether we will accept that we have been properly consulted.

We have heard comments on aspects of the budgeting process. Indeed, the Minister has confirmed that the Estimates document is a living document. It does change. At times, Departments may have expectations and make projections that are reported to and accepted by the Assembly but then run into unforeseen problems, such as legal challenges in the tendering process and difficulties with site acquisitions. There are all sorts of reasonable and credible explanations that can be presented for why a particular spending programme was not delivered on time. Indeed, the Assembly has monitoring rounds, reallocation processes and reporting processes that allow people to accept reasonable and credible explanations. Let me say this clearly to the Minister, because he will have an opportunity to correct it today: an oversight in the Minister's office is not a credible explanation for forgetting to send the documentation. For a start, it is too heavy to forget, given that 108 copies have to go out to Members. That is a big pile of documents on somebody's desk.

1.15 pm

The Committee did not get the documentation for two weeks. It addressed the question of trying to meet the deadline, of whether there could be a loss of £500 million and of whether it was essential and necessary. It took independent legal advice. None of the information that we were getting was correct. It was misleading, and some of it was presented to the Assembly again today. It is desirable and preferable that we do things in time. The nuclear option would be the Assembly ending up being logjammed on a budgetary process and being unable to agree a Budget, meaning that we would then lose money.

I am confident that we will resolve the issue, because there are enough reasonable people with common sense around the Chamber. I am confident that we could even do it by the deadline of the end of July, with a bit of come and go from the Minister. I hope that the Minister confirms today that he is coming to his scrutiny Committee on Wednesday to give us an explanation that we can accept as credible and reasonable. We have allowed enough time to meet the original deadline. We can still do it, Minister, but not by calling the Committee infantile and by telling Members that he hopes that they will see the error of their ways. I hope that he will recant when he has an opportunity to speak.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the opportunity to take a more detailed look at the Estimates, particularly given the limited opportunities to date to do so. There has been a lack of transparency in the Estimates process and, as I understand, in the information that has been passed to some of our Committees about that process. Some of my colleagues on Committees told me that sometimes information went to Committee Clerks and that some questions could not be answered. This is about public funding; it is not about money owned by the Minister of Finance or the Minister of Education or any other Minister, for that matter. It is public money, and we have a right to scrutinise how it is spent to try to ensure that, in the public interest, best use is made of it.

Under Standing Order 42, the Finance Committee can grant accelerated passage if it is satisfied that there has been sufficient consultation during the scrutiny process. I wish to repeat something important that the Minister seems to have ignored: for two successive weeks, officials came to the Committee for Finance and Personnel to brief it on the

Estimates process, and for two weeks in a row we were told that the officials could not discuss the matter because the information had not yet been released. On 30 May, an official told us that he understood that:

"the Main Estimates papers are still being considered by our Minister."

On 6 June, officials advised the Committee that:

"The Minister is still considering the papers, and we have not got them cleared by him yet."

The Minister has said that the documents have not really changed since the Budget was approved. If the documents do not change and they are a fait accompli, I want a further explanation for the delay. I would like to understand what is going on. Subsequently, the Committee got a letter from the Department advising it that there had been an oversight in the private office. The Assembly and the public deserve an explanation. Was the Minister on gardening leave? What was going on? Our role is to scrutinise the Estimates and to ask questions to try to ensure good use of public money. We are not being given that opportunity.

Given that process and the lack of engagement, how could any member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, with integrity, consider that there has been sufficient consultation? I also want to highlight to Members something new that has happened since the Budget was passed earlier in the year, which is that we have the Estimates and the out-turns of last year's financial figures. We now know where money has been allocated and whether it has been spent well. What has been the level of expenditure? Again, officials have advised us that the figures for those outcomes are very accurate and are unlikely to change until they are finalised later in the year, so it is a good set of figures to work from. I read the document and looked at a range of figures. In particular, I looked at where there were significant differences between those figures. That showed areas that had not had significant amounts of money spent on them in previous years but might still receive a large allocation when money might be better spent elsewhere.

It is important that there is proper engagement with the Assembly and with the Committees on how the money is spent. I reiterate that this is public money; it is not the fiefdom of an individual Minister. Surely, the Minister must be accountable to the Assembly and to the Committee for Finance and Personnel so that they can ask the appropriate questions.

I welcome the fact that, when engagement finally started with the Committee last Wednesday, 13 June — some two weeks late — we were able to ask why there had been a delay. We started to ask some of the questions that should have been asked a considerable time ago. There is a question still on my mind, on which I seek further explanation. On page 60 of the Estimates, at point A-16, I see that the Middletown Centre for Autism, which had £655,000 allocated to it in 2010-11 and £725,000 in 2011-12, has been allocated £4.9 million. We were not certain why that increase had occurred. The officials came back to us the following day — I think it was the following day, but it was certainly after the Committee meeting — in writing, indicating that the allocation related to a capital grant. Is that the best use of public money? Is it the best use of money for children with autism? Are there other

public assets that could be utilised? Are the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety continuing to go in different directions in dealing with autism? Should we not have an integrated approach to try to ensure good value for money and better outcomes for our young people? The building in itself does not deliver services. We need to know how best we can provide services to our young people and make the best use of that money. I still seek further information about what exactly is planned there and what is envisaged in the long term.

The Minister criticised the Committee for not granting accelerated passage. We actually sought further information and are yet, as I understand it, to take a final decision on the matter. I hope that the Minister will show some humility and, as the Chairman said earlier, wind his neck in. His arrogance in lecturing us does not go well when he is trying to convince Committee members that they have been consulted. The Minister needs to be very careful. The Finance Committee has been very careful. We have taken legal advice, we have checked with the Business Office and we have taken advice from our Clerks about the options between now and the end of the Assembly term and the options thereafter. Again, we have sought detailed advice on the process if the Minister, for some reason, fails to come and consult the Committee appropriately.

I hope that it will be possible to proceed in a timely fashion and without difficulty, but the Minister needs to be very careful about what he says from now on. He can get Committee members' backs up by not realising that they genuinely feel that there has been a lack of consultation. I see he is shaking his head at me again. As I have said, the outcomes have become available. That is new information that can affect my judgement on where various amounts have been allocated in the detailed Estimates.

When the Budget went through, there was no detailed breakdown. All we had in the Budget was headline figures. We now have a more detailed breakdown of how the Ministers intend to spend the money. Surely there should be public scrutiny of how that money is spent to ensure better use of public money.

As others have said, the financial process in the Assembly is very poor. That is not the Minister's fault; it is what has been inherited. I give credit to him and his officials for attempting to change that. I ask why the Minister of Education is holding up the public scrutiny process. I understand that he wants a single line of accountability for his £2 billion budget. Surely, that is not in the public interest. There ought to be greater scrutiny of what is happening and greater transparency in how money is spent during the year, so that we can get the maximum use of that money for the benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland.

I posed a couple of other questions because I am concerned that we make good investments. I noticed that DFP increased the Land and Property Services budget from £26.8 million to £31 million. It was right to ask the question, and after doing so we learned that there is an invest-to-save procedure going on there whereby they are trying to become more efficient. I am content with that explanation. That has to be welcomed.

Other colleagues were concerned about the increased use of the word "miscellaneous" to avoid transparency and

accountability. It would be much better if that word were avoided except in exceptional circumstances, and if it is used as a heading then the detail of what the money is spent on should be given below.

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

Mr Beggs: With regard to the Excess Vote, I am content with the explanation for DCAL. I would seek further information on what the additional £11.5 million for DSD was spent on in order to be satisfied with that.

Mr Hamilton: I support the two motions. When I was first elected, many Members here today were also first elected to the Assembly in 2007. I have to recall that now. It seems like a lifetime ago. One argument that many of us put forward was the need for better budgeting.

We inherited many things, not least the process. We also inherited a fairly lax approach to spending what was given to us through the block grant. It was maybe not a popular thing to preach at that time because the Budget was pretty good, certainly in comparison with where we are now. A lot of money was coming into Northern Ireland from the Exchequer, so maybe it was not the most critical of matters at that time, but it was one that many of us did keep on and on at. During my time on the Finance Committee, we regularly discussed how we could make sure to spend every penny we had and in the most efficient way possible.

Now that we are in distinctly tighter times with public funding, that is a message that everybody should be getting. It would seem that thankfully over the past number of years, particularly in this past financial year, performance is much better. When devolution was re-established in 2007, underspends of around or in excess of 5% were the norm. Some members of the Finance Committee at that time will remember seeing such figures coming before us from direct rule Ministers, underspending huge swathes of the money that they had. The Committee and Minister at that time said that that was not good enough and things needed to be tightened up and Departments needed to sharpen their pencils. So, we have moved from having underspends of around 5% and hundreds of millions of pounds going back to the Treasury unspent every year to a position where capital and current underspend in the past financial year is at 0.5%. The average underspend over the past seven years was, I think, around 1.7% in current expenditure and an unbelievable 7% on the capital side. Think of the projects that that could have built. It really was a scandal.

We bandy percentages and figures about, but it is worth putting this into language that people can understand. We are regularly argued at by some people in ivory towers who say that we should introduce water charges and to hell with the consequences for householders in Northern Ireland. However, the difference in moving from where we were to 0.58% is more than would be raised by levying water charges on individuals in Northern Ireland. So, just by managing our expenditure better, we are in a much better position. It meant that, this year, because of the budget exchange scheme that the Minister suggested to the Treasury, none of the money that we did not spend this year went back to the Treasury, whereas under the old rules even end-year flexibility money could have gone back. Certainly, under the initial budget exchange scheme we would have

lost large percentages of that cash and would not have been able to put it to good use in Northern Ireland.

1.30 pm

In addition, it was noticeable in the provisional out-turn this year that Departments were bearing down on administration, and that, without putting any targets on it, unlike Whitehall Departments, administration expenditure was reduced by an average of 6%. That sends out the message that Departments are not only understanding that they need to work better at spending the money that they have but that they are spending it where it should be spent and not on administration. I think that Departments are managing their finances better, particularly in these tight circumstances, which Mr Bradley described as some of the worst ever.

We agreed to a four-year Budget to give certainty to Departments. We have done that, and Departments are getting the message about better financial management. Why then, would we not grant accelerated passage and, thereby, cause uncertainty to trickle into Departments? As the Minister said, it is not as though the Budget Bill to be debated tomorrow is, in any way, a revelation. About 95% of it is what was agreed in the Budget anyway. The difference is in the movements about which we are all well aware, such as the reallocations of the A5 and A8 money, the movement of money from the centre into the social protection fund, the money associated with not increasing student fees and the reduction in air passenger duty. We are aware of those things anyway.

I appreciate the point that the Budget requires scrutiny, but the Assembly has already agreed to more than 95% of this Budget, and the remaining figures are things about which we are already aware, by and large. The Main Estimates and, indeed, the Budget Bill, do not represent some sort of revelation for Members.

Much has been said about a lack of consultation. I am a Member of this House and I respect that Committees should be able to scrutinise. Individual Members such as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education and members of other Committees have sometimes said that they do not get sufficient time to scrutinise things, and the Budget process itself has been questioned. I agree with the comments made about that. The Budget process is not sufficient, and that is why there is a proposal to change it and make it better. However, to say that there has been a lack of consultation on these Estimates, these motions and, indeed, the Budget Bill, is not true.

Mr McLaughlin outlined the sequence of events. The Committee for Finance and Personnel did not get the papers when it thought it was going to get them, but it is my understanding that it got them a week before its meeting last week. That may sound like a short period for the Committee to scrutinise the material, but the truth — as Mr McLaughlin will know, because he chaired the Committee for a number of years — is that in the previous term of this Assembly and into this term, Mr McLaughlin, and Mr Beggs, who was on the Committee at that time, agreed to accelerated passage of the Budget Bill on every occasion but two, with one meeting with officials and one meeting with the papers before them. Therefore, to say that this is some sort of anomaly and that it is wildly different is completely inaccurate.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Mr McLaughlin, Mr Beggs and others, including Mr Bradley and I, have agreed to accelerated passage with one meeting and the papers before us once.

I will give way.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. I accept his point about previous years, but will he agree that the circumstances this year are exceptional in that officials arrived at the Committee on two consecutive weeks embarrassed by the fact that they had no access to the papers that they were to share with the Committee?

Mr Hamilton: It is not the first time that that has happened in this Assembly. It is probably not the first time that it has happened in the Committee for Finance and Personnel. I recall officials coming to the Committee and being sent away because papers had not arrived. I was happy to agree to that, even though colleagues of mine were the Ministers at the time. The argument put forward for accelerated passage not being granted was that there has been a lack of consultation. My point to the Member and to others is that exactly the same time for consultation has been granted as has been granted on every occasion in the past.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: It has been agreed to by the Committee on every occasion, except two, amounting to close to a dozen times over the past five years.

I will give way.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I know that you are anxious about the time. We should remember that the Committee has not decided not to grant accelerated passage. It has allowed sufficient time to resolve the difficulty that has arisen. When an agenda for Committee is set, the Department is notified. There was no courtesy of a warning in advance that we would not have the documents and that the item should have been taken off the agenda. In fact, the officials turned up and the Committee was expected to discuss a document that it had not seen. That is the issue. I think that we can resolve it, but no decision has been taken yet.

Mr Hamilton: I welcome the points at the start and the end of the Member's contribution. I think that this can be resolved. It has to be resolved, because there are consequences. The Member was right in his contribution: the Committee can decide to do whatever it wants, but there are consequences for taking certain decisions. There are issues over the use of the permanent secretary granting 95%. The idea of handing over the ability to grant that money — I think that the ominous words "as he may direct" are contained in the relevant legislation — to a civil servant is what many of us have fought to get away from over the years. There are potential consequences for the use of receipts. Some Members may vote in a way that harms their own Minister. The Department of the Environment, which is the Department of Mr Bradley's ministerial party colleague, Mr Attwood, is very dependent on receipts coming in. It is our understanding that that may not be able to be used, so that Department may run out of cash much quicker than others. There are consequences for not doing this. The Committee has the right to do what it has done, but it is not without consequence.

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

Mr Hamilton: I urge that in the time available to us we resolve this issue so that those consequences do not become a reality.

Mrs Overend: I am pleased to speak on the Main Estimates today, given the importance of the subject matter at hand. The Estimates set out the detailed resource and cash spending plans for all Departments for 2012-13. For that reason, it is important that they are given adequate scrutiny. I express concerns about the amount of time that Members have been afforded to consider a document that is 370 pages long and contains a vast amount of information and figures. The Finance Minister will be well aware of the position of the Committee for Finance and Personnel in that regard. It is important that the situation does not recur.

Every debate around the Budget in the House is accompanied by the usual calls for changes to how the Budget process works. I welcome the work that the Minister has undertaken thus far, but we cannot allow the review of the financial process to be held up any longer. It is important that the Finance Minister ensures that the necessary changes are put in place despite the opposition that is coming from some quarters.

As the UUP's enterprise, trade and investment spokesperson, I want to use my time to focus specifically on the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). The work that is undertaken by that Department is hugely important, given the current economic climate. The Executive have rightly set out the economy as the number one priority in this Assembly mandate. The Estimates state that the provision that is sought for 2012-13 is 11% lower than the final net provision for 2011-12. That shows the scale of the challenge that DETI faces. By any standards, that is a significant decrease in budget; it equates to over £30 million. Therefore, it is imperative that every funding allocation is scrutinised to ensure efficiency.

Unfortunately, it is not possible through the Main Estimates to look into that level of detail. However, I intend to look at a few of the central features of enterprise, trade and investment. Job creation is key to the recovery of the Northern Ireland economy. The latest unemployment figures show that 62,500 people are claiming unemployment-related benefits. That figure has increased steadily over the past while. That is compounded by the serious problem of youth unemployment, which has increased by around 125% since 2008. The Programme for Government sets out the commitment to support the creation of 25,000 jobs by 2015. That is what we are working towards.

In autumn last year, following the Chancellor's statement, the Minister confirmed to me that Northern Ireland was due £10.3 million in Barnett consequentials in 2012-13 from the youth contract initiative. I have called for that to be directed towards tackling youth unemployment, which should be a priority. Can the Minister explain where that money is going? Does he agree that youth employment is the ideal area for that substantial funding to be allocated to?

Invest Northern Ireland obviously has an important role to play in job creation, given that it is responsible for the establishment and expansion of small businesses. Indeed, it accounts for the majority of the DETI budget. The Estimates show a slight reduction in DEL from last year to

£104,000 as well as an increase of £11.08 million in the form of a grant that is included along with the non-budget allocations. I support the prioritisation of job creation, but it is regrettable that there is no detail on what the substantial increase is for, and that is perhaps a flaw of the financial process and, to some extent, exposes the inadequacy of today's debate.

It is important that there is flexibility in Invest NI's budget to ensure that there is no repeat of its performance of last year when it handed back nearly £40 million during two monitoring rounds. That was not ideal and creates a very negative perception of Invest NI among the business community as well as the public at large. That issue was raised when the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment received a briefing from Invest NI recently, and I would welcome an update from the Minister on the potential opportunities for increased budget flexibility for Invest NI.

I mentioned the Programme for Government (PFG) target for jobs, and it is important that the PFG ties in with the Budget. In the absence of a costed PFG, I would welcome clarification on the specific number of jobs as well as the type of jobs that the Estimates will support the promotion of in 2012-13.

I will also mention tourism within the context of the Estimates. We are all aware that tourism is a key driver of the economy, and Northern Ireland has some unique events next year to take advantage of. Examples include the World Police and Fire Games, with events taking place at locations throughout the country, as well as Londonderry as the UK City of Culture. The Estimates show an allocation of £370,000 in 2012 for the development of tourism. You will agree that that is rather vague, and I would welcome clarification on specifically how that money is to be utilised. In the non-budget section of the DETI Estimates, it is evident that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland are subject to substantial cuts to their grant allocations. The economic strategy identifies tourism as a sector that needs to be developed, yet it is arguable whether the Estimates do that.

I will take the opportunity to raise the issue of a tourism strategy. It is clear that the sector wants that, and the Minister has stated that she hopes to bring one alongside the economic strategy. That has not happened, and, as a result, we have no overarching cross-departmental strategic focus for tourism in Northern Ireland. That needs to be rectified as soon as possible.

Lastly, I want to mention the imminent abolition of the Department for Employment and Learning. It is clear that some of those responsibilities will move to DETI during 2012-13, and I believe that the majority of those functions should move to DETI, but that is a separate debate. The point is that increased budget responsibilities will come as a result, and, therefore, the DETI Estimates before the House today will not remain unchanged. I seek clarification from the Minister about how he will deal with the impending situation of the increased budget for DETI as well as other Departments that are to be affected in a practical sense as it is important that we have transparency.

Mr Hilditch: I support the motions before the House today, and I do so as a member of the Finance and Personnel Committee, which has been continuously looking at the

situation and has received briefings from officials over the four-year Budget period thus far.

As an individual constituency MLA, I have taken a close interest in the financial planning process that has involved the four-year Budget being set and the agreeing of the finance to be spent, and there have been changes over the past 12 months. My constituency and others are affected by those matters, and Committees will discuss those issues at their meetings. The House has been made aware of and informed about that over a period of time.

Today's debate takes place, once again, with the backdrop of the economic difficulties. The difficult times continue for everyone. It was the same at this time last year and, if we are honest, will be the same for some considerable time ahead.

However, it is the job of government to see the country move forward, react accordingly and attempt to keep it moving forward. This is what the House is attempting to do by giving legal approval for the spend set out in the Estimates. I am content to do so, while joining the Minister, the Department and most Members to strive for the continual improvement of the financial planning process, the Estimates process and the budgetary process, which have been discussed at length in the Finance Committee. That will be ongoing for some time yet. Hopefully, an end will be reached, when an open and transparent process will be in place to everyone's satisfaction.

1.45 pm

Two Excess Votes are before us, for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department for Social Development. As a member of the Finance Committee, it was clear to me that the proper processes had been followed and that the appropriate approval had been sought. We will support the motion with that knowledge and in the knowledge that the Committee was fully informed and that it communicated with the relevant Committees. The budgetary process and the Estimates are the result of much consultation and input from the many sectors in Northern Ireland, and I hope that, within hours of today's sitting, the process can proceed as envisaged with as little discomfort as possible. We have already agreed the Budget, and many of the limited changes that have been agreed have been before the House. Hopefully, we can move forward after today.

I welcome the funding that is made available in the Estimates for both the major road schemes in my constituency, the A8 and the A2. Both schemes awaited approval for many years under direct rule, especially the A2 plans. The ideas and communications on that go back to the early 1960s, so we are delighted to see funding for that contained in the spend. Anyone who travels on the A2 from Silverstream to Seapark — Ministers have done so in recent times — will be aware of the problems of commuters and of the plight caused by a number of homes and properties having been derelict for a time, with a whole community displaced. This year's spend will be welcomed in that area for that reason.

The Budget for the year ahead will also present some difficulties and challenges, because the A2 scheme is a £60 million project. A number of sections in Departments will need to collate information to make the situation bearable for folk who live in the area.

Having served on the Committee for Social Development, I share the Minister for Social Development's enthusiasm for and commitment to urban and town centre regeneration. That is reflected very well in the spend for the coming year. The Department has been responsible for the creation of a number of master plans in towns and villages throughout the Province and has budgeted accordingly. That spend should be commended, because there were doubters at the time.

I particularly welcome the major environmental improvement schemes throughout the financial year, and I cite as an example the one in the town of Carrickfergus in my constituency. A partnership between the local council and the Department for Regional Development (DRD) brings together some £2 million for the project, and, again, that is reflected in this year's spend. That is notwithstanding the help with rates that the Minister and the Department, in trying to help town centres, are providing to small businesses. I totally agree with the Minister's sentiments about putting the heart back into our cities and town centres. We must maximise the financial resources that are available through partnership-working with Departments, agencies and, indeed, the private sector, which is pretty enthusiastic about that area of work. Many of our older, historic towns have large portions of abandoned land and vacant properties. The master plans that we are funding and the streetscapes that we have budgeted for and that will soon kick in are a catalyst for regeneration. I particularly look forward to the completion of the regeneration schemes. In some areas, housing lists are excessive, and opportunities exist to encourage some development of domestic housing in town centres, especially development above premises and of courtyards, which is envisaged in some of the schemes. I can but encourage a continuation of the financial planning around such issues.

I am a member of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, which includes among its responsibilities the delivery of sport throughout Northern Ireland. Through our devolved Government, much has been delivered in that sector over recent years, but much more work needs to be done on the ground now that we are up and running at Stormont. However, there is some concern that the Budget, as it sits, will deliver projects at the high end of the scale. Although that will certainly benefit our elite sports people and athletes who are in the news, those at the grass-roots level may continue to suffer and struggle a little.

Clearly, the new stadium projects for the three main sports will eat up a lot of the capital. With proper planning, they can become vibrant centres for their sports, and their hinterlands will also benefit from the spend, part of which will be in this year. Indeed, not redeveloping Windsor Park may have resulted in our national team having to play home games outside Northern Ireland. However, we must be careful not to create a have and have-not hierarchy in sport. I have previously stated in the House that sport has gone through some difficult times in the past 40 years and that its survival is due, in no small amount, to the many volunteers and administrators who give of their time and energy in the cause of their sporting disciplines and clubs. It is clear, however, where the investment has been, to date. I know and have witnessed from my work outside the political arena that that has been partly, or initially, down to, for instance, health and safety issues, particularly in stadiums.

In trying to cover those three areas, I am happy enough that the Estimates before us move forward, and I hope that the problems outlined by some of our other colleagues in the Chamber can be overcome within the next few sittings.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): I welcome the opportunity to outline the Environment Committee's views on the Supply resolution for the Main Estimates for 2012-13.

Everyone in this place will be aware of the pressure that Departments face in providing their services for less and less income. The Department of the Environment (DOE) is particularly exposed to such pressures for two main reasons. First, some 80% of the Department's discretionary expenditure is on staff salaries, which places major restrictions on developing cost reductions. Secondly, the Department relies heavily on income from planning applications for its funding. At the start of this Budget period, the Department advised the Committee that it was looking at an income of some £10 million less, a 45% drop on that of three years ago. The Committee is deeply concerned about the long-term impacts of that on the Department's delivery of its services, but it welcomed many of the measures that the Department is putting in place to try to minimise the impact of falling revenue. However, the Committee is adamant that the Department needs to be very careful in how it achieves this.

One of the key ways that the Department delivers its services is by funding external bodies that provide practical expertise on the ground. The Committee recently heard that, to meet the EU water framework directive's requirements, DOE produced and published river basin management plans to improve freshwater bodies in Northern Ireland by 2015. An interdepartmental bid totalling just under £8.9 million was developed to cover the additional resources that would be required to implement these plans, but it was, unfortunately, unsuccessful. Subsequently, it was agreed to fund the DOE elements of the bid through moneys returned to the Department's baseline budget for 2011-12, in lieu of income from the planned single-use carrier bag levy.

The DOE reprioritised its budget to grant-aid some small local community projects for improvement work under local management area action plans. That is welcome, and it has achieved some excellent results, but it cannot be seen as a strategic approach to delivering key European obligations. The river basin management plans state that only 28% of water bodies are at good status and, through the measures in the plans, the aim is to increase that to 59% by 2015. When briefing the Committee last week, DOE officials stated that that target would be very challenging if no extra resources were found. Failing to meet the requirements of the water framework directive has the potential for huge infraction fines from the EU.

We know that the single-use levy is pending, but we also know that it is unlikely to provide the revenue required in time to ensure that the necessary work is done. In fact, if it is successful in its aim, it will generate no revenue at all. The Environment Committee is adamant that the levy should not be used as a tax to generate essential funding for DOE, and I urge the Assembly to ensure that the necessary funding is provided to ensure that we can meet European standards for our environment.

The Committee is also concerned about the need for adequate funding for the RPA process. It is essential that the DOE bid in the June monitoring round is successful in order to provide the necessary assistance to the voluntary transition committees in this financial year.

I welcome the proposed £100,000 within the bid to commission community places to support the development of community planning in communities and each council cluster.

Mr Allister: In the Supply resolution for the Main Estimates, there is £8.2 billion on the cash side and £8.4 billion on the resource side. The two put together come to over £16.5 billion. The fundamental question that anyone living in Northern Ireland should reflect on when hearing the figures that we have to spend is this: where has that money come from? Another way of putting it is this: how much of that money did we accrue ourselves in Northern Ireland — from our own tax base and our own various mechanisms for raising funds — and how much of it is subvention from the British Government?

Just yesterday, another one of the fantasists who used to sit on the Sinn Féin Benches opposite the Minister was telling us about the economic attractions of a united Ireland and the Utopia that it would be, and never paused to think, never mind answer the question, of where the money would come from. The first matter that the debate throws up into sharp relief for such fantasists is where the £16.6 billion is coming from. It is certainly not coming from the direction they want to take us. Rather, it is coming from the source that they want to take us away from, that of our affinity and partnership in the United Kingdom. That is the sobering reality of any debate about finance in this House, and one that too few want to discuss, contemplate or take on board. Oh yes, they are very happy to pontificate about all their nonsense proposals of Irish unification, but they are never willing to pause a moment to reflect on the fact that the £16.6 billion that we spend in this Province comes from that dreaded, hated British connection.

If that connection was not there, the money would not be there.

2.00 pm

Having said that, I hesitate to comment too much upon the latest rift in the DUP/Sinn Féin marriage. Far be it from me to talk at all about that particular marital discord, but it is quite clear that there is something of an issue between the Minister and his Sinn Féin colleagues in government around the accelerated passage process. He has waxed quite robust in his comments in that regard. I do not know when they will kiss and make up, but I am sure that they will, in due course. Nor do I know what this particular trade-off is part of, or whether, in settling the issue of accelerated passage, there will be some other pay-off on something else. Doubtless there will be. I will never know the details of the kiss-and-make-up package, but I am sure it will be there, nonetheless.

The whole issue of accelerated passage is significant. As I understand it, as we stand here today, there is legal authority to discharge up to 45% of the Budget expenditure on the Bill that we previously passed in the spring. That should take us through, I suppose, until the end of the summer. Then, we have the suggestion that, if we do not sort the accelerated passage, we can still have the permanent secretary, under the powers given in the 98 Act,

sign off up to 95% of the Budget. I have serious reservations as to whether that is legally tenable. It is quite clear that the reasonable expectation attached to the power in the '98 Act is that it is to be used in circumstances of extremis, where there is an essential breakdown in government. Where you have a supposedly functioning Executive and a supposedly functioning Assembly, the reasonable expectation is that the Executive will bring to the Assembly, and the Assembly will approve, the budgetary plans for the incoming year. The reasonable expectation is that, while the Executive and Assembly continue in existence, you will not circumvent that simply by a default mechanism through the permanent secretary. In real political institutions, if an Executive could not get their Budget through their Parliament or Assembly, that Government would fall. That is the natural logic of parliamentary democracy. I caution as to whether it is a right and legitimate use of the permanent secretary's power over 95% of the Budget to exercise it on that ad hoc basis. I really do have serious reservations whether that is viable.

When I look at the figures, I see £16.6 billion. I compare them with last year, and see that, last year, we voted through just under £16.8 billion. Yes, there is a reduction, but in the scale of things, it is a very small reduction. It is a reduction of £170 million, which is not to be sniffed at, but, in the scale of £16.6 billion, it is a relatively small percentage. The question that that raises for me is this: how does that sit with the fact that we have been repeatedly told about £4 billion of cuts? If there were £4 billion of real cuts to real budgets, one would expect the decline on the graph to be much steeper than the decline it shows from last year. No doubt the Minister can explain that.

Even within that, there is still time for squander. There are still issues on which we can readily, happily and enthusiastically squander money. Perhaps the Minister can tell us whether these Estimates allow us to spend another £5 million this year on spin doctors, for example. Is there another £5 million earmarked for spin doctors to tell the story of the Executive? Sometimes, even with the 161 staff in the press office, they think that they get a raw deal with the press. They think, "How dare press people challenge, question or assert anything to the contrary in respect of what the Executive say." Are we going to squander another £5 million on that this year? Are we going to squander another £1.25 million on hospitality? That is £3,000 a day. Is that what the Executive require to spend on hospitality? Has that been cut? Are we going to spend £400,000 on the vanity project of photographers to take photographs of our Ministers, so that we might have the privilege of paying for the photographs we see appearing in the media? One wonders if there are any cuts there. One fears not. More will be squandered.

Of course, we come to the most sacred cows of all — those of the North/South arrangements. In this Budget, we see under the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister a 30% increase in the allowance to the wretched, miserable, useless North/South Ministerial Council. Oh yes, schools might be under threat of closure and hospitals' acute facilities might have to be reduced, but we can find an extra 30% for the North/South Ministerial Council, which has never done anything for anyone in this Province. There is £30 million this year again for the North/South bodies. Yes —

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

Mr Allister: — there is still a lot of room for squander where the money is least needed. That is part of the story of these Estimates.

Mr Wilson: I thank Members for the contributions they have made to the debate. I suspect that the debate will be remembered more for what Mr Allister described as the little spat between myself and the Committee over whether it had sufficient time to look at the Estimates than for the detailed discussion on the Estimates. I do not think that anyone will want to take advice, on this issue, certainly, from the Jim Allister marriage guidance association. I do not think that there is a great deal of kissing going on in this marriage anyhow. Some people described it as a shotgun marriage.

Mr Hamilton: They got rid of all the shotguns, did they not?

Mr Wilson: They were decommissioned some time ago, so I do not think that that will apply.

I will probably have time to deal with the main point about the consultation that has been made by a number of Members. I want to make it clear from the outset that, as far as I am concerned, as Minister, I seek to, and seek to ensure that my officials, provide information to the Committee, attend the Committee meetings when asked and deal with the Committee as fully as we possibly can on those occasions. There was a breakdown on this occasion. I wrote to the Committee and made it quite clear that it was a mistake; it was not deliberate. When it was discovered, it was immediately remedied. The total responsibility lies with me, and an apology was made. That is as far as I will go.

It appears that some of the Committee members want me to grovel. Well, I am not prepared to do that. I will accept responsibility for mistakes that were made, and I will apologise for them. Once I do that, I expect the people who have been inconvenienced by that mistake to be mature and grown up enough to accept that and to move on, and not to engage in some kind of petty point-scoring and to keep picking at the issue.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I do not want to delay you, but your officials will have come back after the first scheduled discussion had to be abandoned and reported that the difficulty was that the documentation was not produced and that they were unable to engage with the Committee. We were given two explanations. The first was that you were still engaged in checking through the document and were unable to sign off on it. We then got a written explanation, which said that it was an oversight. Which is the truth?

Mr Wilson: The letter that came from me, saying that it was an oversight, was the explanation that I wished the Committee to have. The Committee has that, and I do not wish to go any further than that. Let me put on public record that I have accepted responsibility for that oversight, and I have apologised for it. Contrast that with what I have described, and I will not step back from it, as the truculent response and petulance of the Committee. It received the papers one week before the Committee was due to meet officials. Therefore, there was plenty of time to read them. Normally, Committees have only one session with officials. Committee members had time to read them and had the

officials in front of them, but most of that meeting was spent discussing issues other than the Estimates. As a result, the process of accelerated passage was held up, and the Committee knew the consequences of that.

I have accepted that I made a mistake. It was not deliberate, and it was remedied quickly. The stance that the Committee has taken is deliberate, calculated and unnecessary. It had an opportunity to do what it had to do, which was to scrutinise the Estimates. However, when Committee members had the officials before them, they decided to talk about a whole host of other things that were not relevant to the Estimates, including why the papers were late. When you contrast the two situations, you can see why I feel particularly sore about the way in which the Committee has dealt with this matter. However, I welcome the remarks that were made by Mr McLaughlin, who at least seems to have taken a fairly measured response to the issue. He accepted that the Committee still has time and has not made up its mind yet about what will happen.

I hope that good sense will prevail. Outside, people will ask whether it is a mature response, once an apology has been made, for the Committee still to jeopardise the Bill's progress and, as Mr Hamilton said, cause uncertainty in Departments about what money they will have to spend for the next four or five months until we come back after recess and deal with the Budget Bill through the full process in September.

I really want to move on, but it is significant that many of the Members who felt most vexed, including the Chairman, spent their entire speeches complaining about the fact that the papers were late and did not mention anything that was in the Estimates. Again, that is an indication of where some people are coming from on this issue.

Despite what a number of Members said, on most occasions, apart from two in the past 10 years, one evidence session has been sufficient. Officials reported to the Committee last Wednesday, so the Committee had a week to consider the papers provided, and it did not take the opportunity to have the normal one-session scrutiny.

In fact, as I say, about 80% of the time was used to talk about things other than the Estimates, which the Committee had in good time. I hope that, on reflection, Members will get off their high horses, which, I think, is how the Chairman described it, and that we will get back to the normal process for this.

2.15 pm

I will now turn to some of the remarks that other Members made. Mr Cree raised the issue of the figures that were before the Committee. The point is that 95% of what was before the Committee had been scrutinised before. As I pointed out, when the Chairman of the Committee spoke on the issue in the Assembly last year he reported that he was very happy with the level of scrutiny of those figures, the evidence that it had taken and the information from Committees, etc. So, 95% of what was before the Committee had already been scrutinised, and the Chairman reported that the Committee was well satisfied that it had been given an opportunity to scrutinise that information.

The remaining part was about monitoring rounds, etc. There have been statements in the Assembly, and members

have questioned my officials about monitoring rounds in Committee. Again, some of the capital reallocations were subject to statements in the Assembly, and there were opportunities for Members to ask questions about that. So, it was not as though the other 5% had not been scrutinised either, because it had.

Mr Cree asked what relevance this year's figures had for the Budget 2011-15, which I referred to. I must say that I am puzzled by that, because the Estimates relate to the second year of the Budget. That Budget was fully scrutinised. I stood in the Assembly for hours getting questioned about it, and I bored Members stiff with my responses, which, sometimes, I gave until 12.00 midnight. So, I was puzzled when the Member asked about the relevance of the figures, because we have already discussed them.

Mr Cree also raised the issue of the transparency of the Budget process, as did a number of other Members. I have made it clear that I want the Budget process to be as transparent as possible. I have criticised Ministers in the past for not giving their savings plans to their Committee. Indeed, some Ministers still have not done so. However, I did not hear any criticism of them. Some Ministers from the parties that do the most complaining have not yet given their departmental savings plans to their Committee for scrutiny. So, on the one hand, we get lectured about transparency, and, on the other, some Ministers from the very parties that lecture us about that have, one year on, still not told their Committee how they are going to save the money that they have to save in their budget. Therefore, so much for that kind of scrutiny.

Mr I McCrea: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: Yes.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister referred to the need for Departments to keep things transparent. Would he do the House a favour and name those Ministers?

Mr Wilson: I was, in fact, going to go further than that. The Member for East Antrim is one of those particularly perturbed by the whole issue. However, last year, his Minister, who of course is not now the Health Minister — the Health Department is being run much better as a result — would not even go and discuss the Budget with his Committee; he preferred to protest outside with unions. Mr Beggs was at the forefront of defending that Minister. Therefore, so much for his concern about transparency and the rights of Committees. When it suited him, he was quite happy to support a Minister who would not even give the Committee the time of day on the important matter of how £4 billion was to be spent in his Department.

Mr Storey, of course, raised the issue of transparency. It is a great point. It is now a matter of public record, so I am not breaking any confidences when I point out that the Education Minister seems to be the one Minister who does not want transparency in his budget.

The irony is this, of course: the information that the Education Minister gives about his budget to the Treasury in England — in what is, for Sinn Féin, the hated Westminster Parliament — is much more detailed than that which he gives to the Committee in the Assembly. So much for transparency. It is a great pity. It irks me that we have not been able to move forward with the Budget process and

with a more transparent Budget because it is being held up by one Minister, although I hope that the situation will be resolved. Two Sinn Féin Members have already mentioned the issue in this debate. I hope that they will bring pressure to bear on their Minister to accept that there must be transparency in how money is raised.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for giving way. Will he explain why one Minister, namely the Minister of Education, can hold up the improvement of the financial process for the Assembly and the Executive?

Mr Wilson: The Minister of Education can do so for a simple reason. Perhaps the Member does not wish to remember the deal provided by his party when it was settled that such decisions had to be made by cross-community support and, as a result of one Minister deciding that he does not wish to have transparency, the process is held up. All I say to the Member is that we have to live with the legacy bequeathed to us by his party. Perhaps the Member should remember that before he makes silly interventions. He should think through the consequences of interventions before he gets up on his hind legs and raises the issue.

Mr Bradley raised the issue of additional revenue not in the Budget. The Budget review group is still looking at additional revenue proposals. I am pleased to report to the Member that we raised £171 million in capital receipts last year, which is £29 million above the target that we had set ourselves. Given the difficulties with the property market etc, that at least augurs well for us meeting the targets that we have set. If there are opportunities to raise more money through capital receipts, we have said that we will do so. We want to add as much to the Budget as we possibly can.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for giving way. The House might be interested to know where the hundred and whatever it was million that he raised came from. What items of the family silver did you sell to get it?

Mr Wilson: The Member uses the pejorative term “family silver”; however, we will not get any money if we do not sell something. The Member has to accept that. I do not have a comprehensive list of the capital receipts. The Member’s party was one of those that encouraged the Executive to raise money in that way. If we are to raise money from capital receipts, we must relinquish something. People will not give us money for nothing.

Again, the Member ought to think through his point before he raises it.

Mr McCarthy: You did not tell us what you sold.

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

Mr Wilson: The Member says that I have not given a comprehensive list of the assets sold, but I am afraid that I am not a walking encyclopaedia on the issue. I can give the headline figure: we aimed to raise £142 million, and we raised £171 million; we are over the target for the year. That money goes back into capital projects that help the construction industry, improve our infrastructure and make Northern Ireland a better place to invest in. Those are the things that the money has gone on.

The Member talks about the family silver. If we have an asset that is redundant and we do not need, it makes sense

to dispose of it and use the money for something that we want to do.

Mr Bradley also spoke about the underspend in Departments and suggested that the levels declared by Departments would lead to a loss of resources for Northern Ireland. I will finish on this point, Mr Speaker, because I know that you are keen to shut me up. All that I can say is that, because of the Budget exchange system that we negotiated with the Treasury, not one penny has been lost to Northern Ireland this year. We have been able to carry money over — money that I will be announcing very shortly — to be allocated to various Departments in the June monitoring round.

I would prefer Departments to underspend rather than squander money. If they find that they do not have the opportunity to spend money, they should return it early so that we can either spend it in-year or carry it into the next year for projects that are of higher priority. Departments should not spend money just to get rid of it.

Mr Speaker: I am sorry that I must interrupt the Minister, as he is in full flight at the moment. As Question Time begins at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the Minister will continue his winding-up remarks.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Sexual Orientation Strategy

1. **Mr Lynch** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when they will publish a sexual orientation strategy.

(AQO 2164/11-15)

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

Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): It is our intention to bring forward proposals for a revised sexual orientation strategy, including a full public consultation, by the end of 2012.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the junior Minister for his answer. What are his views on civil partnerships and gay marriage?

Mr Bell: Legislation is in place for civil partnerships. The view on gay marriage is that the legal and factual definition of marriage is between a man and a woman. There are no plans to change that definition, and I endorse that position.

Mr G Robinson: Will any sexual orientation strategy contain new rights not already protected by law?

Mr Bell: A number of misconceptions have been put forward about what a strategy is. A strategy does not contain new rights or privileges. The intention is that the sexual orientation strategy and the supporting action plans will be directed at the issues that affect the everyday lives, hopes and aspirations of lesbian, gay and bisexual people. The development of the sexual orientation strategy will be used to bring a focus on and to prioritise those issues.

The strategy is not a list of rights; it is an accumulation of best practice. As well as providing an overarching policy framework and a basis for discussion and consideration, it is important that the strategy supports our community in facing up to and tackling homophobic attitudes and behaviours. In the 21 years that I professionally practised as a social worker, using the values of anti-oppressive practice, I saw at first hand many instances where people's homes or property had been attacked, and children had been left isolated and lonely, and, in certain cases, homeless. We want to tackle real distress that has been caused by discrimination. Everybody, regardless of their sexual orientation, the colour of their skin or their gender, should have the right to live their life free from intimidation and fear. The proposed public consultation will allow anyone with an interest to make their views known and will, therefore, test opinion on those issues.

Mr Eastwood: What is the junior Minister's opinion on the Health Minister's announcement today that he will not end the discrimination that prevents homosexual men from giving blood?

Mr Bell: That is not a matter for which I have policy responsibility.

Child Poverty: Targets

2. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they remain confident that the 2020 target for the eradication of child poverty can be met, given the recent scepticism articulated by UNICEF on the ability to achieve this target at a time of ongoing government cuts.

(AQO 2165/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: As a matter of fact, the recent statistics released at the end of last week by the Department for Social Development show a significant drop in poverty levels in Northern Ireland. The largest reduction was in relation to our relative child poverty levels. We now have the lowest child poverty levels since Northern Ireland started measuring child poverty here some 10 years ago.

Some had projected that poverty would increase during the global economic downturn. However, it is clear from the latest figures that, in relative terms, families with the lowest incomes have been less detrimentally impacted than other income groups. The report referenced in the question sets out the latest international comparison data for 35 countries on child poverty measured separately through rates of child deprivation and relative income poverty.

We have always acknowledged that the statutory targets set in the United Kingdom are ambitious and will be challenging to achieve. However, as an Executive, we are committed to continuing to strive towards the elimination of poverty by 2020. The Executive have introduced a wide range of measures designed to maximise incomes and reduce living costs for families. We have developed a new structure in OFMDFM — Delivering Social Change — to drive forward an innovative and collaborative approach across government to tackle poverty-related issues. We have also introduced the new social investment fund to encourage strategic outcome-focused and joined-up interventions. However, it should be noted that the statutory, relative and absolute measurements across the United Kingdom are income-based only and that we are measured against the UK median income.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the First Minister for his response. Given the major concerns across Northern Ireland over the implementation of welfare reform, is the First Minister confident of maintaining those levels of child poverty? Has the Department set individual targets to ensure that they do not rise, going forward?

Mr P Robinson: We are, of course, bound by the targets set in law. Those are the targets that we will attempt to achieve.

I approach the issue of child poverty measurement with some caution. For instance, if the euro zone were to crash, child poverty levels in Northern Ireland, believe it or not, would greatly improve, as they are based on relative terms. There has been a significant improvement in child poverty levels over the past year, but I suspect that, in the real life

of most people, things have not got significantly better. Child poverty levels are based on how Northern Ireland relates to the United Kingdom median level, so the statistics show that we are getting better. However, in another way, those at the top have got worse, and, as a result, the median level has come down. We therefore need to be very cautious in looking at the figures. If we look at the issue in absolute terms and the figures are income-based, we end up with much the same result.

The UNICEF document to which the Member referred indicates levels of deprivation and lists 14 measures against which we should judge whether there is poverty. As I looked through the measures, I felt that I must have been brought up in abject poverty. I did not have the kind of features that are contained in that document.

The figures improve year on year, and they are probably more of an indicator of equality than of poverty.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. Agus go raibh maith agat leis an Chéad Aire as na freagraí go dtí seo. I thank the First Minister for his answers to date. My question is on his last comment. Large-scale unemployment has reduced the median targets, so is it not the case that many families and children are not better off? Indeed, given the levels of poverty in the North of Ireland, many are worse off.

Mr P Robinson: That is my argument and why I do not think that we should rely on the statistics that show that, in relative terms, things have got better. You cannot freeze child benefit and cut other child allowances and expect people's real lives to improve. We need to look at the statistics with some caution. I am not saying that we should do away with them — they are a useful guide for us — but I do not think that we need to rely on them.

From the point of view of government, it is absolutely essential that we address child poverty. In the early and formative years of a child's life, education, health and housing are of the utmost importance, as they will shape the rest of his or her life. That is why the focus needs to be on child poverty and why we need to give the best assistance that we can to the poorest in our society.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the First Minister for his answers so far. Will you give us your analysis of why, on the basis of the statistics, you feel that people on a low income appear to have been less affected?

Mr P Robinson: I do not think that people on a low income have been less affected, but, statistically, their position has improved. That is largely because those at the higher levels have come down. People have taken cuts in wages and, in some cases, have moved to a three- or four-day week. That has reduced the level of income, and, as a consequence, the median level has moved down. Statistically, it has shown up in that fashion. We have always had misgivings about the ways in which statistics are prepared and whether there can be any meaningful statistics on child poverty. When I arrived in Mumbai, I saw barefoot children begging on the streets. Fifty per cent of the population were without formal housing. I am told that, in relative terms, poverty levels in India are the same as those in Northern Ireland. In absolute terms, that cannot be the case, as there is real poverty across the whole society. However, in relative terms — that is, relating to other people in that society — poverty levels in India equate to those in Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I advise Members that questions 4 and 7 have been withdrawn and will require written answers.

Carer's Allowance

3. **Mr Gardiner** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they have had any discussions with the Minister for Social Development in relation to potential equality issues arising from the non-payment of carer's allowance to carers who are in receipt of a state pension. (AQO 2166/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will ask my colleague Assembly Member Jonathan Bell to answer that question.

Mr Bell: This is a matter for the Minister for Social Development, and, to date, no discussions have taken place. The Minister for Social Development has confirmed that a basic principle of the social security system is that two benefits cannot be paid for the same purpose. Many benefits are intended to provide a level of income replacement where, for example, a person does not work because they have retired, have limited capability for work or have caring responsibilities. When a person is entitled to two income replacement benefits at the same time, only one is normally payable.

Although the question suggests that an equality issue arises in respect of age, I should point out that the overlapping benefit rules relating to carer's allowance apply to a person regardless of their age and are dependent on the benefits to which an individual is entitled. Therefore, they apply equally to people of working age and those over the state pension age. A person in receipt of contributory employment and support allowance, for example, cannot be in receipt of carer's allowance.

Mr Gardiner: Does the junior Minister know what steps the First Minister is taking, in national carers' week, to match the new paid respite break being introduced by the Westminster Government?

Mr Bell: We are looking at all our potential moves to support carers, particularly those who are over pensionable age but are on a low income. We need to be careful: where a carer's allowance cannot be paid because it overlaps with the state pension, people keep their underlying entitlement to carer's allowance. That gives them access to a carer's premium in income-related benefits, so receiving carer's allowance in addition to the state pension would reduce or extinguish a pension credit and/or housing benefit or a pension credit. Carers who are over pensionable age on a low income can receive additional help from income-related benefits, such as pension credit and housing benefit, which are paid at the higher rate for carers.

With any increase in income as a result of changing overlapping rules, we need to be careful to take into account income-related benefits such as receiving carer's allowance in addition to the state pension, reducing or extinguishing pension credit or housing benefit, which would be payable and would leave some pensioners worse off. As a result, many would not automatically get help with the cost of their dental treatment, dentures, glasses, fares to hospital or court fees or would not have access to free school meals for children. It is about balancing all that and doing our

best for pensioners. I compared the figures: in the 2008-09 DSD household survey, 31% of our pensioners were living in poverty; the figure today is 26%.

2.45 pm

Mr McCarthy: In all honesty, does the Minister not realise that there are people who have worked all their days, paid their national insurance etc and looked after a loved one? Despite all the nice words that the Minister has said, I can guarantee that a senior citizen listening to this will have no idea — not a clue — why, at an age when they need it more, the Government do not pay them extra money.

Mr Bell: I do not know whether any of the Alliance Party Ministers have the additional money in their budget to pay for that. If they did, you would need to be careful, Mr McCarthy. If you change the overlapping rules, will you go back to pensioners in our constituency and tell them that they are not entitled to their dental treatment and their dentures? Will you go back to them and tell them that they will not get the help they need to pay for their glasses? Will you tell them that they will no longer get their fare to hospital paid or that they will no longer have access to help for court fees and free school meals? Those are the implications of what you are asking for. It is important that our pensioners get the best deal that we can give them. That is why the Department for Social Development needs to be very careful about any changes to the overlapping rules.

Mr Molloy: A LeasCheann Comhairle, thank you very much. I thank the Minister for his replies so far. I welcome the decrease from 20% to 13% between 2009 and 2011. However, that still leaves 37,000 pensioners living in absolute poverty. What further measures can be taken by the Executive to alleviate that problem?

Mr Bell: Is it absolute or relative poverty? We have shown over the period in question that we have had a significant reduction in pensioner poverty, but your question is about the actions that we can take.

The social protection fund was established by the Executive to assist those most in need. Subsequently, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister ensured that a winter fuel payment scheme was progressed by DSD and the Department of Health under the Financial Assistance Act (Northern Ireland) 2009. Through that scheme, a one-off payment of £75 has been made to some 158,000 of our people who are in receipt of income support, income-related employment and support allowance and income-based jobseeker's allowance. In addition, 96,000 pension credit recipients have received a one-off payment of £100, as have approximately 6,000 people who have had or are in receipt of treatment for cancer as per the criteria laid down by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. All of that was issued automatically to recipients.

It is estimated that, by the time that all the applications have been processed and the appropriate payments made, £22 million will have been allocated this year through the social protection fund to assist some of our most vulnerable citizens. We are on the right road if we take the Northern Ireland household's below-average income, which shows, as said, that we have 26% — 75,000 — of our pensioners living in poverty, compared with 31% in 2008-09.

Mr Newton: I thank the junior Minister for his answers so far. I want to specifically ask about the benefits that carers are entitled to claim. Will you offer some advice on the specific benefits those who are identified as carers are entitled to claim?

Mr Bell: As I said, where the carer's allowance cannot be paid because it overlaps with the state pension, the person keeps their underlying entitlement to carer's allowance, which gives them access to the carer premium in the income-related benefits. So, receiving carer's allowance in addition to state benefit would have reduced or extinguished the pension credit, the housing benefit and/or both. Where a carer is over the pensionable age and is on a low income, they can receive additional help from the income-related benefits — pension credit and housing benefit — which are paid at the higher rate for the carer.

As I said, we need to be careful regarding any increase in income as a result of potentially changing overlapping rules because you would need to take fully into consideration the income-related benefits. You do not want to remove or extinguish the pension credit or housing benefit payable, because that would, in effect, leave pensioners worse off. As I explained to Mr McCarthy, they would not get help with dental treatment, dentures, the cost of glasses, referrals to hospital, court fees or free school meals for children. For those reasons, we want to ensure that any potential change leaves pensioners better off. We have shown that there has been a 5% decrease in pensioner poverty. That is cold comfort to those still in pensioner poverty, I accept, but it is decreasing. We need to make sure that any change does not leave pensioners worse off.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

FM/DFM: Trade Missions

5. **Mr Ross** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans they have for further international trade missions. (AQO 2168/11-15)

China

8. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the recent high-level engagement with the Chinese, what are the potential benefits of developing further links with China. (AQO 2171/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission I will answer questions 5 and 8 together. The deputy First Minister and I, following a meeting with Xi Jinping, deputy premier, and an invitation received from Madam Liu Yandong, intend to visit China later this year. Our visit is also planned to coincide with and assist Invest Northern Ireland with a Northern Ireland trade mission to Shanghai in November. Some of our firms sell into China, and we hope through our visit to be able to create more opportunities for them and new businesses, which will, obviously, assist our strategy of strengthening the Northern Ireland economy and creating more jobs.

Our Programme for Government includes a target for increasing sales to countries such as China and India. We are determined to do all that we can to provide the assistance that our businesses need in establishing

a presence in overseas markets. There are instances, particularly following our meeting with Madam Liu, where our personal participation will open doors, especially at a political level. Our intention is also to meet Northern Ireland companies in China, as we recognise the importance of our government being fully accessible to local businesses and overseas stakeholders. Ministerial involvement reinforces the message that we are pro-business and are committed to growing the economy. We will be supporting our universities in developing their partnerships with Chinese universities and colleges, particularly to enable them to attract financial support and encourage more students from China to come to Northern Ireland.

We hope to stimulate additional interest in tourism from China. The high-level Chinese Government visit to Northern Ireland in May attracted significant media coverage in China. In particular, the delegation was delighted with its visits to the Titanic centre and the Giant's Causeway. We need to build on those very positive developments.

Mr Ross: Will the First Minister agree that last week's announcement from Bombardier that it had received a significant order from NetJets, which could be up to the value of £4.5 billion, is exactly the sort of thing that Departments, working with Invest NI, local businesses and others, can do to bring that level of investment to Northern Ireland?

Mr P Robinson: Yes. As a representative for East Belfast, I do not think the Member would expect anything but a positive response to that question. It is a significant boost to the Northern Ireland economy as a whole. The deputy First Minister and I, when we were in Canada, visited the Bombardier plant in Montreal. We had a look at the Challenger jet, which is one of the two aircraft for which the order was placed. We are delighted because it is not only of benefit to Bombardier; their supply and service companies will also benefit. Therefore, the benefits go right down to the grass roots.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the First Minister for his answer. Do the Executive intend to produce an international relations strategy to ensure an effective cross-departmental approach to issues such as inward and outward investment, as highlighted by my colleague?

Mr P Robinson: Yes. OFMDFM officials have been working up an international relations strategy. No small part of that will be the role that we already play in Europe, where I think we have access at a higher level than would be gained by many other regions of our size. We have direct access to President Barroso and the commissioners. Furthermore, the role that we have played in North America, particularly in the United States but also now in Canada, our recent visits to the United Arab Emirates, India and, shortly, to China indicate that, for the first time in generations, Northern Ireland is starting to look outwards to where we can boost our economy through the relationships that we build internationally. In addition, the deputy First Minister and I will meet, almost weekly, ambassadors and high commissioners from various parts of the world.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On which sectors will the Chinese visit focus? Also, does he agree that a visa waiver scheme for Asian countries such as China, similar to that in place in the South, would help to

attract further trade? Will he and the deputy First Minister pursue that?

Mr P Robinson: The list of sectors for the Chinese visit has not yet been compiled, because businesses are considering whether to accompany us in November. If it mirrors the kind of delegation that we had in India, it will cover virtually every sector that one could imagine. I suspect, however, that the agrifood sector will be particularly involved in the visit to China.

The deputy First Minister and I discussed protocols with the Taoiseach in the margins of the North/South ministerial meeting. He indicated that he was eager to share networks and contacts with us for our visit to China. The Tánaiste pointed out that protocols signed by the Republic of Ireland and China have been most beneficial, and we will look to see whether we can replicate some of their successes.

Mr Kinahan: The aim of the economic strategy was to support the creation of 5,900 jobs by inward investors. Will the First Minister update the Assembly on where we are with that?

Mr P Robinson: We have had some very significant successes over the past number of months. Invest Northern Ireland met all its targets in this area of activity during the previous Programme for Government. It was punished for its success by being given even greater targets to achieve in this Programme for Government. We have in place a monitoring process, and, when it is published, Members will see the success that has been achieved against each of the targets set. There certainly has been a good response thus far. If I did not say it, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment certainly would say that we are operating in a very difficult environment but are doing so with a lot more success than all those around us.

Contested Spaces Programme: Funding

6. **Ms P Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the timescale for the second round of funding for the contested spaces programme.

(AQO 2169/11-15)

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

Mr Bell: Our commitment to the contested spaces programme, alongside that of Atlantic Philanthropies, is testimony to our continued work to challenge the segregation and division that exists across our society. The programme, which represents a total investment of £4 million over the three years from 2011 to 2014, provides a unique opportunity to encourage and support shared service delivery in interface areas and in the sections of our community where there are contested spaces.

On 22 May, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister announced the opening of the second call for applications to the programme. The second call closes on Tuesday 17 July, and applications are particularly welcome from projects in rural areas and those that focus on youth development. All applications received will be assessed by Atlantic Philanthropies and departmental officials over the summer, with a view to finalising the decision process by mid-September.

We expect successful projects to be notified thereafter. They will join the five existing projects that have been supported as a result of the first round of funding.

3.00 pm

Environment

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 1 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer. Question 9 has also been withdrawn.

National Park

2. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on his plans for the creation of a national park.
(AQO 2180/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): I thank the Member for his question. The update is simply that a paper is in circulation around the Executive at the moment. I am going to revise that paper. With the Executive's support, before the recess in July, the principle of legislation for national parks will have been endorsed. We will then be able to take that forward, with the intention of tabling legislation in the Chamber during the course of this calendar year. In parallel to that, the Department will continue its work to identify potential candidate sites for national park designation so that, as soon as possible after the legislation receives Royal Assent — if that is what transpires — not just one but two parts of the North of Ireland will be designated as national parks. That will firmly and confidently make the statement that our natural and built environment is important to the quality of our lives and crucial to the growth of our economy, not least jobs. A report that will be published this Thursday will definitively demonstrate that fact.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his answer. I will hold you to account on the time frame for legislation within this calendar year. Will you outline to the House the economic benefits of a national park, or national parks, to Northern Ireland?

Mr Attwood: I said that we would table legislation in this calendar year. Thereafter, as is proper, the Assembly will have to go through all the processes of that legislation, up to Final Stage and Royal Assent. I would like to think that, within the course of 2013, we will have the legislation in place, and, arising from that, the process of designation.

I reassure people that any national parks legislation that the Assembly might be inclined to endorse will fit the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland. It will not necessarily be in the image of legislation and practice elsewhere in these islands. That way, I hope that, if I cannot achieve consensus, we can achieve very strong majority support. In a time of economic need, national park designation can be an economic tool as well as an environmental tool going forward.

What are the benefits? Evidence suggests that, where you have national parks, you have growth in tourism. Where you have national parks, you can have better management of the natural environment. Where you have national parks, premium prices are paid for products that come from that area. For all those reasons and much besides, national

parks are part of a legislative programme that will manifest a strategic leap in the North of Ireland in policy and law that will serve the economy and the environment going forward.

Mr Campbell: The Minister outlined the distinction between the principle of the legislation for the national park and the actual establishment of a park. Does he accept that the support of local people, landowners and interested parties in and around any envisaged national park is absolutely paramount for it to be successful?

Mr Attwood: No individual or section of the community can have a veto — that was not what Mr Campbell suggested — on the principle or designation of national parks. We have to take into account all the views, hopefully build a consensus around those views, and do what is in the public interest and the interest of Northern Ireland. A number of months ago, a certain person said to me that anyone who supported a national park for the Mourne did not love the Mourne. I gave that person cold comfort; that morning, I had been speaking to farmers who had been hostile to the principle of a park in the Mourne but were now supportive of it. They and everybody there love the Mourne as much as anybody else.

How will we ensure that the concerns that Mr Campbell rightly identified are dealt with? If there is to be a national parks management board, we will ensure that there is adequate — I am not conceding the principle at this stage — if not majority representation from the local community to ensure that local interest is not prejudiced in any significant way. How will we ensure that local interest is recognised? With the review of public administration (RPA), planning function will devolve to the local council, not to a national parks management board. That is the practice in other parts of these islands, and it has created worse fears in parts of this island. In that way, I believe that we can give sufficient reassurances so that the environmental and economic benefits can be maximised.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister detail what engagement his Department has undertaken with people in the Mourne specifically on any future national park status and how that will affect how they live, work and play?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. Extensive consultation has informed my mind and that of the Department on taking forward the proposal. I have been to the Mourne on two occasions to speak to local people, including those who are against it, those who are in favour of it, local farmers, the Mourne Heritage Trust, and so on. On the far side of any agreement in principle by the Executive to endorse legislation, there will be a further detailed consultation with areas of the North to define precisely what the legislation will look like and to define precisely the concerns and issues that need to be addressed, if not mitigated, through the content of the legislation.

However, the best advice that I got on the issue of national parks was that experience suggested that people's concerns were deepened and heightened in a way that derailed the potential and possibilities of national parks legislation. I do not want that to happen again because we are at a time and place in Northern Ireland where, given the scale and wonder of our built and natural heritage, given the fact that it is

such a significant economic driver, and given that we have a great opportunity to expand the tourist potential of our built and natural heritage, the designation of national parks in legislation is an essential tool. I hope that all in the House will endorse that principle.

Mr Agnew: The Minister mentioned the potential for growth in tourism from national parks legislation, and we have heard politicians recently on the news vexed about the speed of the Runkerry proposals. Does he find the same sense of urgency around the Executive table when it comes to national parks?

Mr Attwood: I cannot comment on the Runkerry proposal except to make one point. It is my view that, in the next 18 months, we must demonstrate in my Department and in the Executive a strategic shift and gear change in protecting and promoting our natural and built environment. There needs to be a baseline shift of new money into the Department of the Environment (DOE) to protect and enhance our built and natural heritage. We need a suite of legislative interventions, of which national parks is one, to define and develop the quality of our built and natural heritage. We need to do that because, in a short space of time, upwards of 80,000 people in Northern Ireland will be unemployed. If we cannot recognise the quality of our built and natural environment as a mechanism for economic growth as well as something to be protected because it is the character for society, we will let down our citizens and our community. However, some people — very few — do not get it.

Review of Public Administration

3. **Mr S Anderson** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the review of public administration.

(AQO 2181/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. I am inclined to refer you to the Hansard report of last week. He has it, and I am sure that if he has it, he has read it. If he has read it, I do not know how the Member could have any more questions, given the scale of the debate. Then again, the DUP did not participate in the debate last week, so it will, no doubt, have many questions to ask this week.

The Member asked for an update. Last week, the Local Government (Boundaries) Order was approved in the Chamber. As a consequence, responsibility for the appointment of a commissioner for district electoral areas (DEAs) has now passed to the British Government, and that work will be taken forward. In the autumn, a reorganisation Bill will be tabled in the Assembly, which will take forward a lot of the strategic detail of the RPA initiative.

At the same time, work is ongoing to build up subordinate legislation, including legislation that will put into effect the governance and ethics regimes that are necessary for good government in local councils. In the past two weeks, we have seen examples of where there has not been good government in local councils. The consequence was that, last Friday afternoon, I wrote to all party leaders in Northern Ireland, advising them of the Executive's commitment on ethics and governance and reminding them of obligations in respect of governance and ethics. I asked them to address those issues in their political parties. It would be an unusual step for a public body to take a complaint against another public body, but, with the help of the departmental solicitor's

office (DSO), I am looking at tabling a complaint to the Equality Commission about what has happened in a number of councils recently.

Mr S Anderson: The Minister has now raised what he said after the debate last week; that he may refer various councils to the Equality Commission. I am a member of Craigavon Borough Council, as he well knows.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member ask a question, please?

Mr S Anderson: Will the Minister be looking at the record of those who seek high positions in councils and the way that they carry on their business? Many times, in fact, they add insult to unionist people in borough councils and district councils.

Mr Attwood: During and after last week's debate, I said that I have some understanding of the point that Mr Anderson has just made. There are times and places in our society in which there are individuals, if not groupings, in councils who behave in a way that puts it in people's faces, winds them up and creates mischief, if not to hurt and cause pain. In that way, I understand what Mr Anderson is saying. However, in the previous mandate, the Executive agreed that d'Hondt, Sainte-Laguë or another mechanism would prevail as the method for election to public positions in councils in the context of RPA. All parties agreed that there should be proportionality in allocating all positions in councils committees and so on and so forth. If that is the principle that people have endorsed for 2015, it should be the principle that applies in 2012.

There is tension in a very small number of places between those who cling to the past and those who advocate the new order of politics, for all of its difficulties, which I do not discount. In human terms this is not easy, but in political terms the right position is quite clear. That is why I wrote to all of the leaders of the political parties, and that is why, later this afternoon, I will discuss with the DSO as to whether we will take a complaint to the Equality Commission.

Ms Lo: During last week's debate on the Local Government (Boundaries) Order, the Minister mentioned putting the voluntary transition committees onto a statutory footing. Will he outline the steps he will take and the timetable that will be involved?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for her question. I agree that something based in statute is better than something not based in statute, because it creates certainty and avoids doubt. Therefore, I will introduce proposals that, hopefully, will be passed by the Assembly through subordinate legislation in this calendar year to make the voluntary transition committees statutory.

3.15 pm

That is what people want and it is good governance and a good outcome given my responsibility. However, let no one be unsure: it will be at least six months before that happens, and six months is a big part of the next three years in the rolling out of RPA. Although, as I have said, I do not agree with the 11-council outcome — I believe that 15 was a better model when it comes to upfront costs, upfront management, local identity and character — I will rigorously pursue local government reorganisation, even in the image

of 11. However, given that six months of hard and good work can be done, I am looking to the voluntary transition committees to take forward that work. I am not relying on the explanation that a committee is not statutory to put in doubt or to delay the work of that committee.

Mr Elliott: Given the Minister's response to Mr Anderson, I foresee some interesting legislation coming to the House in the not too distant future. To get back to local government reform, why has the Minister not yet put a business case to the Executive to help fund the transition of local government reform and the rate convergence?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member; there will be interesting legislation, but the previous Executive and all parties to it endorsed that interesting legislation. They endorsed a model that would ensure that the elected positions and the distribution of committee places in local councils under RPA would reflect proportionality principles. So, the forthcoming legislation may be "interesting", but it was endorsed by parties around the Executive table, and whatever difficulties Mr Anderson indicated, I hope that that will prevail. Late last year, the Executive decided on the 11-council model for local government reorganisation, and, arising from that decision, the business case is being updated. On the far side of the summer, the details of that business case will become known.

As I said last week, I would, rightly, get cold comfort if I were to charge into Sammy Wilson's office and say, "Will you give me £50 million for RPA"? That is because your argument has to be based on a business case, and that business case is currently being updated. I remind you that people put up their hands in this Chamber in March 2011, when there was no budget cover whatsoever for RPA. That said, as Members will be aware from last week's debate, I have put in a June monitoring bid of £2.3 million, of which £200,000 would go to each cluster of councils to enable them to take forward change management in the transition from 26 councils to 11, with £100,000 for some pump-priming work on community planning, which is one of the big functions that will transfer. So, independent of there being no budget cover and of the business case being updated, I am already looking for money from my Executive colleagues, and I hope that that will be endorsed by all parties around the Executive table.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Here, at last. I thank the Minister for his response, but, in a six-hour debate last week, he intimated his support for severance payments to sitting councillors. How does he foresee meeting that? Also, the PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) report indicated that reform would cost £118 million; does he believe that those figures would reflect the cost today?

Mr Attwood: The updated business case will definitively answer the latter question. However, if the Member is saying that putting the upfront costs of reorganisation at £118 million was putting them on the high side; I think that it was. I would be surprised if, on the far side of the updated business case, they were not put somewhat lower.

I hope that all Members will endorse the principle of severance payments for councillors. Without rehearsing all the arguments, people have, with virtually no income, served citizens of the North for many years. They have been great public servants during the years of terror, state conflict and great turbulence, when it was not easy. I believe that, as they depart the public stage, they should be given some recognition.

I want to point out, without prejudice to the updated business case or to my June monitoring bid, that the Executive said in the previous mandate and in this mandate, when all Ministers were round the table, that the cost of RPA would not come from Executive central funds. They said that there would be a self-financing business case for the funding of RPA through various means, not Executive funds. That is the situation that prevails and would prevail in the event of a councillor severance scheme. In the fullness of time, I will table regulations in the House to put that into effect, and those will govern that matter as well. However, on the far side of the business case and the June monitoring round, we will see where I can find good reason, good money and good political support to help councils through what will not be an easy process.

Driver and Vehicle Agency: Taxis

4. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the remit and powers of the Driver and Vehicle Agency's (DVA) taxi enforcement officers. (AQO 2182/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for her question. The collapsed role of enforcement officers is to ensure that taxis are properly licensed, properly insured, roadworthy and fulfil the legal standards. An enforcement officer's powers range from giving advice and warnings to issuing defective notices, prohibition notices, fixed penalties and, ultimately, prosecution. That is the broad regime and architecture available to taxi enforcement officers.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Minister for his answer. What happens if a complaint is received from a taxi driver who believes that an enforcement officer has acted outside his or her remit or powers? Is the Minister aware of any taxi licences that have been revoked purely on the basis of an enforcement officer's evidence?

Mr Attwood: I have made it clear in the Chamber that, if MLAs consider that something is, on a prima facie basis, unreasonable, irregular or should be further challenged, I am willing to look at that, because I trust their judgement. When it comes to enforcement or planning matters, whatever they might be, I will look at them, as is consistent with the authority of my office. If any Member, including Ms Ramsey, knows of a case in which matters may have gone too far, I am prepared to look at that. However, depending on what happens in individual cases, taxi drivers have remedy and means of challenge. They can challenge through the normal processes, including, in the event of prosecution, a court case, during which they can interrogate the evidence base on which they were brought to account. Depending on whether the action taken is backed up by the evidence, they may reach a favourable outcome. So there are processes within the DVA and, in the event of prosecution, outside the DVA that should satisfy a taxi driver that an enforcement officer's powers have not been used disproportionately. However, if there is disproportionate use of those powers, I would like that brought to my attention.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Will he outline the principal benefits of the proposed new taxi licensing scheme.

Mr Attwood: I know that this is quite a highly charged development. However, I believe, as I have said before in the Chamber, that we should judge ourselves by proper

regulation, followed by proportionate enforcement, whether it relates to hauliers, taxis, bus operators or, dare I say it, tour operators in Belfast. That is the twin-track strategy that should be used to achieve the protection of the consumer and serve the best interests of business. Significant taxi licensing legislation has been passed in the Chamber, and it will be rolled out over the next two years.

However, what will the outcome be? The outcome that governs all regulation: it will increase customer confidence and business certainty; potentially drive out illegality; and, because taxis will, like other businesses, be regulated, enable better enforcement.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister will be aware of the work of the Driver and Vehicle Agency, and the consultation document that has been completed on MOT testing for vintage vehicles. Will the Minister advise the House —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will you advise me of the relevance to the question, please, and ask a question?

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister advise whether the outcome of the work of the Driver and Vehicle Agency has been decided?

Mr Attwood: As the Member knows, there was a consultation. The responses, inevitably and rightly, indicated broad support for the exemption of pre-1960 vehicles. The Committee is content with the proposed way forward and that policy on exemption should be developed on the responses and on the European directive on periodic testing. My Department agrees and is taking forward that proposal.

Planning Policy Statement 21: Policy CTY 10

5. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of policy CTY 10 of PPS 21 since its introduction. (AQO 2183/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. Again, this is a question for which, if there are examples that Members think require further interrogation, at either ministerial level or by senior management, especially given that PPS 21 is a new policy, I am willing to undertake that. Members will know of cases in which I have interrogated what is going on to determine whether PPS 21 is being interpreted properly. There are issues of interpretation; that is why training on PPS 21 was rolled out last autumn; that is why there are monthly peer reviews of cases from district offices to see whether the policy is consistent; and that is why I have undertaken an operational review. That review has gone on for a while, because I want to make sure that, given that the policy is new, I have a significant evidence base from which to draw conclusions. Although I believe that PPS 21 is working in the round, as the evidence of approval suggests, I have no doubt that, at the very least, fine-tuning is required.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his answer, and his commitment to look at whether there are specific issues. Although there seems to be a willingness on the part of the Minister, when it comes to senior planning officers, there seems to be a different interpretation in different locations —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we have a question, please?

Mr Storey: — of CTY 10. In considering CTY 10, will the Minister look at how his Department is interpreting CTY 13,

which is linked by the issue of integration? If there is no principal dwelling on a location, there is a requirement to make an application on the basis of integration.

Mr Attwood: I do think that senior management in the Planning Service gets the ambition and best practice of PPS 21. However, there is a bit of a learning curve in some divisional offices on best deployment and best practice when operating PPS 21.

I recall a meeting with Mr Elliott, councillors of his party from Fermanagh and others, including agents, that put a spotlight on particular applications of the policy. That was very useful, and will, I hope, be reflected in the operational review once it has been concluded.

Yes, the matter raised by the Member will require further attention. However, I undertake to give it further attention.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister insist on a more flexible interpretation of the policy to allow a dwelling to be built slightly further away from the farm dwelling, often in a much better, integrated site and not be the immediate neighbour of a slurry pit or cattle shed?

Mr Attwood: I have been in Omagh with the Member's father looking at an example of the very point that she raises.

I need to be mindful of the fact that there was a lot of controversy around PPS 21. There was toing and froing and various versions, and, ultimately, it was the product of not only the Minister of the Environment but an Executive subcommittee. Given that it is a relatively new policy, I need to be very mindful of not trying to drive a coach and horses through it. If I did, I would be hostile to the ambition, as agreed by the Executive, and I would leave the policy open to more and more legal challenge. Therefore I am going to be judicious.

3.30 pm

However, I believe that there are issues in respect of the location of the accommodation, clustering, being at a crossroads and the precise interpretation of the fine detail of the policy which, I believe, on the far side of an operation review, will address some of the issues of consistency and some of the issues of interpretation but will not lead to every application being approved. At the moment, the approval rate is well over 80%. I think that that is testament to the policy working well, by and large, but I have no doubt that there will be a number of cases, perhaps as indicated in the Member's question, in which some further interpretation and consistency are needed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That ends Question Time for today. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments while we change the top Table.

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

Executive Committee Business

Supply Resolution: Main Estimates 2012-13

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves that a sum not exceeding £8,203,787,000 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 the 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 £8,424,156,000 be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the 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 3(b) and 3(a) of table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2012-13 that was laid before the Assembly on 11 June 2012. — [Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that resources not exceeding £13,004,918.26 be authorised for use by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department for Social Development for the year ending 31 March 2011, as summarised for each Department in part II of the 2010-11 Statement of Excesses that was laid before the Assembly on 11 June 2012. — [Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I will continue where I left off. I think that I had addressed the remarks that were made by Mr Bradley. There was just one remaining issue, which was the capital spend and the shortfall in that. I am continuing to pursue that issue with the Treasury, as are the First Minister and deputy First Minister. It is a very complex issue and one on which we are not making a great deal of headway. Treasury has one set of figures, and we have another set. Even when our figures are right, the Treasury says they are wrong, but it is something that we have to continue to work through with it. I am not so sure whether we will reach a successful conclusion on the issue, but I think it is something with which we need to persevere, as the Member pointed out.

Judith Cochrane the Member for East Belfast raised the issue of financial savings from a shared society and talked about the amount of money we spend on schools, for example, and about how there is an overspend on the number of schools because of the divisions within our society. Members raise that all the time. It is fine to say

that there are surplus school places and that we have too many schools, and it is an issue that we need to address. However, her party would be the first to be out protesting and making pleas for special cases the minute the Education Minister raised the issue of a school closure, and it would not really matter what sector the proposed closure was in. It could be a constituency issue, and I understand the pressure that constituency representatives come under when a school closure is being proposed, even though there are surplus places in the area.

On top of that, the Alliance Party has been very good at proposing the extension of schools that it prefers, such as integrated schools, in areas where there are still surplus places in maintained or controlled schools. On one hand, it is easy to talk about the costs of division and the impact of that, but, when it comes to tackling it, Members will, sometimes, due to constituency pressures, take views that are inconsistent with the views that they express here in the Assembly.

Mr Beggs raised a number of issues. I dealt with a lot of his contribution when I made my general remarks at the start of the debate, so I do not intend to go over it again, other than to say that I trust that the explanation and exhortation that have been given to the Committee will be accepted. However, he raised the issue of the Department for Social Development Excess Vote and queried what it referred to. It was for additional money that was spent on the housing programme, and the details can be found in the Public Accounts Committee's report.

He also said that the Estimates change. I can understand that idea, because these are complex documents, and Members do not always get their heads around them. However, he said that we needed time to consider the matter, because, although I indicated that 95% of the information had already been agreed in the Budget Bill, if the out-turn figures were different, the Estimates would change. However, the out-turn figures for this year will not be reflected, and I cannot change the Main Estimates at this stage. It is not until we come to the June monitoring round that the Executive will reflect the out-turn figures. Therefore, he said that all the figures are different because the out-turn was different than what was proposed in the Budget, but that is not reflected in the figures.

As I said, by and large, the figures are 95% of what the Committee has scrutinised already, plus bits added on, which have had adequate scrutiny in the Assembly on other occasions.

I will now come to Simon Hamilton's remarks. He made the point, and he made it very well, that the lack of accelerated passage and the fact that we may have to deal with the Budget by extraordinary means only creates uncertainty for Departments, which runs contrary to the whole point of our agreeing a four-year Budget.

The idea of a four-year Budget was to give certainty to Departments so that they would know what their spending path would be over the next four years. At the time, it was hailed as a success for the Assembly, because, do not forget, we were the only regional Assembly anywhere in the United Kingdom to have the courage in an election year, before an election, to spell out clearly what we were going to do over the next four years with the money that we had.

In Scotland, they ducked the issue and gave only a one-year Budget before the election, because they did not want to spell out until after the election the difficulties that they were going to be faced with. We in this Assembly took the courage in our hands to lay before the electorate what it was going to put up with for the next four years, what the picture was going to be for the next four years and the decisions that we have made, and we asked people to judge us on that basis.

After giving that certainty, it would be a step back if we removed it by introducing a method of dealing with the Budget that reduced expenditure by 5% and created that degree of uncertainty, albeit that, as Members pointed out, there is a Budget Bill in September that would restore the rest of the money. However, in the meantime, Departments do not have the certainty that would be created by getting this through before July.

Mrs Overend raised a number of issues about youth unemployment, the youth contract initiative and the Barnett consequential that would result. She is not in her place, but it is worth making the point that, although we lament that we are going through a recession, we sometimes underestimate the impact that decisions by this Assembly —

Ms Lo: It was not me who raised those issues.

Mr Wilson: I thought that I said that Mrs Overend raised the issue. I looked down in the direction of the Member. I really should have been looking over here, but something caught my attention.

Mrs Overend is not here, but it is worth making this point: we are going through a recession, which is not pleasant, and lots of people are not in employment. However, as a result of decisions made by the Assembly, the rate of unemployment here is not only lower than the UK average but is the fourth lowest of any region in the UK. Do not forget that we made growing the economy a priority and that the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister — she floated past me a moment ago, but I do not where she has gone — set very demanding job targets for her Department.

We also have a lower than average rate of youth unemployment. Although youth unemployment in other parts of the UK has gone up, the rate here has gone down. That is not to say that we can be complacent. Off the top of my head, I think that youth unemployment still stands at around 14%. However, that compares favourably with figures in the Irish Republic, England and Scotland. We have put money into dealing with youth unemployment. There will be an opportunity to look at that again, because the Employment and Learning Minister has made a bid in the June monitoring round for a strategy to deal with it.

I do not want to get into trouble with anybody else today, so I cannot say what will be in the June monitoring round before it goes to the Executive. However, I gave an assurance to the Assembly before that, once the Minister brought forward a strategy to deal with youth unemployment, we would look favourably on the proposals. In a couple of weeks' time, once the Executive have had a chance to examine the June monitoring round figures, we will be able to announce what, if anything, we can do on that issue this year.

Mrs Overend also spoke about the tourism budget and mentioned the £370,000 for tourism, which relates to

departmental administration. There was also a grant of £22.1 million for the Tourist Board and a grant of £14.8 million for Tourism Ireland. I know that the Member for North Antrim raised the issue of squandering money on such cross-border initiatives. However, I spent some time in America last week, and, at one of the events that I attended, Tourism Ireland was specifically promoting Northern Ireland in the US. I have to say that it put a lot of effort into the venture to promote Northern Ireland exclusively. When one looks at the expenditure, one will see that it is wrong to say that all the money spent on those kinds of cross-border bodies is squandered. That money had certain economies of scale because of the basis on which it was spent. However, that certainly did not in any way detract from the promotion of Northern Ireland.

Mrs Overend also talked about the Department for Employment and Learning budget transfer. Of course, that will be dealt with at a later date when we look at the transfer of government functions.

Anna Lo raised the issue of Planning Service receipts, which are down 18% in 2011-12. The Department of the Environment (DOE) is continuing to implement measures that will address the reduced income. That really is an issue for DOE to deal with.

The Member also spoke about RPA, for which there is a bid. It is my view that the fundamental principle of RPA is that councils will benefit from it. There will be substantial savings made if they can share services after amalgamating. If they make significant savings as a result of RPA, I really do not see why other public services should bear the cost of councils making those savings. That would be like giving councils money and saying, "By the way, you will make savings from the money that we have given you, but you can hold on to the savings made, because we will not be asking for them back." So, when the Member raises that kind of issue, she ought to bear in mind what the impact of RPA will be.

3.45 pm

Mr Allister quite rightly raised the issue of the fiscal deficit for Northern Ireland. My unionism — and I am sure that this is also true of his unionism — is not based purely on the financial transfer from Westminster to Northern Ireland. As Mr Allister pointed out, those who talk about leaving the United Kingdom and moving towards a united Ireland — and it is fantasy talk — ought to be aware that there will be a very serious fiscal impact from that. It is good to remind ourselves of that.

If one looks at what has happened from 2004-05, when this current Assembly was set up, that fiscal deficit has increased by £2.6 billion. When one considers that kind of fiscal transfer, one can see the benefit of being a part of the wider United Kingdom.

Mr Allister also raised the issue as to whether, if we did not get accelerated passage, there was a mechanism within current governmental arrangements for the permanent secretary to undertake decisions about the Budget, and he referred to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. However, that power lies in section 7 of the Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001, which allows the permanent secretary of the Department of Finance and Personnel to set budgets for the remainder of this financial year at 95% of last year's allocation. So, there is provision, if

the Assembly does not agree to accelerated passage for the Budget, though it is my belief that the Assembly Members are much better placed to do the job themselves. That is what Members are here for. Despite the disappointment that there has been in members of the Committee not getting papers when they wanted them, and papers not being supplied on time, I have given explanation and apology, and I hope that we can move on from that. It will not be necessary to use the powers contained in the 2001 Act.

The last issue raised by Mr Allister is that of the £4 billion reduction. That was a cumulative reduction in real terms over the whole period of the Budget. It did not fall in one particular year. Furthermore, since then, we have had Barnett consequentials in this year of £200 million. We have also raised resources of our own to fill the gap. As I indicated earlier, we have been successful in raising capital receipts above and beyond what we had originally planned. We have held rates at a real zero increase, but that, nevertheless, released some cash because we used the GDP deflator, so there is a 2.2% increase and that raised money. There were a number of other ways in which revenue has been raised which, of course, has reduced the impact. That is one of the things that we worked hard at: reducing the impact of the reduction in the Budget from Westminster.

I hope that I have covered the points which Members have raised. I recommend the two motions to the Assembly.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before proceeding 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 sum not exceeding £8,203,787,000 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 the 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 £8,424,156,000 be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the 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 3(b) and 3(a) of table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2012-13 that was laid before the Assembly on 11 June 2012.

Supply Resolution: Excess Votes 2010-11

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We will now move to the motion on the Excess Votes, which has already been debated.

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to introduce the Budget (No. 2) Bill.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Just say, "I beg to move."

Mr Wilson: I beg to move.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Again, I remind Members that this motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that resources not exceeding £13,004,918.26 be authorised for use by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department for Social Development for the year ending 31 March 2011, as summarised for each Department in part II of the 2010-11 Statement of Excesses that was laid before the Assembly on 11 June 2012.

Budget (No. 2) Bill: First Stage

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): Sorry; I was premature there, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was not listening to you, and I thought that you had moved on to this one. I apologise for the mistake.

I beg to introduce the Budget (No. 2) Bill [NIA 8/11-15], which is a Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of the year ending 31 March 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 (including accruing resources) for the year ending 31 March 2013; to authorise the use for the public service of excess resources for the year ending 31 March 2011; and to repeal certain spent provisions.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members will know that the Second Stage of the Bill is scheduled for tomorrow. However, the Bill may not proceed under the accelerated passage procedure unless the Speaker is notified by the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel that the Committee is satisfied that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the Bill in accordance with Standing Order 42(2). If the Speaker has not received that notification before the Second Stage of the Bill is due to be moved, the Bill may not proceed under the accelerated passage procedure. The Second Stage will have to be rescheduled.

Committee Business

Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The next item of business is a joint motion from the Committee on Standards and Privileges and the Assembly Commission to appoint the Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards. I call Mr Barry McElduff to speak on behalf of the Assembly Commission and move the motion.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Príomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I beg to move

That this Assembly, in accordance with section 19(1) of the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, appoints Mr Douglas Bain as the Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards for a term of five years from 17 September 2012.

Tá mé sásta an rún seo a mholadh. This time last year, the Assembly agreed to delegate to the Assembly Commission responsibility for making arrangements to identify, by fair and open competition, a person to be appointed as Assembly Commissioner for Standards. The Commission was also given responsibility for making arrangements for determining any criteria for appointment and for determining the terms and conditions on which such an appointment, when made, was to have effect.

I am pleased to be able to come to the House today to report on how the Commission made those arrangements and to seek the Assembly's agreement to appoint Mr Douglas Bain as the new Assembly Commissioner for Standards. On terms and conditions, the Commission ultimately agreed that the commissioner should be paid a daily rate of £550. In so doing, we took account of the Committee on Standards and Privileges' recommendation, which had been agreed by the Assembly, that the commissioner's specific salary and terms and conditions should be broadly commensurate with those of comparable office holders.

The Commission agreed a fair and open competition process for identifying a person to be appointed as Commissioner for Standards. We agreed that the seven key principles of best practice in respect of public appointments should underpin that competition. I thank Felicity Huston, the former Commissioner for Public Appointments, who very kindly gave Assembly officials advice when they were drawing up the process for the Commission's consideration.

The Commission agreed that a selection panel should be established and that it should include the Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges, as well as a member of the Assembly Commission, and I was duly appointed in that capacity. The panel was chaired by Stuart Allen, the Scottish Parliamentary Standards Commissioner. I thank all of the panel members for their participation and for taking time out of busy schedules to ensure that we identified the right person.

Unfortunately, an initial competition did not identify a suitable candidate. The Commission therefore agreed in January 2012 to carry out a further competition. The post

was widely advertised and 25 applications were received. After having sifted the applications, the panel carried out interviews on 26 April this year. We were very impressed with everyone we interviewed. However, as a panel, Mr Bain impressed us most, and we concluded that he was our preferred candidate for appointment. Last week, a note was circulated to all Members that provided details of Mr Bain's extensive, high-level experience.

I am confident that Mr Bain's skills and experience will allow him to be an excellent Commissioner for Standards, and I ask the Assembly to agree to his appointment.

Mr Allister: I am disappointed in the choice. I thought that this Assembly would see the necessity to strive to obtain somebody from well outside the Government ambit and the tendencies that come with that. Instead, it seems that the person chosen is someone who fits neatly within the quango circuit: someone whose past experience does not demonstrate the independence that one might have expected, but who comes from that particular setting. My anxieties are increased when I consider the findings of the Billy Wright inquiry in respect of Mr Bain, who, during the relevant time, was director of services in the Prison Service. Anyone who followed the Billy Wright inquiry will know that a core issue in it was the alleged destruction of and failure to disclose documents.

Here we are, appointing someone who will adjudicate over us, so to speak; who will tell us whether we have lived up to the standards expected of us; whether we have performed as we ought to or whether we fell down in any respect; and will, no doubt, be mindful of the Nolan principles, and all of that, in respect of the expectations that we face.

I invite Members to refresh their memories by re-reading some of the Billy Wright inquiry material. They will discover that a particular document lay at the heart of the non-disclosure. The existence of that document would appear to have been denied until a copy of it was delivered anonymously to Mr David Wright. The Prison Service then began to acknowledge its existence. It may not have been the core issue, but it was one of the core issues in the Billy Wright inquiry. When the chairman of that tribunal reached his decisions, he had some things to say about that particular issue. Paragraph 313 of chapter 6 of the inquiry report states:

"Mr Bain gave evidence that the file was ... within his office as Director of Services with which he was very much hands-on. For the vast majority of its life this file was under his control, whether it was in his physical position or not. It bore a sticker on its outside cover with the words 'Examined in connection with the BWI'."

That refers to the Billy Wright inquiry. The paragraph continues:

"The witness had never before seen a sticker like that. Mr Bain accepted that the file fell within the specification of documents served by the Inquiry. If, as the sticker indicates, it had been examined by the team tasked with producing documents in response to the specification, he had no explanation why it had not been produced, despite the file having been examined twice by the team. He accepted that the team had not exercised its judgement correctly. Instead, the existence of the file was

very recently leaked anonymously to the Inquiry via the Wright family solicitor."

Paragraph 6.314 of the report goes on to state:

"Director of Services at the material time, Mr Bain, knew that this file was regarded as important by the Inquiry. He was also well aware of its contents since it was his file."

The report then states:

"We are surprised that after his return to work in December 2005 he took no steps to ascertain that its contents had been produced to the Inquiry."

The report goes on to state:

"Mr Bain also said he had no knowledge that HMP Maze Prisoner Security Files had been destroyed."

If we skip a paragraph, we will find that paragraph 6.316 of the report states:

"While all that might be accepted, the situation he found himself in was very different when he became aware that the HMP Maze Prisoner Security Files had been 'destroyed by Security' on a substantial scale. That he knew this is established in documents examined by the Inquiry. Although at first Mr Bain said he did not know that HMP Maze Prisoner Security Files were destroyed, he accepted that in the light of these documents, he knew in May 2004 that they had been. As he expressed it: 'It wasn't my recollection of events, but plainly I was aware of it at the time.'"

That was his explanation for giving evidence that he knew nothing about it. The next paragraph states that:

"In our opinion the fact that he did not take any steps in light of his awareness of the destruction of these files was very surprising."

Given the tenor of the language that tends to be used in such reports, an expression of surprise in the inquiry report stating that someone had not troubled themselves to take steps to tell the inquiry certain things and to make sure that certain things were brought to light is, of itself, quite damning of that individual. Yet that is the individual who has been brought to the House on recommendation to be appointed as overseer to examine how all of us conduct ourselves. I say that, on the strength of the Billy Wright inquiry, there are questions that remain unanswered over his conduct as the director of services in the Prison Service. For me, that raises a question about his suitability for appointment.

4.00 pm

We are all aware that he also served as Chief Electoral Officer in the Electoral Office, and we all have our own views about that. My experience does not add to my confidence in him. Fundamentally, I think that the Assembly should pause on this appointment and should not push it through today. We should take time to reflect on what was said about Mr Bain in the Billy Wright inquiry and to consider whether he is really the individual that we are looking for as the overseer and holder of the very important post of ombudsman. I suggest that he is not and that the Assembly should pause and consider whether he is.

Mr Elliott: I was not part of the overall appointment process, so I have a relatively limited knowledge of how this has happened. I apologise to Mr McElduff for not being here for his opening remarks, so some of the issues that I will raise may have been covered. If that is the case, whoever makes the winding-up speech can explain those points.

I am concerned about the entire process that has led us to this position. I am also concerned that we have got to it so quickly with very limited information coming back to Members. I note from the report that was in my pigeonhole today that, in the first round of applications, nobody was deemed suitable. There was no indication of how many people who applied for the post and were deemed unsuitable. In the second round of applications, it appears that there were 25 applicants, of whom three were deemed suitable for interview. I have no idea how that process came about, other than that there was an appointment from the Assembly Commission, one from the Committee on Standards and Privileges and an independent representative. I have significant questions about that process and how the appointment of Mr Bain was decided. I am not aware of any report being produced by the Commission or the Committee on the process or the appointment. I have significant queries, and I hope that the Member, during his winding-up speech, will take my interventions to establish some answers.

Mr Ross: I will first make some comments about the role of the Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards. The new commissioner's primary role is to investigate complaints that a breach of the Assembly's code of conduct has occurred. The new commissioner will be able to initiate an investigation when no complaint has been received but he believes that a breach of the code of conduct has occurred. The commissioner will also be able to give advice on any matter of general principle relating to Members' standards of conduct. As Members have said, the role of the commissioner is, therefore, of the utmost importance in ensuring that MLAs uphold high standards of conduct in public life.

The Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 provides for the commissioner's role. It also provides for the commissioner's independence and powers, which include the same powers as the Assembly to call for witnesses and documents. Given the importance and significance of this powerful role, it is important that we appoint a person who has the experience and expertise to undertake the duties with skill, wisdom and judgement. As Mr McElduff said in his opening remarks, I sat on the selection panel that identified Mr Bain as the preferred candidate. The competition was, of course, demanding, and, as a panel, we were determined to get a high-quality candidate, and, in Mr Bain, we decided that we had one. He has a legal and public service background as well as a track record of investigation and independence. He impressed the panel with his responses, and I am confident that he will make an excellent Commissioner for Standards.

For a number of years, the Assembly has had an interim arrangement to ensure that allegations of misconduct are independently investigated. As we appoint the new statutory commissioner today, it is appropriate that we acknowledge and recognise the work that the ombudsman has done as the interim Assembly Commissioner for Standards. Dr Tom Frawley, supported by key staff in the ombudsman's office,

has been the Assembly's dedicated servant during this period. He has had to investigate and consider many thorny and difficult issues. On behalf of the Assembly, I thank him for his service. It is important to acknowledge today that the Assembly and the wider public have been well served by his support.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: Of course.

Mr Allister: The Member tells us how impressed the panel was by Mr Bain. Is the Member impressed by what the Billy Wright inquiry had to say about Mr Bain? Does he really think that the flaws and deficiencies found there speak to the man who should investigate anything in the Assembly?

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is important and useful in a debate such as this that Members can put forward views about not being content.

As for an individual's past and whether Members are content about a specific issue, the Assembly has a legal duty to ensure that whoever is appointed as commissioner is identified by fair and open competition. The Member suggested that the Assembly should look to appoint someone from outside our quango culture — I cannot remember his exact words. The Assembly, of course, has to appoint somebody who applied for the post. It is perhaps unfortunate that in the initial appointment procedure we did not have more candidates of the calibre we had hoped for. We went out on a further investigation and managed to get considerably more applicants for the post.

As I said, it is important that whoever was appointed was identified by a fair and open competition. The Commission agreed that the principles of best practice in respect of public appointments should underpin that competition, which meant identifying a preferred candidate based on merit and on agreed criteria that applied equally to all candidates. It would have been inappropriate for the panel to bring other matters into consideration when assessing candidates.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way on that point. There are a number of queries that I had about the initial process, and that was one of them. Was the initial process for applications identical to the second one? If not, how did it differ? How many people applied in the initial process?

Mr Ross: The clear difference between the first and second process was the individuals who applied. It was not identical in that we had different candidates applying for the post. We had 25 applications when we re-advertised the post. We did not have enough candidates the first time, so we looked to advertise more widely and in specific areas to get candidates of a particular calibre. That was important in order to widen the field.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Member for the explanation. He said that 25 people applied, but, if I picked it up right, only three were interviewed. That is a significant reduction in the number of candidates at the paper-sifting stage. What were the criteria used to cut down the number of candidates so harshly?

Mr Ross: We sought answers to a number of questions. There was a point-scoring system, as is the procedure in all

such processes, and the panel sifted the applications on the basis of their answers. If candidates did not score highly enough in those categories, they did not get through the sifting exercise.

I must emphasise that the process was agreed by the panel. I hear that there are concerns from Ulster Unionist Party Members, but it was agreed by all members of the Committee on Standards and Privileges, including the Ulster Unionist member, and it was agreed unanimously by the Assembly Commission, which has representatives from all parties. It is important that that be noted.

In answer to Mr Elliott's concern about the process going too quickly, I would point out that, under the original resolution passed by the Assembly, we should have had the new Commissioner for Standards in place before now. It was because we wanted to make sure that we had an applicant that everybody on the panel, on the Committee on Standards and Privileges and on the Commission could have confidence in that we prolonged the recruitment process and readvertised to get more candidates. We wanted to make sure that we had a candidate that everybody felt comfortable supporting and that we would be able to get support for. That is why the process took longer than was initially thought. This has not in any way been rushed; we have taken our time.

Mr Bain has the skills and expertise necessary to make a good Commissioner for Standards, and I look forward to working with him over the rest of the mandate. I hope that Members from across the House will support the motion. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly, in accordance with section 19(1) of the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, appoints Mr Douglas Bain as the Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards for a term of five years from 17 September 2012.

Adjourned at 4.14 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 19 June 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Are you in a position to assure us that, next Wednesday, on the momentous occasion of Her Majesty's visit to the Stormont estate, the royal standard will fly from the flagpoles of this Building, or failing that, the Union Jack?

Mr Speaker: Order. This is not a point of order, and I know that the Member knows that it is not a point of order. This is — *[Interruption.]* Order. It is not a point of order for this House, and we should move on. *[Interruption.]* Order. It is not a point of order, so let us move on.

Mr Allister: Further to that point of order —

Mr Speaker: No; it is not a point of order for this House. Let us move on.

Mr Allister: Well let us see what happens on the day.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Plenary

Mr Speaker: Order. The deputy First Minister wishes to make a statement to the House.

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): Thank you, Mr Speaker. In compliance with section 52C(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, we wish to make the following statement on the fourteenth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in plenary format, which was held in Dublin on Friday 15 June 2012. The Executive Ministers who attended the meeting approved this report, and we make it on their behalf.

Our delegation was led by the First Minister, Peter Robinson, MLA, and me. In addition, the following Executive Ministers were in attendance: Minister Attwood; Minister Farry; Minister Ford; Minister Kennedy; Minister McCausland; Minister Ní Chuilín; Minister O'Dowd; Minister O'Neill; and junior Minister McCann.

The Irish Government delegation was led by the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, TD, who chaired the meeting. The following Irish Government Ministers were also in attendance: Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Eamon Gilmore; Minister Bruton; Minister Burton; Minister Coveney; Minister Deenihan; Minister Fitzgerald; Minister Hogan; Minister Noonan; Minister Quinn; Minister Reilly; and Minister Shatter.

We had a useful discussion with the Irish Government on economic developments, including the impact of the euro zone crisis, fiscal challenges, bank restructuring and lending, and the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA). We reiterated our commitment to continue practical co-operation on those issues and to explore areas where cost savings may be achieved. The potential benefits of developing markets for both jurisdictions were recognised. Ministers discussed opportunities for co-operation in that area and to maximise the potential from tourism events.

The Council welcomed continuing collaboration on innovation in the European Union and noted a successful and well-attended Collaborate to Innovate conference on European research and innovation funding for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) on 7 June 2012, which was addressed by EU commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, Minister Arlene Foster and Minister of State Lucinda Creighton.

The Council noted a progress report prepared by the NSMC joint secretaries on the work of the North/South

bodies and in the other NSMC areas for co-operation and welcomed the following key developments: Tourism Ireland's successful campaign in 2011 and its major initiatives in 2012 and 2013 including 2012: Our time, Our place, Derry City of Culture, the World Police and Fire Games and "The Gathering 2013"; InterTradelreland's activities to promote collaboration to maximise drawdown of funding under the EU research, technological development and innovation (RTDI) framework programme and to improve accessibility to procurement markets for SMEs; the Special EU Programmes Body's (SEUPB) successful open call for INTERREG IVa applications, which closed in February 2012, with 91 applications worth £189.2 million, of which 13 applications, valued at £42 million, are being considered further; and the commencement of programme development on a future Peace programme and a future INTERREG cross-border programme;

The Council welcomed the Food Safety Promotion Board's successful collaborative Safefood knowledge networks, which will assist knowledge-sharing by those involved in the food chain; the Loughs Agency's success as lead partners with the University of Glasgow and Queen's University Belfast in securing funding of £8 million through INTERREG IVa for the integrated aquatic resource management project between Ireland, the North and Scotland; the completion by Foras na Gaeilge of public consultation on the introduction of new funding arrangements for core-funded bodies, with interim funding arrangements extended to 30 June 2013; the success of the Ulster-Scots Agency 2012 Burns Night gala, which was attended by 950 people in the Ulster Hall in Belfast, and its development of a programme of activities to mark the centenary of the Titanic, the centenary of the Ulster covenant and the 400th anniversary of the plantation charters.

The Council also welcomed preparation by Waterways Ireland of options for advancing the Ulster canal project; discussions between the Agriculture Departments on the proposed reforms to common agricultural policy (CAP) post-2013 and meetings between the two Chief Veterinary Officers and the EU Commission, during which the case was set out for the all-island animal health and welfare strategy; and the undertaking of a joint survey to inform cross-border pupil movement and school planning. The results from the survey and proposals on the way forward are to be considered no later than at the first NSMC education meeting of 2013.

The Council welcomed the fact that the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) are taking forward joint actions on research to support implementation of environmental policy and legislation and are co-operating in supporting researchers who are seeking European funding for priority environmental research under the EU FP7, INTERREG and LIFE+ programmes.

It also welcomed the continued progress on business planning for the establishment of the radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin Hospital, which is planned to commence in 2013 and be operational by 2016; a successful North/South conference on alcohol misuse in Armagh on 26 January 2012, which was attended by over 130 delegates from many sectors and included informative presentations from local and international speakers; the launch of the inter-jurisdictional protocol in child protection for the transfer of childcare cases between the North and the South and work to develop a new cross-border work programme in child protection; collaboration on road safety, including sharing

of knowledge and experience on the introduction of lower blood: alcohol concentration levels for drivers, improving new driver safety and the introduction of mutual recognition of penalty points for four lesser road traffic infringements; and improvements by Northern Ireland Railways and Irish Rail to the reliability and punctuality of the Enterprise service, alongside future plans to improve locomotive reliability, reduce fuel consumption and equip Enterprise trains with Wi-Fi.

The Council discussed the challenges and likely priorities for the upcoming Irish EU presidency in 2013. We explored the potential for co-operative actions during the presidency, including meetings of senior officials, the hosting of EU events in both jurisdictions and the discussion of EU matters as an agenda item at relevant NSMC meetings in sectoral format.

There was a discussion on the north-west gateway initiative. The Council welcomed the progress that has been made on a range of projects that have been delivered and planned that aim to deliver economic and social benefits in the north-west. Ministers will meet to reaffirm their commitment to maintaining progress to ensure that those measures are delivered effectively through the work of their Departments. A further progress report will be brought forward to the next NSMC institutional meeting.

The Council discussed progress to date on the A5 north-west gateway to Aghnacloy and the A8 Belfast to Larne projects. We noted that the Executive have announced an investment package, including two sections of the A5 and the A8 project. We also noted that the Irish Government remain committed to the completion of the co-funded A5 project.

There was a discussion on the importance of co-operation on third-level education. It took account of the likely increase in student mobility between both jurisdictions and the importance of continuing collaborative action among third-level institutions to assist with cost savings and on research and development.

The Council endorsed the following recommendations concerning the North/South bodies: sponsor Departments to consider options around the setting up of a board that would deliver the benefits of improved accountability and governance for Waterways Ireland but comprising fewer than 12 members, and to present proposals for consideration at a future NSMC inland waterways meeting; sponsor Departments to implement as appropriate, through changes to the legislation or other administrative means, a de minimis provision for dealing with Waterways Ireland disposal of a waterway or part of a waterway; sponsor Departments to review the current provisions in relation to Waterways Ireland's commercial activities to ensure that those are adequate, and to report to a future NSMC inland waterways meeting; and, taking account of the current economic and fiscal circumstances, no further action to be taken at this time to extend the remit of Waterways Ireland.

No further action is required concerning the engagement between the boards of the language body, sharing of services and consolidation of accounts since work is already underway to address each of those issues. No further action is required concerning the remit of the Ulster-Scots Agency to undertake work that is associated with the promotion of Ulster-Scots language and culture outside the island of

Ireland since legal advice has indicated that the existing legislation presents no difficulty. Sponsor Departments will continue to assist the Ulster-Scots Agency to achieve value for money within existing budgetary constraints. No action is required at present concerning an increase in the board membership of the Ulster-Scots Agency, but the issue will be kept under review, subject to consideration of the legislative and financial implications.

The Loughs Agency is to establish and provide services to producer organisations for the development of marine products. Any legislative obstacles identified by the agency will be addressed by the two sponsor Departments. An amendment is sought to the Magistrates' Courts (Costs in Criminal Cases) Rules 1988 to enable costs that are awarded to better reflect the cost of bringing prosecutions. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will keep under review the opportunity to amend the Foyle Fisheries Act 1952 to allow for a fixed-penalty regime.

Taking account of existing EU monitoring arrangements, the cost of a board to administer just 3% of the Special EU Programmes Body budget would be difficult to justify. The two sponsor Departments will examine the governance arrangements for the SEUPB that are currently in place and will report to the next NSMC SEUPB meeting in October 2012.

There should be no change in the status of the current board of the Food Safety Promotion Board (FSPB) from "advisory" to "executive". The FSPB may intervene in the event of a food scare situation if invited to do so by the lead authorities in both jurisdictions, provided that there is no legal impediment to doing so.

It was noted that work is progressing on a review of the financial memoranda of the North/South bodies, with the aim of having the review completed by the end of December 2012. In relation to shared services, it was noted that work has commenced on exploring the potential for providing efficiency savings within the North/South bodies, with a view to a report to the NSMC in the autumn of this year.

The Council noted that we, the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste will reflect and consult on the terms of reference 2 and 3 of the St Andrews Agreement review, with a view to decisions being taken at the November 2012 plenary meeting.

10.45 am

The background and recent developments on the North/South consultative forum were noted, and it was agreed to resolve the issue at the next NSMC plenary. The Council noted the latest developments on a North/South parliamentary forum and expects deliberations to be finalised shortly. A future schedule of NSMC meetings proposed by the joint secretariat was approved, including a NSMC institutional meeting in October 2012 and the next NSMC plenary meeting on 2 November 2012.

At the meeting, the First Minister, the Taoiseach and I also thanked Mary Bunting and Pat Donaghy for their contribution to the work of the NSMC and wished both of them well for their forthcoming retirements. Mary has been joint secretary to the NSMC for almost seven years, and Pat has been in the joint secretariat since 2000 and has been the deputy joint secretary for eight years. They have both played a major part in building North/South relations and will be sorely

missed when they go. It is very important that we record our deep appreciation for the great work that they did.

Mr Nesbitt (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):

I thank the Minister for the update on the meeting. I draw his attention to paragraph 15, which is about the North/South parliamentary forum. Could he fill us in on the detail of the objectives, structures, costs and benefits to the taxpayer of such a body?

Mr M McGuinness: At the plenary meeting, we noted that the Ceann Comhairle and Speaker Hay had been making good progress on a North/South parliamentary forum, and we look forward to deliberations on that matter being finalised shortly. It is fair to say that rapid progress has been made in the past couple of weeks.

The question is really about whether it can be justified. I believe that it can be eminently justified, because working together North and South can bring huge benefits for our people without infringing on anybody's allegiances. It is very important that we recognise that parliamentarians, whether from this institution or the Oireachtas, are involved in all sorts of key Committees for their areas of work, and they can bring that experience to bear for the mutual benefit of all of us on a range of issues to deal with the economy, the health service and education. If people come together and recognise the importance of working on an all-island basis, that will bring huge benefits for all the people we represent, which will be welcomed.

I look forward to a rapid conclusion of that work. It is not really a matter for the First Minister and me; it is more a matter for our Speaker and the Ceann Comhairle, Mr Barrett. In the past very short while, they have taken possession of important papers that I believe will lead to the public exposition of the announcement of that body in days rather than weeks.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. What further steps can be taken to reduce the costs of North/South bodies?

Mr M McGuinness: That matter is consistently looked at by our Finance Minister and Minister Noonan in the South. In recent times, steps have been taken to recognise the huge financial challenges that we all face, North and South, and provisions have been made to ensure that we make cost savings and put the finances that are available to the North/South institutions to good use in a way that brings dividends for the people whom we represent. That is an ongoing situation. Minister Noonan and our Finance Minister, Sammy Wilson, recognise their responsibilities on the matter. It is about delivery, and, thus far, it is quite clear that the North/South institutions have delivered huge benefits for all of us. However, on an ongoing basis, we must consistently look at how we can make further savings and do so in a way that does not affect the delivery of important services.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasChéad Aire, as do fhreagraí go dtí seo. I thank the deputy First Minister for his answers to date. Will he update us on discussions about developing trade links?

Mr M McGuinness: At the meeting, both sides clearly recognised the benefits of trade with developing markets,

including how we could co-operate in this area. All of us know that the recent visits by Vice Premier Xi to Dublin and Madam Liu to the North were very successful in helping us to develop relationships and open doors with China, which is very keen to build links with Europe. We outlined our plans for a trade visit to China in November. The Irish Government are keen to work with us and help us to take advantage of this opportunity. They have offered us assistance from their embassy in China.

We all recognise that one area with significant potential is agriculture, and we explained that we are already working on developing this sector in China. The Irish Government outlined the work that they have done to develop their trading links with China, which, I have to say, are much more advanced than ours. They have now developed protocols to facilitate the export of racehorses directly to China, and they have also satisfied the necessary conditions to export other animal and seafood products. We believe that there is massive potential for us to do more business with countries such as China and other emerging markets, and the Irish Government have offered us assistance from their embassies and agencies in taking this forward.

We understand the importance of developing trade links, not only with China but with many other nations throughout the world. Over the past couple of years, the First Minister and I have put a lot of effort into trying to attract foreign direct investment from the United States. We have been particularly successful in that and have had spectacular results. At the beginning, we were told that, because there was a world recession, we were hardly likely to attract one job. In fact, we have attracted thousands of jobs through the relationships that we built up with the United States of America. We went recently to India and the United Arab Emirates, and, later this year, we will go to China. As the First Minister has said on a number of occasions, we need to be much more outward looking and recognise that there are huge economies that have needs. Given the scale of these massive economies, particularly India and China and also an emerging Brazil, if we can attract them to businesses here, which can provide them with first-class products for their use, there are fantastic opportunities that we need to develop. We need to do that in conjunction with the ongoing work that Invest NI is involved in and the business delegations that it sends to these places. When political representatives go with the delegations, it gives them an added weight and increases the opportunities for further developments in trade.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement and his answers so far. I also welcome the discussions about collaborative working on tourism events. In that vein, is he comfortable with the Northern Ireland Executive not taking part in “The Gathering” next year?

Mr M McGuinness: We discussed that issue at the NSMC, and we have been very sensible about how we recognise the fact that “The Gathering” was first announced as a result of an initiative taken by the Irish Government. It was announced at a gathering of highly influential people, including former President Bill Clinton, in Dublin. We would have liked to be consulted at the outset and would have appreciated an invitation to participate at that early stage. That did not happen, and we recorded that in the course of our discussions with the Taoiseach. That having been said, there is no doubt that “The Gathering” planned by the

Irish Government will bring huge numbers of extra visitors to the South. We are looking at the opportunity that “The Gathering” presents for us to take advantage of that. There is a oneness, and we all know that Tourism Ireland has a key role in the overseas promotion of “The Gathering” of 2013. It is a year-long programme of events and gatherings in Ireland, driven by arts, sport, business and community groups. The two tourism Ministers will discuss it. I am optimistic that we can be involved in a process that will see us gain some advantage from this also.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement, and I welcome the enhanced North/South co-operation that is being delivered by the ministerial council, not least in economic and infrastructure development. I welcome the increased co-operation between NI Railways and Irish Rail and ask whether there is any timescale for the introduction of Wi-Fi on the Enterprise service?

Mr M McGuinness: I said earlier that that was an issue that the agencies are considering. I suppose that it will be down to the practicalities of how quickly it can be introduced, but the fact that they have made it clear that they will introduce it means that we can expect that it will be introduced sooner rather than later. I do not have a date, but I am sure that, given that it was discussed at the NSMC and that agreements were reached on it, it will happen in a very short period as opposed to its being a long-term objective.

Mr G Robinson: In light of ongoing discussions at Stormont about cutting the size of the Assembly and the Executive, does the deputy First Minister recognise the need to cut the number of North/South institutions?

Mr M McGuinness: No; and I do not think that the Member will be in any way surprised by that answer. Obviously, we have a duty and a responsibility in that regard. Party leaders and the Assembly and Executive Review Committee are involved in important discussions around the number of MLAs and Departments, and positive and constructive discussions are taking place. On the ‘Nolan Show’ this morning, I noted that Stephen Nolan made this out to be a big crisis in the institutions. As far as I am concerned, nothing could be further from the truth. I am very much involved, with the First Minister, in constructive discussions with the party leaders about these important matters. Reports on the North/South arrangements show that they have delivered important benefits for all our people on this island. We all know that, as is always the case, there will be discussions — negotiations for want of a better word — during the rest of this year, which will, hopefully, lead to final successful outcomes that we can all sign up to about the size of the Assembly and the number of Departments. I think that people know that, in the course of those discussions, there will be further discussions about the impact and role of the North/South bodies and areas of co-operation.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answers. It is good to hear about the great investment that has come here. When discussing lending, did he talk through the role of the banks — North and South — in lending more money to small and medium-sized enterprises in order to make sure that they survive to make the most of whatever investment comes?

Mr M McGuinness: Yes; that is very important. We discussed local banking sector issues with the Irish Government, and we noted the continuing difficulties faced by the banks as they restructure. The most recent data show that, although new lending by our four main banks is decreasing, loan approval rates overall are standing firm, at about 90%. As your question indicated, having a local banking sector that meets the needs of consumers and businesses and which provides competitive lending to SMEs is vital to our economic recovery.

Our Finance Minister, Sammy Wilson, continues to raise that issue with the British Government, the Bank of England and bank representatives; we also advised the Irish Government that Invest NI had recently announced a new loan fund. It is a very important matter, and the difficulties experienced by our SMEs in the North are replicated by those in the South. This is a real challenge, and the banks have a duty and a responsibility to play their part. The First Minister and I and others have been involved in all sorts of meetings with banking institutions over this crisis. At each meeting, we reiterate their responsibility to ensure that the difficulties being experienced by people in the business community are addressed.

From their perspective, the banks have a very important contribution to make towards the recovery of our businesses in a world recession, and we are not going to give up on that.

11.00 am

Mr Campbell: In the recession that the deputy First Minister has just alluded to, bankruptcies continue apace, in Northern Ireland and in the Republic. Was there any discussion on the issue of bankruptcies, particularly where those affected have assets and offer employment on either side of the border? In connection with that, has he any comment to make on a high-profile property developer in the Irish Republic, who, at the weekend, was quoted as saying:

“As a British citizen I have always objected to being forced into bankruptcy in a foreign jurisdiction purely on the basis that I have a judgment liability in that state.”

Of course, that statement was from Londonderry-born Tom McFeely, a former IRA hunger striker.

Mr M McGuinness: Addressing the usual positivity and constructiveness of the Member, I will say that my party is on the public record as being very critical of the individual just mentioned. That is on the public record in Dublin.

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

With regards to the issue of bankruptcy, when I heard the beginning of the Member's question, I thought that it was going to be positive. As usual, he never disappoints. Bankruptcy is a very serious matter, North and South. Businesses and individuals are facing all sorts of challenges. There is a duty and responsibility on all of us in government to recognise that people who face those difficulties and challenges are entitled to assistance. Can we deal with that matter under the auspices of the North/South Ministerial Council? Probably not. However, the separate jurisdictions — the Irish Government and ourselves — are trying to ensure that we give as much support to businesses as possible to prevent many businesses from going into bankruptcy. We have, of course, taken all sorts of initiatives ourselves,

through the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), Invest NI and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), that have alleviated the difficulty for many of our businesses, and we will, undoubtedly, continue that work.

Mr McDevitt: At the outset, while I have the deputy First Minister's attention, I acknowledge the publication of legislation on the inquiry into institutional abuse, which is very welcome. In light of that development, will he update the House on any discussions that may have taken place at North/South Ministerial Council level on the question of the co-ordination of an all-island approach to clerical abuse, which, of course, crosses the border? If discussions have not taken place, can I implore him, from the bottom of my heart, to begin them as soon as possible?

Mr M McGuinness: We all were very struck by the contribution made recently by Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, who, I believe, is to the forefront of the whole issue of child protection within the Church. About a month ago, he proposed that there should be a cross-border inquiry into the activities of Father Brendan Smyth. In the aftermath of the contribution from Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, I went on public record to say that I would support such an investigation. It is important. Last week, I introduced the First Stage of the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill here in the North. The decision to ensure that that inquiry is held under the auspices of Justice Hart has given tremendous encouragement to people who were victims of institutional abuse.

The issue of clerical abuse, which is not associated with institutional abuse, is a very serious subject. There can be no doubt whatsoever that the challenges faced by people who were abused are challenges that need to be met by the Governments, North and South. Although that did not feature as an agenda item during our discussions, we made it clear that we are pressing forward very decisively with the inquiry into institutional abuse. No doubt, there will be further discussions about the matter, particularly the request by Archbishop Diarmuid Martin that there be a North/South investigation into the activities of Father Brendan Smyth. Given the way in which that man was able to wreak havoc for a period of over 20 years — on some occasions, 15 years after he was first caught on — it begs the question for all of us: what were the authorities, North and South, doing? What were the gardaí doing? What was the RUC doing? What were the Church authorities doing about the matter? It is an important issue to be dealt with. However, first, we wanted to get right how we deal with institutional abuse. We have now put in place the process for dealing with that, and the legislation will be dealt with here at the Assembly. No doubt, at some stage in the future, we will consider how we deal with the issue of clerical abuse, North and South, given the activities of clerics who move between both jurisdictions. From my perspective, there is a compelling case for that. I agree absolutely with your contention.

Mr Allister: On 10 October last year, the First Minister told the House that the number of North/South bodies, and the potential reduction of that number, was within the remit of the St Andrews review. Now that the first phase of that review has been completed, can the House take it that there is to be no reduction in either the number or the powers of the North/South bodies?

Mr M McGuinness: We welcomed work that had been taken forward at the NSMC sectoral meetings on term of reference 1 of the review concerning the North/South bodies, and endorsed a number of recommendations that came forward from Ministers. We noted that there is still some work to be done by the Finance Ministers on the financial memoranda and shared services. That work will be progressed soon. That part of the review is now complete, subject to further discussion at NSMC sectoral meetings. As for terms of reference 2 and 3, some work remains to be done on the remaining elements of the review. We agreed that we, the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste will reflect and consult on terms of reference 2 and 3, with a view to final decisions being made at the next plenary meeting, which will be in November. We hope that we can expedite the matter in the course of our discussions over the next number of months.

As I said, and as many here are aware, the First Minister and I have been involved in important meetings, now happening regularly, with other party leaders in the Assembly. We believe that it is very important to be inclusive. We believe that it is very important to try, through all our deliberations, to achieve a consensus that everybody can find favour with. That work will continue. The outworking of all that will be dealt with in a very public fashion through the work of the NSMC. At this stage, I do not think that it would be appropriate for the Assembly to go outside the restrictions that we, as Ministers, face in our responsibility to the Council.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the deputy First Minister for his update thus far. Will Ministers meet in the near future to discuss the important matter of the north-west gateway initiative?

Mr M McGuinness: At the meeting, we welcomed the progress that has been made through the north-west gateway initiative on a range of initiatives that aim to deliver economic and social benefits in the north-west. I am pleased that the Executive have agreed to a substantial funding package of £12.6 million to support the City of Culture. That will provide an excellent opportunity for us to showcase Derry and the north-west region. I am also very pleased with yesterday's announcement from the Social Development Minister, Nelson McCausland, of over £4 million for a temporary structure at the Ebrington site, which will be available for sizeable audiences.

There has been significant progress across many areas that are key to the success of the region: economic development; health; education and skills; tourism; connectivity; economic infrastructure; and agriculture and rural development. That includes over €120 million of funding allocated from EU funding programmes.

In answer to the question, it was decided that Ministers would meet to reaffirm their commitment to maintaining progress on the initiative and delivering measures effectively through the work of their Departments, so we agreed to keep track of the progress at the next NSMC institutional meeting.

Mr Beggs: Mention is made of the interjurisdictional protocol on child protection for the transfer of childcare cases. What discussions have taken place at the North/South Ministerial Council with regard to improving children's welfare by way of holding absent parents to account for their

child maintenance payments, which some may have avoided by simply moving across the border?

Mr M McGuinness: There has been no discussion at the NSMC on that issue. If the Member wishes to communicate with us his concerns about that, it is something that we will certainly consider for inclusion at a future discussion.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. Will the deputy First Minister update us on progress in relation to the A5 project and on what stage it is at?

Mr M McGuinness: At the meeting, we welcomed the progress that has been made by the two transport Departments. We noted that the Irish Government remain committed to the completion of the co-funded A5 project, which is of strategic importance to the north-west and the island as a whole. We approved a funding and implementation plan for the A5 project to the end of 2016, based on existing financial commitments. We noted that relevant officials, North and South, are to continue to explore options towards completion of the A5 project in the period post 2016. We also noted that the inspector's report and recommendations on the A5 are being considered by the Department for Regional Development and that, subject to a satisfactory outcome, contractor work could commence in the autumn of this year.

I am pleased that the Department for Regional Development has published the necessary orders for the A8, which should allow construction work to commence in the summer of this year. I know we have since been told that there is going to be a judicial review of that, but it is quite clear that the jobs that will be created during construction of the A5 and the A8 will provide a much-needed boost to the construction industry. Once they are completed, they will have a very positive impact on the whole island by improving access and reducing journey times.

Criminal Justice Intergovernmental Agreement

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): With permission, I wish to make a statement regarding a meeting under the auspices of the intergovernmental agreement (IGA) on co-operation on criminal justice matters, which was held in Dublin Castle on Thursday 24 May. The meeting was hosted by Alan Shatter TD, Minister for Justice, Equality and Defence, and I represented the Executive.

This was the fifth formal ministerial meeting under the IGA since the devolution of justice over two years ago. As I have said in previous statements to the House, I am committed to keeping the Assembly informed of meetings held under the auspices of the agreement on the same basis as NSMC meetings. The meeting on 24 May, among other things, provided both of us with an opportunity to review progress against the 2011-12 joint work programme that we agreed at our meeting in June last year. The period of the work programme is coming to an end, and it was pleasing to note the positive progress that has been made and the objectives that have been met. I previously shared a copy of the 2011-12 work programme with Members as part of the oral statement last June.

I will give three specific examples of the work under last year's programme. First, there was the establishment of a joint probation/prison/police/gardaí group, which is contributing to the development of robust systems for the management of dangerous offenders on release from prison. Secondly, there was the opportunity to consider together the implications for both jurisdictions of the proposed EU victims directive. That has been particularly relevant given the Justice Committee's inquiry into victims' issues and our commitment to refresh our victims' strategy. Thirdly, there was the organisation of the second annual joint public protection seminar, which was successfully held in Antrim at the end of November. It provided an opportunity for representatives of both Probation Services, along with other agencies, to discuss a number of key public protection issues, including assessing risk regarding sex offenders; offender management; the strategy for management of women offenders; and drug and alcohol misuse.

11.15 am

Other agreed actions included exploring the potential for fast-track probation reports to help speed up justice, maximising opportunities for co-operation on forensic science and sharing best practice on justice initiatives, as well as learning how we can best support victims of crime.

The 2011-12 work programme has provided the foundation for building on and taking further forward related and emerging actions in the 2012-13 work programme, which I agreed with Alan Shatter on 24 May. The new work programme sets out priorities for continued cross-border co-operation over the next 12 months, and I have attached a copy to my statement for the information of Members.

It includes: opportunities for joint training and peer review; the production of a document on best practice in policing diverse communities; helping us jointly consider the role of advocacy services for victims of crime; further extending information-sharing arrangements to support public protection; and exploring how best to work with young people at risk of offending who are affected by speech and language difficulties.

Progress against all the actions in the 2012-13 work programme will be monitored by the working group of officials, who will report to Alan Shatter and me at our next ministerial meeting. It will be my intention, with the Speaker's continued agreement, that I will update the Assembly following that meeting.

Alan Shatter and I were also updated on the progress of the six project advisory groups, which focus on areas including public protection, registered offenders, youth justice, forensic science, support for victims of crime and social diversity. Each project advisory group has continued to promote and support co-operation between officials across the broad spectrum of criminal justice agencies on both sides of the border. The public protection group, for example, has continued to lead on the preparation of common statistics, which support the comparison of key indicators across the two jurisdictions.

In relation to the management of sex offenders, there is excellent ongoing co-operation between the PSNI and an Garda Síochána at an operational level. As Members are aware, ensuring that victims of crime receive the necessary support when they come into contact with the criminal justice system is a priority for me. I previously advised Mr Shatter about the work being done in Northern Ireland, including the inquiry being conducted by the Justice Committee. The outcome of that inquiry will be of interest to the project advisory group that focuses on victims' issues.

We were also updated on the work being taken forward around youth justice, particularly joint work on the development of a toolkit to help young people at risk of offending to develop empathy, where that is lacking.

The co-operation between the two forensic science services continues with collaboration on sharing of expertise. It was of particular significance in underpinning the importance of co-operation in this vital area of the criminal justice system that I was pleased to accept Alan Shatter's invitation to address, along with him, the European Network of Forensic Science Institutes' annual conference, which was held in Dublin Castle on 24 May.

I am pleased to report that there continues to be good progress in supporting and promoting North/South co-operation to make Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland a safer place. The meeting was a good opportunity to be updated on a policy seminar, which was held in Armagh on 24 April and was attended by the co-chairs of the project advisory groups and other lead policy officials from both jurisdictions. Delegates heard about, discussed and considered the work being done in Northern Ireland on the development of a reducing offending strategy and the development of the White Paper on crime being taken forward by the Department of Justice and Equality. It is clear that we have many similar challenges on both sides of the border, and consideration is being given to a proposal to establish an ad hoc crime strategy group that would report to the working group of officials.

The intergovernmental agreement provides a helpful framework for supporting North/South co-operation on criminal justice matters, but we are seeing the real benefits of co-operation when individuals in the criminal justice agencies have developed good working relationships with their respective counterparts. It is that type of practical

co-operation that Alan Shatter and I are committed to promoting and supporting.

Finally, the agreement is not intended to provide for discussion of cross-border security issues. However, I have cause to discuss such matters regularly with Mr Shatter, and I used the opportunity of our being together to briefly discuss some general wider, cross-border security-related issues. Those included the work being done to combat fuel laundering and related fraud, including its environmental impacts.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I thank the Minister for bringing this statement to the House. There is reference in the statement to the implications for the proposed EU directive. Human trafficking is something that the Committee has taken a particular interest in. Will the Minister elaborate on what the implications will be for bringing this EU directive into place?

He also mentioned that there have been discussions around cross-border security issues. Can he elaborate further on the nature of those discussions?

Mr Ford: I thank the Committee Chair for both questions, and I will take the second one first. I am not sure that it would be wise for me to elaborate on the detail of discussions on security matters. I hinted at a number of security matters, including the fuel fraud problems that afflict border areas in particular and our ongoing concerns about the campaign of violence by small numbers of people who reject the political settlement that the rest of us have accepted.

A variety of work is being done on human trafficking on both sides of the border that, I believe, is entirely in line with what the requirements of the EU directive will be. We have taken a particular line, through the Organised Crime Task Force, by seeking to identify and rescue those who are trafficked and by supporting initiatives such as the Blue Blindfold campaign to diminish the demand for such activities. Given the publicity value, those issues are, in many senses, best co-ordinated on a North/South basis. The fact that the Irish Government ran the first Blue Blindfold campaign alongside us was a positive example of how we can work together to ensure that this island as a whole and, indeed, these islands as a whole are exemplars of good practice in defeating trafficking.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim míle buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas ar maidin. I thank the Minister for his statement this morning. He stated:

“the group ... is contributing to the development of robust systems for the management of dangerous offenders on release from prison.”

Will he outline some of the practical outworkings of the scheme?

Mr Ford: I thank the Deputy Chair for his question. Much of that was covered at the public protection seminar that was held in Antrim before Christmas, to which I referred. That work is predominantly led by the two probation services. It is important that the practical lessons learned in one jurisdiction be applied in the other, where they are relevant; that we get the maximum possible co-operation, given that we have a relatively permeable land border, to ensure that there is notification of sex offenders arriving in

one jurisdiction from the other; and that work be done to maintain contact with and supervision of them.

The proposals that I recently announced to strengthen notification of those who arrive in Northern Ireland from the Republic are part of that. I think that good work is being done to tie up the practical issues of co-operation between the two probation services in a way that prevents sex offenders, and other serious offenders, using the border to escape the supervision that they deserve on release.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for his statement. He mentioned security matters. Was there no structure to security discussions at the talks? Were such discussions totally ad hoc? The Omagh bomb victims are very keen to look at the cross-border element. Were there any discussions about the Omagh bomb?

Mr Ford: I appreciate Mr Elliott's point. However, the issues around the Omagh bomb somewhat predate my appointment as Minister. The intergovernmental agreement that I inherited refers specifically to criminal justice rather than terrorism. However, I think that, on occasions that I get the opportunity to meet the Minister in Dublin, it is entirely appropriate for us to cover those security aspects as well to ensure that co-operation is maintained at the highest level in order to support the work being done by the Garda Síochána alongside the PSNI to deal with the terrorist threat that still exists on this island. The formal mechanism is not there, but the practical reality is that those issues are carried forward by me and my officials and by Alan Shatter and his officials at a number of opportunities, not just at those formal meetings. I think that that is an example of the good work being done and that we need to see continue.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his statement, which was very detailed and thorough. It represents the culmination of a good working relationship between him and the Justice Minister in the South.

In the last paragraph of his statement, the Minister refers to the fact that wider, cross-border security-related issues are not an integral part of the work of this particular set of meetings. Is it time that the Minister examined the operation of this device and tried to extend this working arrangement to dealing with wider security-related issues? Is it appropriate that that be done?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Maginness for that question. He makes a valid point as to how issues relating to security should be covered. Indeed, Members have referred to the fact that justice is not covered by the NSMC. For some, I suspect that that will also include security matters.

I can only work with the institutions that I inherited on the devolution of justice. They prescribe that the IGA is the body through which we discuss criminal justice co-operation. I use it to ensure that we enhance security co-operation through those meetings as well as through informal meetings. Were we to suggest that justice be covered by the NSMC, I am not sure that there would be full consensus in the House, but I am open to any measure that ensures the best practical commonsense co-operation between the Departments, North and South, and the various agencies of the justice and security systems.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. You referred to the EU directive on the victims of crime. You

are aware that the Committee has been working hard and diligently on an inquiry into victims and witnesses to crimes in Northern Ireland. Given the implications of the EU directive, will you take the opportunity, at your next meeting, to share with your counterpart the excellent work that is being done by the Committee and allow us — through you — to share that work with them so that we can further enhance cross-border co-operation with regards to the whole issue of how victims are dealt with?

Finally, Minister, may I ask, in relation to the last part of your statement, whether you are satisfied that there are sufficient cross-border resources in place to deal with the scourge of fuel laundering?

Mr Ford: I thank my colleague for his cunning effort to get two questions in without being noticed.

I have no reason to believe that the resources provided by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, the Office of the Revenue Commissioners in the South, the police and the Garda Síochána are not adequate to deal with the problem of fuel laundering, but it is clearly an ongoing problem that requires attention.

The Member asks me about taking forward the good work being done by the Justice Committee on victims' issues. I would be delighted to take forward into ongoing discussions with Alan Shatter the good work being done by the Justice Committee, except that the Committee has not finished it yet and has not told me what is in it.

We have had discussions on our code of practice for victims. The Republic has a charter for victims that covers similar areas.

To digress slightly from the issue of the IGA, the work done by the Committee on victims' issues — building on the work previously done by the Department that will come back and inform the Department's thinking — is a very constructive example of the way that I want to work. Just please let me have the report before the meeting in six months' time.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his statement. What are the practical outworkings of the co-operation on forensic science services, apart from the reference to conferences in the statement? In particular, will it have any positive impact on reducing the backlog for Forensic Science Northern Ireland (FSNI)?

Mr Ford: Mr Weir raises a valid point about the pressures, not just on the FSNI, but on all the forensic science agencies throughout these islands. To some extent, that pressure is exacerbated by organisational and institutional changes in England and Wales. That is why we have a tripartite agreement with the Scots and the Irish to provide backup. None of us has very significant opportunities to take on additional work because all the laboratories are under pressure. However, there are key issues, such as providing peer review and expertise in training and developing a certain amount of expertise in one lab rather than another. In those areas, good work is being done by the Irish, the Scots and us, but there are ongoing issues, as forensic science advances, to ensure that we get the maximum possible benefits for assisting the justice system by the proper application of forensic science in all our jurisdictions. That will be a challenge for the future.

11.30 am

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his statement. An issue that arose during the deputy First Minister's statement was that of clerical child abuse. Has the Minister discussed the upcoming inquiry in this part of Ireland and the all-Ireland nature of the issue with his counterpart?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Lynch for the question. The issue of clerical abuse was discussed informally at the meeting. Issues were raised with me about certain aspects where there were North/South limits by some of the survivors of that abuse, which I have passed on to Mr Shatter. However, it is not my job to tell him what to do, nor his to tell me what to do. Of course, the inquiry is being led by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, not by the Department of Justice.

Mr S Anderson: I too thank the Minister for his statement. At the end of the statement the Minister referred to discussion on cross-border security issues, as has already been mentioned. Can he confirm that he is pressing the Dublin Government to do all that they can in relation to dissident republican activity along the border and in other areas of the Republic?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Anderson for that point. I do not think I need to pressure Alan Shatter, the Garda Commissioner or anybody else who has responsibility there to continue to take action. It is clear that significant resources are being devoted within the Republic to the border areas where the particular issues of dissidents arise. I believe that we are seeing some very strong and positive co-operation across the border between the Garda Síochána and the PSNI, which is as much as we could expect them to do, given all of the pressures on their jurisdiction as well. So, it is not a case of applying pressure; it is a case of welcoming the ongoing co-operation.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. I acknowledge your response to an earlier question from my colleague Mr McCartney. Does the Minister agree with me that many of the victims' groups would argue that an all-Ireland sex offenders register would be the best mechanism for tracking those people? Are there any immediate steps on co-operation across both jurisdictions on bringing forward an all-Ireland sex offenders register? How imminent is that?

Mr Ford: Ms Boyle raises a valid issue about those sex offenders who are moving across the border, but we also need to recognise that there are sex offenders who move between this jurisdiction and Scotland and between this jurisdiction and England and Wales. It is difficult to see how simply concentrating on the cross-border element would necessarily make things more joined up than they currently are. I am keen to see the agencies co-operate. We are seeing very positive co-operation, particularly between the two probation services on the island, which I believe is meeting those concerns. I am not sure that the problem solely exists across the border here. I think there is also an issue across the North Channel and across the Irish Sea. The issue is practical co-operation rather than necessarily an institutional tie-up.

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 comprehensive responses. I will pick up on the final paragraph in his statement, about the opportunities he had with Minister Shatter, including the work being done to combat fuel laundering and related fraud. It was a theme picked up on by my colleague Mr Maginness. Were there any further discussions around opportunities to work together on aspects of organised crime and the development of a joint strategy to combat it on the entire island?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr McGlone for his question, although I am beginning to wonder whether I should have just confined the statement to the final paragraph. It might have made life much speedier in the House, since most of the questions are concentrating on that. There are indeed robust structures to deal with organised crime. Members will be aware that I chair the Organised Crime Task Force (OCTF) in Northern Ireland. Many of its subgroups, particularly those looking at issues like fuel fraud, as well as issues like trafficking, combine agencies from the Republic with agencies from Northern Ireland, and, I believe, are seeing good work being done together. Although those are not issues that come up in discussion at every meeting of the IGA, they have been well covered by the OCTF subgroups, reported to the OCTF and, obviously, to the parent bodies in the Republic, and covered by some of the cross-border seminars that happen. That is an example of the practical work that is being done. It does not take a ministerial meeting to ensure that the two revenue and customs authorities and the two police services talk together about issues such as fuel fraud, and we are seeing that practical work continuing at the operational level in the way it is best needed.

Mr Wells: I thank the Minister for his statement. I hope that he took the opportunity to congratulate Minister Shatter on being the first Irish Government Minister to realise that the city is called Londonderry.

On a much more serious issue, a large quantity of illicit fuel is still being smuggled from the Irish Republic into this part of the United Kingdom. Clearly, more can be done by the authorities in the Republic to stop it coming at source, which is through large bulk suppliers of fuel. Did he have any discussions with his counterpart about this issue? Is he confident that the Irish Republic has the will to stamp out the problem?

Mr Ford: I am happy to assure Mr Wells that it appears that Alan Shatter and I can use the D-word and the L-word interchangeably without intending to cause offence in any direction.

On the specific issue of fuel fraud, I am not sure that what we are dealing with is just a South-to-North smuggling issue. Given the fact that excise duty is now much closer than it was a few years ago, a very large part of it is related more to laundering, which is something that occurs on both sides of the border — not just within border zones. After all, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs has closed down plants in County Antrim, which is about as far as you could get from the border. It is not simply an issue of South-to-North smuggling. The examples that I gave Mr McGlone of the work of OCTF and its fuel fraud subgroup show the good work that can be done when agencies come together.

Regardless of exactly where the problem arises, it is being dealt with in a partnership way.

Mr Molloy: I thank the Minister for his statement. Can I bring him back to the issue around forensic laboratories? A number of families, more than were initially under investigation, have now been deprived of vehicles and various things for over 12 months while investigations take place. Is there any limitation on the forensic laboratories' response time on investigations?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Molloy for his question, although I fear that the first part was trying to drag me into an individual investigation. The answer is that the laboratories take whatever time it takes to carry out the work that needs to be done. On my visit to Seapark, I was not entirely surprised to discover that the timescales to carry out full investigations are somewhat quicker than those that feature on certain television programmes; however, there is an issue around ensuring that resources are made available, at a time of considerable pressure, to ensure that work can be done as speedily and efficiently as possible.

Mr Allister: I refer the Minister to the question from Mr Elliott, which I think he rather dodged. Of course the Omagh bomb predated his involvement as Minister. However, there is a live, ongoing issue, which was accentuated again yesterday by the victims, about the need for full answers on a cross-border basis. Has the Minister discussed this issue with Minister Shatter and to what effect? Does he have a view that would assist on the issue?

Mr Ford: Mr Allister, like Mr Elliott, is trying to drag me into the issue of an inquiry into the Omagh bomb and the specific issues of cross-border implications. Those are not issues for the Department of Justice; they are issues for the NIO, perhaps. The cross-border element is a matter for the Secretary of State to take forward, not for me. The answer is that, no, I have not had specific discussions on the Omagh bomb issue with Alan Shatter. My concerns are to ensure that Alan Shatter and I prevent any future Omaghs.

Executive Committee Business

Statistics and Registration Services Act 2007 (Disclosure of Social Security Information) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That the Statistics and Registration Services Act 2007 (Disclosure of Social Security Information) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be affirmed.

Members, the regulations for your consideration today are part of a wider programme of work to utilise existing government-held information for the production of population and social statistics in Northern Ireland.

The Statistics and Registration Services Act 2007 created a new non-ministerial Department, the Statistics Board, to promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good. The Act extends to Northern Ireland and these regulations are being made under powers contained in that Act.

The national insurance register has been identified as an important source of data on individuals that could be used to improve population and social statistics. The register is owned jointly by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC), the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Department for Social Development (DSD).

Regulations have already been made at Westminster to allow HMRC and DWP to pass national insurance registered data to the Statistics Board. The regulations under consideration today will allow the DSD to pass national insurance registered data to the Statistics Board.

The type of information that will be shared is simple, demographic data, which, among other things, will inform future estimates of the number of people living in Northern Ireland. Under the legislation, the Statistics Board is able to release the national insurance register's social security information to the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), which is responsible for the production of population and social statistics in Northern Ireland. Although the regulations will allow access to personal information, it is forbidden to publish any information that could identify an individual, and data has to be held under very strict conditions.

The regulations have been considered by the Committee for Finance and Personnel and the Committee for Social Development and no objections were raised. Therefore, I recommend that the Statistics and Registration Services Act 2007 (Disclosure of Social Security Information) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be affirmed.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. As the Minister has outlined, the regulations will enable the DSD to disclose selected customer information from the national insurance register and social security records for the use of NISRA in developing local demographic statistics. The information will also be used for the checking and verification of the 2011 census results.

The policy proposals contained in the statutory rule were considered by the Committee for Finance and Personnel on 9 May, when it was agreed to invite Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) officials to brief the Committee. Given the role of DSD in the disclosure of the relevant information, it was also agreed to seek the views and comments of the Committee for Social Development. On 18 May, that Committee confirmed that it had no comment to make on the policy proposals.

DFP officials provided a useful oral briefing to the Committee on 23 May, and they confirmed that the driving force behind the regulations was the creation of population estimates that were as robust as possible and that would be used to inform policy decisions and the allocation of resources. Committee members were assured that protocols would be put in place in respect of the access to and use of personal data and information security. Officials also advised that consideration will be given as to whether there is a potential to move, subject to EU requirements, from a traditional census to the use of existing administrative data that is supplemented by the surveys. That could mean the availability of census-type information on a more regular basis.

The Committee formally considered the statutory rule that is before the Assembly at its meeting of 6 June, together with the accompanying report from the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules. The Examiner raised no issues by way of technical scrutiny. As the Committee had agreed to copy the initial policy proposals to the Committee for Social Development, it also agreed to copy the statutory rule to that Committee for comment. In the meantime, the Committee agreed to recommend that the Statistics and Registration Services Act 2007 (Disclosure of Social Security Information) Regulations 2012 be affirmed by the Assembly, subject to any views from the Committee for Social Development. It was subsequently confirmed that that Committee had no comment to make on the statutory rule. Therefore, on behalf of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I support the motion.

11.45 am

Mr Cree: The regulations we are dealing with allow the Department for Social Development to disclose information to the Statistics Board in respect of individuals in connection with certain benefit payments. That is necessary, as has been said, to enable the board to carry out its functions.

It is worth noting that clauses 5 and 6(a) only permit the Statistics Board to disclose such information to the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, and only for the purpose of assisting the Statistics Board's production of population statistics. I also note that a regulatory impact assessment has not been produced for this rule, and no impact on the private or voluntary sectors is foreseen. The rule is subject to affirmative resolution by the Assembly, and I am happy that that be granted today.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of the SDLP, I support the motion. This measure can help to ensure that we have accurate statistics available to us, which will help to verify information available through the census. Of course, we want to be reassured that all data used in that way will be subject to the utmost

security. I am sure that the Minister can and will give us that assurance. We have no other issues with the measure. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Mitchel McLaughlin.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: What a nice surprise. *[Laughter.]* In this particular instance, the Committee got all the consultation that it needed. I am quite happy to join with my colleagues and endorse the regulations.

Mr Wilson: It is not very often we see the Member lost for words, but it was a nice occasion anyhow. I am glad that he is pleased with the level of scrutiny that the Committee was able to give on this occasion and that we do not have a repeat of yesterday.

I thank Members who commented on the regulations and welcome their remarks. I also thank the Chairman of the Finance and Personnel Committee and the Social Development Committee. Those two Committees carried out the scrutiny of the regulations.

The main concerns, and the ones that have been raised by Mr Bradley, the Chairman of the Finance and Personnel Committee and Mr Cree in the debate, are around the security of the data. Assurances were given and spelt out to the Committee during the discussions that it had. There are a number of things.

First, no identifiable information will be made public. Although we will be collecting names and addresses etc, all of that is for internal use only to identify where people live and how many people live there so that we have a comprehensive picture of population in Northern Ireland.

Mr D Bradley: I accept the Minister's assurance, but, like me, he will probably recall several instances in England where computer disks have gone missing and the personalised information stored on those disks has fallen into the public domain. Can the Minister assure us that that type of incident will not happen in this case?

Mr Wilson: The Member interrupted me; I had only got to the first point that I want to make. I have made the point that no identifiable information will be made public. We will seek to ensure that through a number of other steps, because there will be a strict adherence to the statistics code of practice, which should help to ensure that no information about an identifiable person is made public. The data will be stored in a dedicated facility to which only nominated users will have access. All users will be subject to relevant security checks. There will also be strong penalties for any unlawful disclosure of information, which can go right up to a term of imprisonment of up to two years. At all times, the storage and use of data will be subject to the Data Protection Act 1998. People who will be using the data will be trained so that they know their obligations about keeping data secure, disclosure of data, and so on. All those steps will be in place.

Can I give an assurance that some person at some stage may not take a chance and breach all those rules? In any human situation, one cannot give a guarantee. All I can say is that every possible step will be taken, from training to setting down clear rules to imposing sanctions against individuals who break the rules. All those steps have been and will be taken to ensure that data is as secure as

possible. I hope that that at least assures Members that the issue is not being treated lightly. The statistics are an important source of information that can tell us how many people there are, the types of people, where they are located, and so on. All that information is useful in deciding future public policy.

I thank Members for their interest and support. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Statistics and Registration Services Act 2007 (Disclosure of Social Security Information) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be affirmed.

Budget (No. 2) Bill: Second Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item in the Order Paper is the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill. I have to inform Members that the Speaker has not been notified by the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel that the Committee is satisfied that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the Bill. In accordance with Standing Order 42(2), the Bill may therefore not proceed under the accelerated passage procedure. As Standing Order 42(1) requires that there must be at least five working days between each stage of a Bill, the Second Stage cannot proceed today and will be rescheduled by the Business Committee.

The next item of business in the Order Paper is Question Time. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The Business Committee will meet at 12.30 pm. The sitting is, by leave, suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 11.52 am.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Finance and Personnel

Mr Speaker: Question 14 has been withdrawn.

Departmental Property Sales

1. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether Land and Property Services has fully embraced his endorsement of the Public Accounts Committee recommendation that evaluations of departmental property sales should be validated by independent professional valuations. (AQO 2194/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I am not entirely sure which Public Accounts Committee (PAC) report the Member is referring to, but perhaps he is referring to the one on the transfer of surplus land in the PFI education pathfinder projects, which was published in December 2007. The report made 16 recommendations. The one that I think the Member refers to — I hope I am getting the gist of his question — was this:

“The Committee recommends that when considering the disposal of a site, public bodies must adhere to the basic principles of defining the site precisely and valuing it accordingly. Public bodies must also ensure that they engage the Land and Property Service, and where appropriate recognised professional valuers, from the outset and ensure that valuations are updated on a regular basis.”

Land and Property Services (LPS) has fully embraced that recommendation. Land and Property Services has a team of professional chartered valuation surveyors, regulated by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, who provide independent professional advice to the public sector at all stages of the disposal process. The key role of LPS is to ensure that, when disposing of land, Departments get the best value when they sell property assets.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will the Minister accept that Land and Property Services must disclose the independent valuation details to prospective purchasers in the interests of transparency, particularly if there is an increasing risk of investment and employment opportunities being lost through any protracted dispute?

Mr Wilson: The role of LPS is, first of all, to set the value. That is the price that the people who are going to sell the land, who are appointed by tender and are professionals, will then attach to the land. Very often, these things are open to tenders where people will bid for the land. If there is a big difference between the value that LPS put on it and the price offered, there is always the opportunity to negotiate with LPS on that to come to a conclusion on what may be the appropriate value. If arguments are made, of course they will be listened to.

I suppose that at the end of the day the important thing is that we get best value for any assets that we dispose of. The whole point of the PAC report was to ensure we were getting the proper value of land that we disposed of. Do not forget: the revenue we get from that is then available for public services and investment in public services in Northern Ireland.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister advise whether the duplication of valuations is likely to incur additional costs? What is his best estimate of those costs?

Mr Wilson: There should be no duplication of valuations. On the sale side, LPS will do a valuation for the public body that happens to be wishing to sell the land. People who want to buy the land will obviously have their own valuation of what they think it is worth to them and will make their bids accordingly. If there is a small difference between the two prices, there is obviously scope for making a decision. I can think of one example of a huge difference that we are dealing with at the moment where the value that we put on the land was 10 times greater than the price that was offered. I do not think anyone would expect us to sell at that price, but we have told the applicant to come and talk to us and negotiate. There can be a negotiation between the two prices.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister agree that the recent experience with the attempt to dispose of the Ballee lands at Ballymena demonstrates how out of touch LPS can be? It valued the lands at £10 million, rejected an offer of several millions from a consortium of former owners, put it out to public tender and got a derisory offer. What does that say about the validity and probity of the valuations put on public land by LPS?

Mr Wilson: If the Member is going to raise the issue, maybe he should tell the full story. There was a considerable time difference between the initial valuation and the amount for which the land was eventually sold. During that time, of course, the market changed. Very often, these things will be reflected in market changes over time. We try to get up-to-date market valuations. Sometimes there will be delays in sales, which can be detrimental but can also be advantageous, if the market has moved in a positive direction.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his answer. I know that he regards the work of the Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee very highly. *[Laughter.]* I encourage him to give us an update on the performance of the asset management unit. I am sure that he will be delighted to do that.

Mr Wilson: I do value the work of the Audit Office, as we all should. Sometimes, I have difficulty with how it manages its own money, and I have made that known in the Assembly on a number of occasions.

Mr Speaker: I urge Members not to stray outside the question.

Mr Wilson: Well, since he strayed outside the question, perhaps I can stray outside it with the answer that I give.

The asset management unit looks at the strategic disposal of assets, and the LPS will have an input into the valuation of the particular assets that it has agreed to dispose of. The asset management unit has a job to

do over this comprehensive spending review (CSR) period. We are looking for an additional £100 million from assets that will be identified and put on the market by the asset management unit. The unit exceeded its revised target for this year, and I hope that, as it identifies and brings together more assets, we will see the revenue accruing in future years.

Dormant Accounts Scheme

2. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on his plans for implementing the dormant accounts scheme. (AQO 2195/11-15)

Mr Wilson: During 2011-12, £47 million of funding was released by the reclaim fund to the UK Big Lottery Fund. The mechanism for distributing the Northern Ireland share of this funding is still being developed. Any funding that relates to 2011-12 can be carried forward into 2012-13 and will not be lost.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his response. Perhaps he will elaborate a little on how he intends to deliver the scheme throughout Northern Ireland. Towards what type of work will these funds be directed?

Mr Wilson: I know that a lot of Members had expectations about the dormant accounts fund and the release of money to projects in Northern Ireland. I am a wee bit disappointed that it has not progressed to the point where we are releasing the funds, although I hope that they will be released early in this financial year if we can get approval. The scheme represents a fairly small amount of money that will be available to Northern Ireland. There will be between £800,000 and £1.3 million in the current round.

Initially, it was thought that it should be given out in grants. However, once a grant is given out, the money is used and that is the end of the story. It was my view that we should find a way to make the money recyclable. I wanted it to go to groups that, perhaps for ethical reasons, could not access the Big Lottery Fund. We have targeted activities run by faith-based groups and work with children. I hope that the money will take the form of loans to social enterprises run by such bodies so that they can use it as investment money. Once the scheme is up and running and starting to earn money, the money can be paid back and can be recycled into other schemes. That will mean that we will have a legacy from it rather than simply spending the money and that being the end of the story. That is the proposal in a nutshell. It has to get Executive support.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. He has come to the area that I wanted to address. It is a modest sum of money, and our general expectations of the two priorities have to be modest as well. He mentioned social enterprise as a means of keeping the money in circulation, which, essentially, was what my question was about. Will that be included as a priority in the guidelines for the application of the funds?

Mr Wilson: I see it as being used almost exclusively through social enterprises aimed in the two directions that I mentioned. It would be in the form of loans to social enterprises, and I can think of projects that might apply. We are looking for inventive proposals where people are saying,

“Look, we find it difficult to get the money from the bank. If we could get £50,000, say, that would get us started. Once the revenue starts to come in from the enterprise, we can pay it back”. Once it has been paid back, it can be used again, rather than us simply giving a grant to an organisation on one occasion and then not having the money for future use.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his answers. I accept what he said: going in the direction of social enterprise is a good thing. Who, ultimately, will decide how the funds will be invested or directed? Will it be you, as Minister, or will you be guided by others who perhaps have different ideas and may persuade you in another direction?

Mr Wilson: The idea was never that it would be administered and the money given out by the Department of Finance and Personnel. I do not want to name any one organisation, but the Member will be aware of organisations that deal with the financing of social enterprises. They are probably better placed to judge the viability of the social enterprise and make assessments of the business plans that are published. The Executive would simply say to an organisation, “You take on the responsibility for distributing the funds, but here are the rules that we want you to abide by when doing it”. Those are the kinds of enterprises and activities that we want the money to go to.

Rates: Debt

3. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel why his Department did not reach its target for the reduction of rating debt last year. (AQO 2196/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The target outcome for the 2011-12 reduction in rating debt is provisional. It is currently subject to audit assurance, so it has not been published. Land and Property Services (LPS) had a target to reduce debt to £145 million. That target excluded debt arising from the rating of empty homes, which was introduced in October 2011. The rating debt position as of 31 March 2011 — the end of the last financial year — was £155.6 million. Indications in preparing LPS agency accounts show that the level of outstanding debt, excluding the rating of empty homes, at 31 March 2012 has reduced to below that level and is likely to be the largest reduction in the debt figure over the past seven years.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he confirm that Land and Property Services uses every opportunity to agree a payment plan for rates arrears and uses courts only as necessary?

Mr Wilson: We do. As I have said in the Assembly on a number of occasions, there is always a delicate balance. Sometimes, people say that we should seek to recoup the debt as quickly and as forcibly as possible. Do not forget: if people have not paid it, it is a tax that everybody else is paying and money that is not available to the public purse. On the other hand, we have to accept that there are difficult economic circumstances. Where we can make arrangements with people, we do so. Of course, the impact will be to increase the debt: the money will not be immediately paid, and that goes down as a debt figure. We have to get the right combination of not sending out the signal that people can avoid their tax responsibilities while other people adhere to theirs and recognising that businesses and individuals

very often, as a result of circumstances beyond their control, are in a difficult economic situation.

2.15 pm

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. Tá ceist bheag agam dó, agus seo í go díreach. I have a follow-up question for the Minister. In what circumstances is a write-off of rating debt considered? What was the extent of that during the past financial year?

Mr Wilson: Write-off occurs in a number of circumstances. First, we see whether it is possible to recover the debt, and, sometimes, we look at the length of time the debt has been on the books. Secondly, if a business has gone into administration or is bankrupt, it may not be possible to recover the money, and assessments will be made.

Over the past year, insolvency cases have increased by well over 100%. Therefore, as a result, write-offs will become more frequent. Even when we have written the debt off in those cases, if there is a chance of recovering the debt at a later date when assets have been sold or whatever, we will seek to recover it. However, at some stage, we have to accept a write-off. Write-offs totalled £21.8 million in 2011-12.

Mr Speaker: I call Jim Allister. I point out to the Member that he normally would not get in on two questions, but, as the Member knows, I am a very generous person. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Allister: I am very happy to experience that. The Minister talked about sending out the wrong signals. What signal does he think writing off almost £22 million of debt sends out to those who scrape and save and pay their rates, bearing in mind that, in the past five years, the total figure of write-off has been £50 million?

Mr Wilson: I tried to explain in an earlier answer that we do not take decisions to write debt off or allow it to build up lightly. We pursue people through seeking to get arrangements with them whereby, if they cannot pay immediately, they make a commitment to pay in the future or, in the worst circumstances, taking them to court. Indeed, the number of times that we have taken businesses and individuals to court over the past year has been quite significant. There were 45,902 court proceedings in the past year compared with 42,915 in the previous year. So, we do not let people off lightly.

The Member has to recognise that, if a company has gone bankrupt and there is no money there, we cannot get the money from it. What do we do? Write-offs are inevitable. I hope that he is not trying to make an issue where there is no issue. We do not let people away with it. We seek to get arrangements, and we will take them to court if we have to. Some people say that we are maybe too vigorous in taking them to court. I take seriously people's responsibility, and, if they are due to pay a tax that everybody else is paying, we cannot send out the wrong signal that, if they decide not to pay, we will let them off.

NISRA: Energy Statistics

4. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what is the scope of the statistics on energy use, energy

savings and deployment of renewable energy provided to the public by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. (AQO 2197/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) staff in my Department collect information on household expenditure on electricity, gas and other fuels in the annual living costs and food survey. That information is published for all UK countries and regions by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in its family spending report, which can be accessed via the NISRA or ONS websites. NISRA and DFP staff also collect and publish information on businesses' total energy and water costs in the annual business inquiry, which is available via the NISRA and Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment websites.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his answer. Collecting data is one thing, and how it is used is another. How does that data inform target-setting by his Department and other Departments and, indeed, the fuel poverty debate?

Mr Wilson: Once the information is available, we know how different income groups spend their money. In fact, one of the measures of fuel poverty is what percentage of a household's income is spent on fuel. That information comes from the collection of the data, and that is how we know that 40% of people in Northern Ireland live in fuel poverty. It is also how we know that a large proportion of those — I cannot remember the exact figure off the top of my head — are in work but are still in fuel poverty.

The statistics are not gathered just for the sake of having the information. They help to inform policy. Last year, the Executive decided to make money available from the social protection fund for winter fuel payments. We did that on the basis of the information from the data that was collected, which showed that fuel poverty in Northern Ireland was a big issue.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister recognise that many people live in older houses, perhaps without cavity walls or cavity insulation? Will he ensure that NISRA works closely with the University of Ulster, which is investigating retrofitting insulation opportunities to try to reduce fuel poverty?

Mr Wilson: Given the information that we have, we know not only the number of people who spend a high percentage of their income on fuel but the age profile because the data shows spending patterns for different ages. The kind of household — whether it is lone people, elderly people or people with a family — and all of that can be used in deciding on the policies that we introduce. Take the warm homes scheme or whatever its equivalent is now called. I am now dipping into history. Many of the groups that are targeted under that scheme are targeted on the basis of the kind of information that is collected through the statistics that are published.

Ms Lo: If the Minister has any figures at hand, can he give us an update on the progress of our own energy-saving plans and actions for all public buildings?

Mr Wilson: I do not have any figures here, but it is the responsibility of my Department to look at how we can reduce energy consumption. So far, we have reduced energy consumption in the estate by 10%. That is a big saving to the public purse, and it has been done by a combination of things. First, we have reduced the office footprint. Secondly,

we have introduced energy-saving measures in the buildings that we retain. Thirdly, we have sought to educate staff so that they do not leave lights on and windows open with a radiator sending the heat out into the atmosphere and adding to global warming or whatever — man-made global warming. It is an important issue, given the money that we spend on energy, and we take it seriously.

North/South Shared Services

5. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on efforts to develop shared services on a North/South basis. (AQO 2198/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The two Finance Departments are currently exploring the potential for shared services to provide efficiency savings in the North/South implementation bodies and will report to the North/South Ministerial Council in the autumn. In addition to this, my Department has been approached by officials of the Irish Government. Indeed, I met Brian Hayes, the Minister in the Irish Government who is taking this forward, regarding plans to develop their own shared services, and a number of engagements have taken place to share our experience with them. My conversation with Brian Hayes was very instructive as far as he was concerned, and he found our experience of shared services one that he wished to replicate in the Republic. Of course, shared services are one way of achieving our set target of a 3% reduction in the cost of administration for North/South bodies.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his positive answer. He will know as well as I do that some people — indeed, some Members — continue to question the benefits that emanate from the North/South shared services agenda. Would the Minister consider supporting a monitoring system by which his Department would put down in black and white the savings that come to Northern Ireland as a result of such cross-border activities?

Mr Wilson: We may be talking at cross purposes, as the Member and I are talking about different shared services. Let me address the issue, although in a way that is not strictly in line with his question. There are a number of ways in which Ministers look constructively at how we can save money by doing things jointly or selling services to and buying services from the Republic. The radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin, for example, would not have been possible, had the Irish Republic Government not bought into it and shared its capital cost. Edwin Poots recently made it clear that the future of Daisy Hill Hospital in Newry was dependent on its ability to get business from the Irish Republic. That is a good example of how we can keep a local hospital in Newry but to do so requires co-operation with the Government in the Irish Republic. I have no difficulty with that kind of co-operation. As Finance Minister, I think that, in delivering a public service, it makes sense, and, along the border, it ensures that services can be provided for people in the Republic or in Northern Ireland by sharing the infrastructure that we provide.

Mr I McCrea: Will the Minister outline what plans he has to expand the shared services that his Department provides and give an example of what efficiencies it has made?

Mr Wilson: Work is under way on a vision for shared services that are provided by my Department. The savings

have already been considerable, both in the cost of running and the efficiency of services. We are considering the feasibility of delivering even more services jointly. Sometimes, Departments could be more helpful. I am surprised, for example, at the Assembly setting up its own separate systems to deal with a range of issues that could have been dealt with through shared services already available in the Northern Ireland public sector. Equally, other Departments have not taken the opportunity to use shared services. Our agenda for the future must be to capture more and more government activity through centralised services so that we gain economies of scale.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that it makes sense to work on a North/South basis and that there should be more of that, not only in government but in business?

Mr Wilson: Again, I think that the Member, like Mr McCarthy, perhaps misunderstood the question that was asked, which was about shared services such as having under one area of responsibility all accounts or HR processing. He raised the issue of North/South sharing of services or responsibilities, and I have made it clear that, where that is done for good, sound economic reasons and can be delivered effectively, I have no difficulty. Why would any Finance Minister have difficulty with that? I take exception — I suspect that this is where the Member is coming from — when the sharing of services might be driven by purely political reasons, whether or not it makes economic sense. In those cases, I would say no, I do not support such activities.

2.30 pm

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Northern Health and Social Care Trust: Services

1. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when he will be in a position to make decisions, following publication of the Northern Local Commissioning Group population plan, on the provision of services in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQO 2209/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Local commissioning groups and Health and Social Care (HSC) trusts are working with the Health and Social Care Board and others to develop population plans for their respective areas. The purpose of population plans is to identify the projected needs for an area and how best to meet them, consistent with the principles and criteria in the 'Transforming Your Care' report. I anticipate receiving draft population plans and an overarching strategic implementation plan at the end of June. The implementation plan will set out the key elements of the population planning process, including cross-cutting regional implications. Over the summer, the draft documents will be the subject of quality assurance work and provide the basis for further engagement with clinical leaders.

Once agreed by me, the strategic implementation plan and the supporting population plans shall form the basis

of a comprehensive public consultation and stakeholder engagement, commencing in the early autumn, on proposals for future service delivery. There will also be subsequent public consultation in local areas on any major service changes emerging from the population plans. The consultation processes will allow patients, service users and the wider public to have their say. Any decisions on the future configuration and provision of services will be informed by the consultation processes. Until the population planning work and consultation processes have been completed, it is not possible to indicate when the decisions will be made.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for his answer. Taking into consideration the proposed consultations, has the Minister any idea of a timescale, following the publication of the population plans, for any significant decision to be made in relation to the data in those plans? How effectual will that data be in the public consultation? What will take precedence: the consultation or the data in the population plan?

Mr Poots: I do not think that the public would be very happy if I launched the consultation process at the start of July. Nonetheless, it will create an opportunity for public representatives to engage with their local trust and the Department on the proposals in the population plan. Therefore, they will be out there, but we will not go to full consultation until September. Obviously, that will run its course, and we will be ready to proceed on the basis of the population plans towards the end of this year or the early part of next year.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Minister for his answer. It is useful to find out that there will be a consultation exercise on the population plans. Whatever the outcome of the population plans in different trusts and across the North, will it go through an equality impact assessment?

Mr Poots: We will meet all the regulatory processes that are required of us. Those judgements will be made as and when we carry out that work. Obviously, I will keep the Executive and the Assembly informed of our plans and intentions. Clearly, because health crosses over a wide range of areas and impacts on so many people in Northern Ireland, it is important to engage in meaningful consultation and have meaningful discussions on the outcomes and what is the best way to take forward good healthcare in Northern Ireland.

Mr Dallat: The Minister will be aware that the Northern Health and Social Care Trust was to have an open meeting next Friday to make an announcement on the future of the Causeway Hospital. Will he assure us that there will be openness and transparency and that those who believe that this is simply a deferment of that decision are totally wrong and that the people of Coleraine have every right to make a case for their hospital and a proper A&E department?

Mr Poots: There will certainly be openness and accountability. The information will come back to me first, as Minister, and I will relay it to the House, because I am accountable to the House in the first instance, and we in the House are accountable to the people. Therefore, the House should be the first to hear it. If somebody breaks the news in some puerile way in the press, I do not want to hear Assembly Members saying that that is a good thing. It is not

a good thing, because it denigrates this House. Therefore, I will come back to the House, Mr Speaker.

Mr D McIlveen: What are the key services at the Causeway Hospital site on which the Minister will seek assurances from clinicians in relation to long-term safety and sustainability?

Mr Poots: We need to ensure that the clinicians come up with the proposals that assure that we can continue to have emergency care at the Causeway Hospital. Emergency surgery is essential to that. The accident and emergency department will work well only if emergency surgery takes place. Then, of course, there is paediatric cover and obstetrics. Clinicians and local trusts will have to look at all those areas when they produce proposals. Currently, for example, the Causeway Hospital deals with 1,400 births a year. That is a significant number, so the hospital could be put under pressure. We need to ensure that obstetrics can be maintained at the site with full cover. I will seek those assurances from the trust, management teams and clinicians. In all of this, the bottom line is that, if I do not get the appropriate assurances, you can rest assured that the royal colleges will step in at some point. So let us ensure that we have a sustainable, safe and resilient service in the Causeway Hospital and in every other hospital in Northern Ireland.

Surgical Services: Belfast

2. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the outcome of the planned reconfiguration of surgical services in Belfast, including whether there will be increased throughput of cases or cost efficiencies. (AQO 2210/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is vital that our hospitals provide safe, efficient, high-quality care that meets patients' needs. That means looking at how we can reshape our services to offer higher standards of care. Following the publication of its consultation papers, 'New Directions' and 'Excellence and Choice: Right Treatment, Right Place', the Belfast Trust is in the process of reconfiguring a range of acute services across its hospitals. The reconfiguration has already resulted in improved efficiencies in ENT, vascular, gynaecology and urology services, and it is anticipated that the proposed single site for general surgery will deliver further benefits.

Dr McDonnell: Will the reconfiguration increase efficiencies and be cost-effective? Will it get us away from the situation in which patients lay waiting on trolleys for days during the part of the winter when people are acutely ill?

Mr Poots: I will answer as honestly as possible: if a hospital is operating efficiently, sometimes, it can be hard to avoid trolley waits. If a hospital operates at close to capacity, at 96% or 97%, any influx creates pressures. Therefore, in an inefficiently run hospital, it is much easier to avoid trolley waits. We have to strike a balance: we have to deliver efficient services but ensure that we have the capacity to avoid large numbers of trolley waits, as mentioned by the Member. The establishment of a single-site ENT service in the Royal Victoria Hospital, for example, has resulted in cost efficiencies of £300,000 in revenue savings through bed reorganisation. At the same time, we have maintained our activity outcomes. The single-site vascular service has

resulted in a reduction from 66 beds across the two sites to a 32-bed unit at the RVH, which undertakes the same level of activity. The current two-site gynaecology and urology services have resulted in significant benefits for patients and staff. We are confident that reorganisation can deliver more of our services in a cost-effective way.

Hospitals: Waiting Times

3. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the progress made on hospital waiting times over the last 12 months. (AQO 2211/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am pleased to report that hospital waiting list statistics for the year ending 31 March 2012 show a significant improvement on the previous year, with a reduction in the total number waiting for outpatient appointments and inpatient or day case treatment. There was a 3% reduction in the number of people waiting for a first outpatient appointment, from 106,206 in March 2011 to 103,007 in March 2012, and 72.5% of people waited for less than 9 weeks. The number of people waiting for inpatient and day case treatment reduced by 3.9%, from 52,880 in March 2011 to 50,828 in March 2012, and 64.4% of patients waited for less than 13 weeks.

Despite that improvement in waiting times, more work needs to be done to reduce waiting times to an acceptable level for all people. A continued reduction in hospital waiting times will, therefore, remain a key priority for my Department, the Health and Social Care Board and the health and social care trust in 2012-13. I have set more challenging targets to be achieved by March 2013, and my Department and the HSC will continue to work to meet the ever-increasing demand for hospital services.

I fully recognise that continuing in that positive trend and further reducing waiting lists and waiting times will be very challenging, and I am, therefore, seeking additional funding from the June monitoring round for elective care waiting lists. If that bid is successful, I intend to target particularly critical areas, such as orthopaedics, ophthalmology, general surgery, dermatology and gynaecology.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his answer. What progress has been made with waiting times for diagnostic investigations, such as an endoscopy, compared with a year ago?

Mr Poots: The total number of people waiting for diagnostic investigations has been reduced by 2%. There has been a 15% uplift in the number who have been waiting for more than nine weeks. However, we have seen a 35% reduction in the number of people awaiting an endoscopy. It has reduced from some 18,000 people to fewer than 12,000 people. That is a very significant reduction. The number of people waiting for more than 13 weeks for an endoscopy has reduced by 69%.

Against a backdrop of being told that the health service was on the verge of collapse, that thousands of people were going to be paid off and that we would not have the money to do anything, we have, in fact, seen waiting lists come down in the past year. That is because people are focused on the job that they have to do.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Can the Minister tell us how much money will be spent on private sector healthcare to tackle waiting lists?

Mr Poots: I have not got the figure to hand, but using the private sector is something that can be beneficial at times. I think that we need to have most of our capacity within the public healthcare system, but it can be to our benefit to acquire services to deal with waiting lists and to reduce waiting lists where they happen. Around 1,000 heart operations, for example, take place in Northern Ireland each year, but we probably need to deal with closer to 1,300 or 1,400. I think that we can move that upwards to around 1,100 people, with the same surgical team. To set up a further team would take us well beyond our actual needs, and the costs would not realise the benefits. So, where it is sensible, rational and cost-effective, we will use the private sector, but that is only to assist us in ensuring that people are not waiting inordinate lengths of time.

Mr McDevitt: Can the Minister confirm that the average waiting time at the emergency department at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast continues to be unacceptably high? Can he indicate to the House what specific measures he envisages the Belfast Trust taking to address that issue?

Mr Poots: The Member will recall that I have said on a number of occasions that waiting times for emergency care are unacceptable. I have asked the Health and Social Care Board to provide me with a robust plan of actions to secure improvements in the performance of our emergency departments. Recently, we saw reports that were carried out on the Antrim Area Hospital by Dr Ian Rutter and Mary Hinds. Those are courses of work to identify how we can move things forward. Figures for the end of April showed a slight improvement on the previous month, but there is still much to be done for A&E waiting time standards and to improve the quality of service for all patients. I believe that there is a whole-hospital solution to this, but it is a course of work that we will continue doing, because I am not currently satisfied that we are meeting the standards that I would like to see.

Mr Nesbitt: Can the Minister tell us what, if any, departmental initiatives are responsible for the improvement in the positive trends in waiting times and what further scope exists?

Mr Poots: We are making the widest possible use of all services available to us. As a Department, we have worked very closely with the Health and Social Care Board and the teams within the trusts to deliver that. Significant pressure has been put on waiting times, and I am bidding for funding in the monitoring round so that we can tackle elective surgery and get our teeth into some of those issues, because, once again, waiting times are unacceptably high in a range of areas. I outlined areas that we will be going after, and I think that we need to tackle the issues. Therefore, orthopaedics, ophthalmology, general surgery, dermatology and gynaecology are all areas in which I would like to see a real and significant difference made. I will be challenging to have the appropriate resource to ensure that that happens.

2.45 pm

DHSSPS: Whistle-blowing

4. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what approach his Department takes to whistle-blowing by staff within the health service. (AQO 2212/11-15)

Mr Poots: Whistle-blowing is a very serious matter. My Department requires all my arm's-length bodies to have effective policies in place to deal with whistle-blowing at a local level. Recently, I wrote to all staff in the HSC to highlight the importance of their having the confidence to blow the whistle where they have genuine concerns, particularly around patient safety.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his support and for his answer thus far. How does he respond to allegations that employees may be discouraged from raising concerns by senior figures in their Department or organisation?

Mr Poots: As I said, I wrote to all staff in the health and social care system to ensure that they got the message very clearly that not only is whistle-blowing something that they could do but something that they should do. If they see wrongdoing, it is important that we become aware of it. We cannot deal with wrongdoing if we are not aware of it happening.

Therefore, workers who report wrongdoing have the right to complain to an industrial tribunal if they are dismissed or suffer any detriment for doing so. Although employees can complain of unfair dismissal, other workers who are not employees cannot complain that they have been subject to detriment; for example, if their contracts were terminated because they had made a protected disclosure. Whistle-blowing is about bringing something to the attention of the employee's management team. It is not about going to someone in the media who then puts out a story in a way that suits that organisation but does not deliver any benefits. Whistle-blowing is about allowing us to get to the nub of problems and dealing with them.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am very interested in the Minister's response to that question. Did the personnel in the Fire and Rescue Service get that letter as well? The Minister's answer does not equate to the very shameful way in which a member of its staff was suspended. The member of staff had whistle-blown in a very responsible fashion. The individual had not gone to the media yet was suspended, and now senior staff in that organisation are going to be allowed to retire before they are held to account for their actions.

Mr Poots: Yes, we did write to all members of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service encouraging them to blow the whistle. The letter was certainly sent to the organisation to be distributed to all its members. All the other organisations ensured that that happened. Therefore, I expect that the Fire Service also ensured that it happened. If it has not happened, I will ensure that it does happen, because that is something that we ask of it.

The Northern Ireland Fire Service receives considerable attention at a senior level in the Department, and it probably gives us more work than any other organisation. Regrettably,

some things have not been carried out as well as they should have been. We are very well aware of those things, and we will deal with them.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister for his earlier replies. The Minister said that the policies are in place. How will he make sure that the policies are not only in place but that best practice is followed? How will he make it easy and practical for people to whistle-blow in their relevant organisation?

Mr Poots: The letter that I wrote provided significant encouragement to people that they could whistle-blow with some degree of confidence. Our current whistle-blowing policies include having clearly demarcated, nominated personnel to whom a whistle-blowing issue can be reported, depending on the circumstances, and communication systems in place to disseminate guidance, including an internet website, community publications, induction programmes, training packs, e-mails, review groups, monthly team briefs, posters, fraud awareness training and HR handbooks. We also have policies that provide initial external channels to raise concerns.

Given all that, I think that the Member can see that extensive work has been done to establish how people can whistle-blow. They got a letter encouraging them to do that, and it is their duty to do so when they become aware of things. No doubt, there will be individuals who do not like that and who will seek to suppress whistle-blowing. If people bring forward issues, I hope that it is the individuals engaged in wrongdoing who are punished, not the whistle-blowers.

Mr A Maginness: I think that people will be reassured by what the Minister said. I hope that there will be a rigorous approach to whistle-blowing in the Department. The Minister referred to people going to the press. Does he accept that, in some instances, people feel so frustrated and alienated in a working environment that they have no option but to go to the press? In such circumstances, is that a legitimate form of whistle-blowing?

Mr Poots: I am glad to say that since I sent the letter in March, eight cases have been reported by individuals to my Department. Obviously, those eight people did not see the need to go to the press; they recognised how to do things properly. Indeed, Members can often deal with cases themselves or bring them directly to the Department. Often, people go to the press because they have particular interests and want particular things to happen. They use the press to deliver messages. Going to the press is against their code of practice, against Civil Service codes and against everything that we in the House stand for.

It is deeply regrettable that a member of the Justice Committee in particular is suggesting that people should tell tales to the press rather than go through the established legitimate system that we are encouraging people to use to bring such matters to our attention so that we can ensure that people who engage in wrongdoing are dealt with appropriately.

Mr Speaker: The Member is not in his place for question 5.

Health and Social Care: Compton Review

6. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why a full equality impact assessment was not carried out on the Compton report, given its implications for the future delivery of health care. (AQO 2214/11-15)

Mr Poots: One of the key reasons for change identified by the health and social care review team, and an underpinning principle of the new model of care proposed in the 'Transforming Your Care' report, is a focus on preventing and tackling health inequalities.

'Transforming Your Care' sets out a strategic road map for health and social care into the future. Given the nature of the report, it was not considered necessary or appropriate to undertake an equality impact assessment on the report itself. It was always the intention that the proposals in 'Transforming Your Care' would be subject to further assessment and development, and the report sets out a proposed process for population plans that will inform implementation of the new model of care.

Population plans are being developed by local commissioning groups and by health and social care trusts for their areas. An overarching strategic implementation plan to set out the key elements of the population planning process, including where there are cross-cutting, regional implications, is being developed by the Health and Social Care Board. As part of the development of those plans and the implementation plan, due cognisance is being given to addressing health inequalities. It will be more meaningful to engage on the more detailed work contained in the plans, and therefore there will be a consultation process on the strategic implementation plan and population plans, once they have been agreed.

Where there are proposals for policy changes, or major service change, coming out of the population planning process, those will be subject to appropriate consultation and equality screening in line with statutory requirements, and equality impact assessments will be undertaken where required.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. Did he take advice from the Equality Commission on this or solely from his Department?

Mr Poots: We have an equality team in the Department that works very closely with the Equality Commission and which regularly takes advice from it. When we engage in things such as this, we ensure that we stay within the legal parameters by carrying out everything in a way that complies with section 75 and, indeed, with other laws through consultation. That is what we will always do.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his answers to date. Will the Minister detail the implications of not implementing the Compton report and not driving forward change?

Mr Poots: In Northern Ireland we currently have a budget which is going up by around 2% each year and demand growing by 6% each year. If that were to continue, and if we continued to do the same thing, we would only create further mountains of waiting lists for people requiring care. That is not a route that we want to follow. The difference that we can make through implementing 'Transforming Your Care'

is that we will bring care closer to people's homes, make better use of nurses and allied health professionals and maximise those skill bases within the health and social care system so that they deliver at a local level and make a real difference, particularly in prevention and early intervention. For example, if we make proper use of podiatrists, they can considerably reduce the number of falls. If we have proper linkage between our GPs, physiotherapists and occupational therapists, we can deliver far better outcomes for the elderly population.

So there is a course of work that is obvious and on which we can deliver. It is a course of work that we will not be deflected from carrying out. Why did it not happen sooner? That is not a question that I can answer, because I believe that the problems identified in 'Transforming Your Care' have been piling up for some time. If you do not deal with problems, they tend to get worse.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answers. Given that Compton is an insider to the local health service, is there not a danger that clever and innovative solutions are being missed out and that maybe the use of population plans in the future is a way of tidying up?

Mr Poots: Well, Chris Ham certainly is not an insider; he works for the King's Fund and is an acknowledged expert across the UK and beyond. Ian Rutter is not an insider; he provided advice to the Prime Minister and has been doing considerable work on these issues for many years, coming from a GP perspective. Deirdre Heenan, as the Provost of Magee College, has dealt with social policy for many years and brought a whole range of expertise. Paul Simpson has a Civil Service background and brought a degree of functionality to the review, and Mark Ennis brought a business perspective. So I am very satisfied that the team that produced the 'Transforming Your Care' report was a team of appropriate expertise. I believe that the report was widely received and accepted as a high-quality piece of work, not just within Northern Ireland but in other places. Other Ministers have received the 'Transforming Your Care' report, read it and been impressed by the content. And I believe that many others will follow where we in Northern Ireland are leading.

Children in Care

7. **Mr Doherty** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the impact of our current and outdated adoption legislation on children in care. (AQO 2215/11-15)

Mr Poots: I accept that the current Northern Ireland adoption legislation, the Adoption (Northern Ireland) Order 1987, is outdated in comparison with the legislation of other UK jurisdictions, and it is for that reason that I have directed that work is undertaken to bring forward a range of proposals for legislative reform of adoption. It is my intention to introduce a new Adoption Bill in the current mandate which will seek to tackle known problems in the current system of adoption, such as delay, and to strengthen supports for all those affected by adoption. The Bill will also make provision for an alternative route to permanence for those children in care for whom adoption is not appropriate.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for that answer. Does he agree that the

needs of children are paramount and that every child should be placed in a loving home, including homes that may be of same-sex couples?

Mr Poots: The Member got it right in the first instance, when he said that the needs of children are paramount. I will always ensure that the needs of children remain paramount. The only human rights involved here are those of the child. No one has a human right to adopt. The human right exists with the child who requires adoption.

Mr G Robinson: In advance of legislation, have any targets been set to reduce delays in the adoption process?

Mr Poots: One of the reasons why we want to look at the Bill is that there are too many delays in the adoption process. We need to ensure that children are adopted more speedily, because children often end up in foster care for a protracted period before they actually go for adoption. It is a much better outcome if children can get adopted at that earlier point so that they get that stability in what is going to be their family for the rest of their life. We want to ensure that we get children adopted more quickly, and that is one of the reasons why we want to bring in new legislation.

Adjourned at 3.00 pm.

Written Ministerial Statements

The content of these written ministerial statements is as received at the time from the Ministers. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

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Environment

Publication of Planning Appeals Commission Reports on the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 (BMAP) and Banbridge, Newry and Mourne Area Plan

Published on Thursday 7 June, 2012

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment):

Development plans inform the general public, statutory authorities, developers and other interested bodies of the policy framework and land use proposals that will be used to guide development decisions in their area. They provide a basis for rational and consistent decisions and provide a measure of certainty about which types of development will and will not be permitted.

The Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015, commonly known as BMAP is the largest plan ever published by my Department, covering an area which contains over 35% of the Northern Ireland population. It includes the City Council areas of Belfast and Lisburn, and the Borough Council areas of Carrickfergus, Castlereagh, Newtownabbey and North Down.

Work on BMAP commenced in 2001, over 11 years ago. The draft plan was published in November 2004, a plan amendment followed in February 2006, and the BMAP public inquiry began in April 2007 and finished in May 2008.

The Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) delivered their reports on the Inquiry to my Department over a period of time. The first report was received in January 2009, with the last report delivered three years later in January 2012. These reports contain the PAC's recommendations on the objections which were made to draft BMAP.

It is normal practice for my Department to consider the contents of the PAC Report on a development plan, and then release the PAC recommendations at the same time as the Plan is adopted. This approach allows an adoption statement, which contains my Department's decision on each of the recommendations, to be published along with the PAC Report.

However, with regard to BMAP some extracts of the BMAP PAC Reports have already been released to assist some specific Article 31 public inquiries. I have therefore decided to follow this limited precedent and depart from normal practice and, consequently I am releasing all the PAC Reports that relate to BMAP. My reasons are as follows:

First, I understand that in these difficult economic times, any measures that I can take to introduce further certainty about potential development opportunities in the Belfast Metropolitan Area will be welcomed in the interim period before BMAP is finally adopted. This is a radical change of approach by the Department and I believe it is the right thing to do in terms of openness and transparency.

In many cases, it will help to remove uncertainty for the local community, the development industry, the Councils and other elected representatives. To publish now – not wait any longer given the length of time since the plan process began – is right and necessary.

Second, I recognise that the forthcoming Reform of Public Administration and the resulting transfer of the majority of planning functions to fewer and larger Councils will impact on development plans such as BMAP, which do not easily fit into the new Council groupings. Indeed by 2015 Councils will have powers to prepare new style development plans for their area. In these circumstances, it is only fair to the Councils and an aid to good planning for the PAC reports to be published now.

I will now turn to the status of the reports. As I have already stated, these reports only contain the recommendations of the Planning Appeals Commission, on objections received and they do not give the final position with regard to the 3000 objections that were made to the draft Plan. My Department is in the course of preparing BMAP for adoption, and will be assessing the PAC recommendations before reaching final decisions, and these decisions will be known when the Plan is adopted next year.

One advantage that I envisage arising from my decision to publish the PAC Reports is that in instances where the PAC state that they 'recommend no change to the draft plan as a result of the objections', it is more likely - although I cannot guarantee it - that these recommendations will be accepted by my Department.

Consequently, if a planning application is submitted on a site where it is likely the proposals in the draft plan will not be changed as a result of PAC recommendations, the application will be decided on the basis of the plan, but also with regard to all other material considerations. However, in other cases, where the PAC recommendation will require further consideration by my Department, the public cannot make any assumptions as to the development status of sites until such times as the final report is issued and the Plan adopted.

My Department has also recently received the PAC Reports for the Banbridge, Newry and Mourne Area Plan, and I am taking the same approach for that plan. The PAC reports on the plans will be published on the planning website www.planningni.gov.uk today, Wednesday 6 June 2012.

To conclude, I must emphasise, this is not re-opening the debate about the issues in the two plans. Resources will be focused on the adoption of plans.

Consequently, to demonstrate that the content of the Plan is not up for grabs I and my officials will not be entering into any discussions relating to the recommendations contained in the PAC Reports for BMAP or the Banbridge Newry and Mourne Plans.

I believe this departure from the orthodoxy around plans is a very different way to go about local development plans. I am rightly told to be decisive, that planning must enable development, that good planning is 'Plan-led', that individuals and investors welcome certainty. I agree. That is why I am proceeding in this way.

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Independent Review of Pseudomonas Aeruginosa Infection in Neonatal Units in Northern Ireland

Published on Thursday 31 May, 2012

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I wish to make a statement to the Assembly about the publication of the Final Report of the Independent Review of Incidents of Pseudomonas aeruginosa Infection in Neonatal Units in Northern Ireland.

On 4 April I made a written statement to the Assembly to advise members of the publication of the Interim Report of the Review. Yesterday I received the Final Report from Professor Patricia Troop who chaired the Review.

The Final Report focuses on the third and fourth Terms of Reference. These are: (3) to review the effectiveness of the governance arrangements across all five Health and Social Care Trusts with regard to the arrangements for the prevention and control of infection and all other relevant issues in the respective neonatal units, and (4) to review the effectiveness of the communication between the DHSSPS, the HSCB, the PHA and the five Health and Social Care Trusts in respect of all relevant information and communications on the pseudomonas bacterium.

The Final Report is being published today, 31 May, on the RQIA's website: www.rqia.org.uk. The report is also being placed in the Assembly Library.

I am meeting the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety today to discuss the Final Report. Professor Troop and three other members of the Review team are attending this meeting to present the report and to answer questions.

In commissioning this review my intention was to ensure that whatever lessons needed to be learned from these tragedies would be identified immediately, and to ensure that those lessons would be acted on as quickly as possible. I set a demanding timescale for the review. I asked for an interim report by the end of March and the final report by today, and Professor Troop and her team have achieved that.

They have had to work quickly and intensively since February, and they have done so with sensitivity to the families who have suffered, and without compromising the rigour of their investigation. I am grateful to Professor Troop and her team for the way in which they have approached and completed this work.

I accepted the 15 recommendations that were in the Interim Report and I have accepted all 17 recommendations that are in the Final Report. I set a demanding timetable for the implementation of the recommendations from the Interim Report, and I will ensure that these and the 17 new recommendations are delivered as speedily as possible.

In previous statements I have paid tribute to the staff who work in our neonatal units and I do so again today. They have been deeply affected by the deaths of these babies and by the grief and the worry of the families who have been

touched by these incidents, and they will continue to do their utmost to minimise the risk of future infections.

Many families have suffered through the pseudomonas incidents. Four families lost their babies to this infection. Another baby died who had been infected with pseudomonas. Other families have had the distress of seeing their babies become infected or colonised. Many more families – those whose babies were in neonatal units and maternity units at that time, and families whose babies were due – have been through an anxious time.

A significant theme that has emerged in this phase of the Review is communications: communications between the organisations concerned, and communications with the parents.

Communications between organisations is a matter of improving systems and processes and we can ensure that these are tightened up.

The question of communicating effectively with the parents is not a new one and the first recommendation in the Final Report highlights the need for the Trusts to address these problems in a systematic and systemic way. Each Trust will have to produce a communications plan whereby clinical staff will have the support that they need in order to be able to focus on clinical matters, and other roles will be taken on by other staff.

I want to thank again the families who have contributed to the Review. That has taken courage on their part and we owe them a great debt. I have expressed my condolences to them in person and in public statements; I believe the most meaningful expression of sympathy is to take effective and swift action so that other families do not have to suffer as they have done.

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry: Terms of Reference, Chair and Acknowledgement Forum Panel Members

*Published at 5.00 pm
on Thursday 31 May, 2012*

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister) and Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): On 29 September 2011 the Executive announced there would be an Investigation and Inquiry into historical institutional abuse. We attach the agreed Terms of Reference for the Inquiry and wish to advise the Assembly of the Chair of the Inquiry and the panel members for the Acknowledgement Forum.

Chair of the Inquiry

Sir Anthony Hart has agreed to chair and direct the Inquiry. Sir Anthony has enjoyed a distinguished career as a barrister and a judge.

Acknowledgement Forum Inquiry Panel Members

The Inquiry will include a confidential “Acknowledgement Forum” in which victims and survivors can recount their childhood experiences of living in institutions to members of the Inquiry Panel. The Acknowledgement Forum Panel Members are:

Beverley Clarke – Beverley has wide experience of social work and child care, working in England and Canada. She is an independent expert witness and has worked for the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office.

Norah Gibbons – Norah is Director of Advocacy in Barnardo’s Ireland. She was also a Commissioner of the Ryan Inquiry into historical institutional abuse in Ireland.

Dave Marshall QPM – Dave is a consultant in the field of child safeguarding, investigation and management. For 9 years he was Detective Chief Inspector and Head of the Metropolitan Police’ Child Abuse Investigation Command’s Major Investigation Team.

Tom Shaw CBE – Tom was invited by Scottish Ministers to review the regulatory framework in Scotland designed to ensure the welfare needs and rights of Children in residential institutions from 1945-95. Subsequently he chaired “Time to be Heard” – a pilot acknowledgement forum for those who had experienced abuse in residential children’s institutions in Scotland.

Terms of Reference

The NI Executive’s Inquiry and Investigation into historical institutional abuse will examine if there were systemic failings by institutions or the state in their duties towards those children in their care between the years of 1945-1995.

For the purposes of this Inquiry “child” means any person under 18 years of age;

“institution” means any body, society or organisation with responsibility for the care, health or welfare of children in Northern Ireland, other than a school (but including a

training school or borstal) which, during the relevant period, provided residential accommodation and took decisions about and made provision for the day to day care of children; "relevant period" means the period between 1945 and 1995 (both years inclusive).

The Inquiry and Investigation will conclude within a 2 year 6 month period following the commencement of the legislation establishing its statutory powers.

The Inquiry and Investigation under the guidance of the Panel will make as many preparations as practicable prior to the passing of the relevant legislation, this will include the commencement of the research element. Commencement of the work of the Acknowledgement Forum is not dependent upon the commencement of legislation and will begin its work as soon as practicable.

The Chair of Investigation and Inquiry Panel will provide a report to the Executive within 6 months of the Inquiry conclusion. If additional time is required the Chairman will, with the agreement of the Panel, request an extension from the First Minister and deputy First Minister which will be granted provided it is not unreasonable.

The Inquiry and Investigation will take the form of

- an Acknowledgement Forum,
- a Research and Investigative team and
- an Inquiry and Investigation Panel with a statutory power which will submit a report to the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

The functions of each are as follows:

An Acknowledgment Forum

An Acknowledgment Forum will provide a place where victims and survivors can recount their experiences within institutions. A 4 person panel will be appointed by the First Minister and deputy First Minister to lead this forum. This Forum will provide an opportunity for victims and survivors to recount their experience on a confidential basis. A report will be brought forward by the panel outlining the experiences of the victims and survivors. All records will be destroyed after the Inquiry is concluded. The records will not be used for any other purpose than that for which they were intended. If necessary, the Forum will have the authority to hear accounts from individuals whose experiences fall outside the period 1945 – 1995. The Acknowledgment Forum will operate as a separate body within the Inquiry and Investigation accountable to and under the chairmanship of the Inquiry and Investigation Panel Chair.

A Research and Investigative team

A Research and Investigative team will report to and work under the direction of the Chair of the Inquiry and Investigation. The team will:

- Assemble and provide a report on all information and witness statements provided to the Acknowledgement Forum;
- Provide an analysis of the historical context that pertained at the time the abuse occurred; and

- Provide a report of their findings to the Acknowledgement Forum and to the Chair of the Inquiry and Investigation.

An Investigation and Inquiry Panel

An Inquiry and Investigation Panel will produce a final report taking into consideration the report from the Acknowledgement Forum, the report of the Research and Investigative team and any other evidence it considers necessary. The Panel will be led by a Chairperson supported by two other members, who will be appointed by the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Chairperson of the Inquiry and Investigation will also be responsible for the work of the Acknowledgement Forum and for the Research and Investigative Team.

On consideration of all of the relevant evidence, the Chairperson of the Inquiry and Investigation will provide a report to the NI Executive within 6 months of the conclusion of their Inquiry and Investigation. This report will make recommendations and findings on the following matters:

- An apology - by whom and the nature of the apology;
- Findings of institutional or state failings in their duties towards the children in their care and if these failings were systemic;
- Recommendations as to an appropriate memorial or tribute to those who suffered abuse;
- The requirement or desirability for redress to be provided by the institution and/or the Executive to meet the particular needs of victims.

However, the nature or level of any potential redress (financial or the provision of services) is a matter that the Executive will discuss and agree following receipt of the Inquiry and Investigation report.

The Northern Ireland Executive will bring forward legislation at the beginning of this process to give a statutory power to the Inquiry and Investigation to compel the release of documents and require witnesses to give evidence to the Inquiry and Investigation. It is hoped that the legislative power will not be needed, however; the power will be available if required. As far as possible the Inquiry should be inquisitorial in nature rather than adversarial.

A Witness Support Service will be established by to support Victims and Survivors throughout their contact with the Inquiry process. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will establish a wider Victims Support Service to provide support and advice to victims before, during and after the inquiry.

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Child Poverty Act 2010: Annual Report 'Improving Children's Life Chances – the First Year'

Published on Wednesday 6 June, 2012

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister) and

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): We have today laid before the Assembly our first annual report as required by section 12(7) of the Child Poverty Act 2010 on the progress made by the Executive towards eradicating child poverty.

This Report represents a collective response on behalf of all Ministers in the Executive.

We are pleased with the progress that has been made during the first year and look forward to further progress during 2012/13 in line with our commitments in the Programme for Government.

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 25 May 2012

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Commission for Victims and Survivors

Mr Nesbitt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) whether the serving Commissioners of the Commission for Victims and Survivors will be offered a four year extension, which is an option within their current contracts; and (ii) if not, what is the future of the Commission. [R]

(AQW 8984/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The term of the current Commissioners comes to an end on 1 June 2012. A recruitment process is underway to appoint a new Commissioner(s). We are committed to there being an effective independent voice for Victims and Survivors.

Community Relations Council

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) who was awarded the contract, around 2010, with the Community Relations Council (CRC) to conduct the governance review into procurement; and (ii) whether any staff member from the CRC declared an interest prior to the contract being awarded.

(AQW 10635/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: In 2009/10, the Community Relations Council (CRC) undertook a governance review of Funded Groups, including their procurement arrangements. The contract was awarded to FGS McClure Watters. During the evaluation of tenders, a CRC staff member declared a conflict of interest and was not involved in scoring or making a decision on the bid.

Peace Bridge, Derry: Opening Ceremony

Mr P Ramsey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many companies tendered for services for the opening ceremony of the Peace Bridge in Derry, including the name of the companies and the costs quoted.

(AQW 10896/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Peace Bridge was officially opened on 25 June 2011 and to mark this historic occasion, a weekend of events was organised to celebrate this new amenity. A business case was developed by Ilex and the preferred option identified was to engage a specialist event management team to produce and manage the opening event.

Nine companies were invited to tender for the event management contract. Two companies tendered. As a result of the tender process, the contract to manage the opening event was awarded to Eventor. The costs quoted were £28,368. Eventor also managed procurement and tenders for the event.

Four invitations to tender were sent for the position of Master of Ceremonies. Three tenders were received. As a result of the tender process, the contracts were awarded to Teresa Craig and Wendy Austin. The costs quoted were £500 and Nil, respectively.

Four invitations to tender were sent for choir and musicians for the opening event. Four tenders were subsequently received. As a result of the tender process, the contract was awarded to City of Derry Civic Choirs/Donal Doherty. The costs quoted were £6,000.

Maze/Long Kesh Site: Peace-building and Conflict Resolution Centre

Mr Elliott asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister who will develop and decide on the description of history to be used in relation to the Peace Building and Conflict Resolution Centre at the Maze/Long Kesh site.

(AQW 11055/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Plans for the work strands of the Peace Building and Conflict Resolution Centre have not yet been determined. However, we can confirm that there will be extensive engagement with stakeholder groups to ensure that the work and content of the centre is approached sensitively.

The Peace Building and Conflict Resolution Centre will be a unique facility promoting international exchange, house research study and academic activities. It will also include the development of a modern archiving facility and a shared space for visitor access, performance events and exhibitions.

We will ensure that the Centre will be used solely for the purposes intended.

Visit to the Middle East and India: Cost

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide a breakdown of the cost of their recent official visit to the Middle East and India.

(AQW 11122/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We are not yet in a position to provide all the information requested as we have still to receive some of the invoices associated with our visit to Abu Dhabi and India.

North-West Gateway Initiative

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the (i) the financial commitments; and (ii) the financial contributions made to date by the NI Executive and the Republic of Ireland to the North West Gateway Initiative.

(AQW 11158/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The North West Gateway Initiative (NWGI) has no dedicated funding.

Child Poverty

Mrs Overend asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) whether they intend to introduce Northern Ireland specific targets in relation to child poverty; and (ii) whether such targets would be set at a lower percentage than the targets contained in the Child Poverty Act.

(AQW 11379/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: There are currently no plans to introduce Northern Ireland specific targets or to lower our targets.

Draft Programme for Government 2011-15: Consultation Responses

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) how many consultation responses their Department received on the draft Programme for Government 2011-2015, broken down by the recurrent themes and concerns that emerged in the responses; and (ii) how the high levels of public support for specific recommendations, and concerns raised that there was no commitment to a NI Climate Change Act, Marine Bill or an expansion of funding for agri-environment schemes, were considered for inclusion in the final Programme for Government 2011-2015.

(AQW 11387/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We received 432 written responses to the 2011-15 Programme for Government consultation exercise, many of which were extremely detailed and wide-ranging. The consideration of all responses was set against the five Programme for Government Priorities established by the Executive.

The inclusion, and delivery, of particular thematic outcomes – including commitments to reduce Greenhouse Gas emissions and halting biodiversity loss – are clearly supported by a wide range of policies, plans and legislation which effectively form the building blocks upon which the Programme for Government commitments are constructed. Examples of these include: the Common Agricultural and Fisheries Policies; the Strategic Energy Framework; Salmon and Eel Management Plans; Greenhouse Gas Emissions Action Plan; Climate Change Adaptation Programme; the Air Quality Strategy and the Biodiversity Strategy.

The Executive has stated that Programme for Government will be supported by a legislative programme that complements its delivery objectives. The responsibility for doing so lies with individual departments.

Disability: People on Work Placements

Lord Morrow asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will introduce legislation to ensure that people with a disability, who are working on a placement for no salary, are not discriminated against by an employer when salaried posts become available, particularly those people who have been on placement for more than six months.

(AQW 11468/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We are currently considering the options for legislative reform. However, we continue to legislate to meet our commitments under Programme for Government, EU obligations, case law requirements and emerging issues.

As part of our consultation on a new disability strategy, we have invited consultees to give us their views on the need for further legislation to address the needs of disabled people. Consultation will close on 15 August 2012 and the Executive will consider responses after the summer recess.

Legislation

Mr Gardiner asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what legislation they intend to bring before the Assembly prior to the summer recess.

(AQO 1929/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We intend to introduce legislation before the Summer recess to confer statutory powers on the Inquiry and Investigation into Historical Institutional Abuse. This will give the investigation and inquiry panel the necessary powers to compel both people and documents.

Following the debate on the DEL Committee's Report, on Tuesday 15 May, we will be in a position to make final decisions on the redistribution of DEL's functions. We also propose, therefore, to introduce the necessary legislation for the dissolution of DEL before the recess.

To assist the Assembly in its forward planning, we also intend to advise the Assembly of all legislative proposals which Executive Ministers intend to bring forward in the 2012-13 session.

New Policy Institute on Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion in Northern Ireland: Report

Mr Lunn asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the recent report from the New Policy Institute on Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 1930/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We welcome the publication of the recent research report by the New Policy Institute, commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), entitled "Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion Northern Ireland".

Junior Minister Anderson and Junior Minister Bell attended and spoke at the launch of the report on Wednesday 2 May in Belfast.

Very shortly, the Executive will publish its own report on the first year of our work to eradicate child poverty here, informed by the Executive's Child Poverty Strategy. That report will also point to the enormous amount of work that we have been doing in the Executive to begin to tackle these issues. Our report, together with the important work that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation carries out, provides us with important updated information.

Set in the context of Delivering Social Change – the Executive's new delivery framework for social policy – our approach to reducing poverty and tackling social exclusion will bring together short and long-term measures to improve the opportunities for young people.

Delivering Social Change aims to deliver a sustained reduction in poverty and associated issues across all ages; and an improvement in children's and young people's health, wellbeing and life opportunities.

We are committed to driving forward new actions that reflect more collaborative and more integrated delivery of services. Through the Delivering Social Change programme board, we are working to deliver new cross-departmental cross-disciplinary approaches in which the services we prioritise for children will be those which deliver the greatest impact in promoting their lifetime opportunities throughout their lives.

Former Military and Security Sites

Mr Swann asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much finance is required to decontaminate all former military and security sites which have been transferred to the Executive.

(AQO 1935/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The amount of finance required to decontaminate the six sites gifted to the Executive under the 2002 Reform and Regeneration Initiative is £ 5.8m.

The amount of finance required to decontaminate the four sites gifted under the 2010 Hillsborough Agreement is yet to be determined.

The investment we are making now will increase the future regeneration and/or disposal potential of each site. We are committed to maximising the economic potential of each site particularly given the current economic climate.

Domestic and Sexual Violence

Ms P Bradley asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans they have to enhance gender equality and guard against domestic and sexual violence.

(AQO 1939/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Eliminating gender-based violence is a key objective of the Gender Equality Strategy. In addition, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety shares the lead with the Department of Justice in tackling

domestic and sexual violence. The “Tackling Violence at Home” and “Tackling Sexual Violence and Abuse” strategies respond to the needs of all victims of domestic and sexual violence and abuse, irrespective of age, gender, disability, sexual orientation, cultural, social or ethnic background.

The suite of strategies referred to above sets out the commitment of the Executive and all partner agencies to adopt a consistent and long-term approach to the prevention of domestic and sexual violence.

Junior Ministers are part of the Inter Ministerial group on Domestic and Sexual Violence, which oversees and guides the multi-agency implementation of these Strategies and the supporting Action Plans to prevent and address sexual and domestic violence.

In 2012-13, OFMDFM will undertake a mid-term Review of the Gender Equality Strategy, which provides a policy framework for embedding gender equality across government departments. Alongside this, OFMDFM will work with Departments to review and roll forward the cross-departmental Gender Equality Action Plans.

Historical Institutional Abuse: Inquiry

Mr McGlone asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when they will publish, for consultation, the draft Terms of Reference for the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse.

(AQO 1941/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Terms of Reference for the Inquiry will be published when they have been discussed with victims and survivors and agreed with the Inquiry Chairperson.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Agricultural Sector: Deregulation

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 9251/11-15, to detail the targets she has put in place to reduce the overall administrative burden; and how many of these targets have been achieved.

(AQW 11178/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): My Department has committed to reduce the administrative burden on the agri-food sector by 25% by 2013 – with an interim target of 15% by 2011.

A re-measurement exercise, using the Standard Cost Methodology that was used to measure the original baseline, was undertaken in 2011 to assess progress towards the interim reduction figure of 15%. That process is currently being validated in partnership with industry representatives however as my officials informed the Agriculture Committee in December 2011 the reduction is likely to be in the order of 4.3%. This figure relates to those regulatory areas within the NI Better Regulation and Simplification Review. It does not, however, reflect any additional simplification measures taken by the Department outside the scope of the Review. Nevertheless, it is a disappointing measure of progress so far but an indicator of the difficulties and the challenging nature of trying to reduce the administrative burden while ensuring that the appropriate level of safeguards and control remain in place for the protection of the industry and the safety of the general public and also the fact that the majority of our regulations are driven by National and EU legislation.

I remain committed to the drive for better and simpler regulation wherever possible.

Programme for Government's Rural Youth Employability Programme

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in relation to the Programme for Government's Rural Youth Employability Programme which her Department is delivering in conjunction with the Department of Employment and Learning (i) which areas will be targeted; (ii) how these areas will be targeted; (iii) what age group will be targeted; (iv) what is the Programme's budget; (v) what the time frame is for its implementation; (vi) whether the Programme will be in addition to services which are already available; and (vii) what will be innovative about the Programme.

(AQW 11179/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Rural Youth Employability Programme, now rebranded as BOOST, will target unemployed young people in rural areas throughout the north. Advantage Foundation Ltd is delivering the Programme which includes a marketing and promotion campaign in rural areas through which they will engage with over 350 partner agencies such as the job centre networks, libraries, the Rural Development Council, the Rural Support Networks, Local Action Groups, Local Councils, Local Enterprise Agencies, Rural Colleges and sports centres, in order to target eligible participants. Registration and promotion materials will be disseminated throughout the rural network and in public access points and Advantage also propose to create awareness among the target rural audience in the media.

To be eligible for the programme the unemployed young people must be in the 16-24 age range. The overall budget for the BOOST programme is £665,000, of which £166,000 is funded by Department for Employment and Learning, £266,000 is funded by European Social Fund, £30,000 is a contribution from Advantage, and the remaining £203,000 is public match funding from DARD through the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Framework. The project commenced in December 2011 and is due to continue until 31 March 2014.

The 'BOOST' programme will complement and support other youth employability projects in the marketplace such as Steps to Work, Essential Skills and Bridge to Employment, without creating duplication or causing displacement.

BOOST is an innovative programme designed to increase the employability of unemployed rural young people through the provision of a number of innovative tools including an Employability Toolkit, a Youth Specific Employment Support Platform and a Network of Employment Mentors. The level and quality of employability information offered and the interactive methods used to reach the target participants, make BOOST unique within the marketplace.

Programme for Government's Rural Youth Entrepreneurship Programme

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in relation to the Programme for Government's Rural Youth Entrepreneurship Programme which her Department is delivering in conjunction with the Rural Development Council and the Special EU Programmes Body (i) which areas will be targeted; (ii) how these areas will be targeted; (iii) what age group will be targeted; (iv) what is the Programme's budget; (v) what the time frame is for its implementation; (vi) whether the Programme will be in addition to services which are already available; and (vii) what will be innovative about the Programme.

(AQW 11180/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Rural Youth Entrepreneurship Programme will target young people who live in deprived rural areas throughout the north. These areas will be identified by the Rural Development Council using multiple deprivation criteria and propose to recruit 600 vulnerable young people onto the Programme by undertaking various outreach events and workshops in the areas identified.

To be eligible under the Programme, the young people must be in the 16-30 age range. The overall budget for the Rural Youth Entrepreneurship Programme in the north is £450,796, of which 60% is funded by the Northern Periphery Programme (NPP) and 40% is public match funded under DARD's Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Framework. The Programme commenced in December 2011 and is due to continue until 31 March 2014.

The Rural Youth Entrepreneurship Programme concept emanated from a Young Entrepreneurs Programme which was an Invest NI Programme that provided support for young people in the north to stimulate economic growth but which had a low uptake in rural areas. The Rural Youth Entrepreneurship Programme is building on this previous provision.

The Programme is being delivered through an innovative partnership of organisations within the Northern Periphery of Europe (Faroe Islands, Greenland, Finland) and aims to contribute to local, regional, national and transnational rural economic development by stimulating latent entrepreneurial abilities among rural young people in the participating partner countries.

Northern Ireland Forest Service: Tendering for Wood

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to list the companies which have been successful in tendering for wood from the Northern Ireland Forest Service in the last five years.

(AQW 11406/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: There are 22 companies who have successfully tendered for timber from Forest Service between 2007/08 and 2011/12. Details of the companies are as follows:

- | | |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| ■ Balcas Timber Ltd | ■ John McHale Timber |
| ■ Banagher Sawmills | ■ Murray Timber Products |
| ■ A Diamond & Son Timber Ltd | ■ M&H Tree Services |
| ■ Drenagh Sawmills | ■ Mountbellew Timber Products |
| ■ Eco Energy Sawmills | ■ Newforge Enterprises |
| ■ Eamon Flaherty Timber | ■ PM Processing |
| ■ Farm Woodlands Ltd | ■ S&J Contracts |
| ■ Glennon Bros | ■ A&R Taggart |
| ■ Haslett Timber Products | ■ Rea Sawmills |
| ■ JF Irvine Sawmills | ■ Farm Woodlands Ltd |
| ■ Leitrim Sawmills | ■ West Timber |

In addition to the companies listed, a number of others were also successful in tendering for timber during the period. The contractual documents in these cases are issued to individuals, therefore their details held by Forest Service, cannot be released for data protection reasons.

Forests

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to list the forests in each Council area which are under the ownership of her Department or its arm's-length bodies.

(AQW 11407/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Department or its arm's-length bodies own all or part of the forests listed below by Council area. Some forests are located in more than one Council area and the forest name appears more than once. The list includes both Forest Service and College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise managed woodland.

- **Antrim Borough Council** - Muckamore, Randalstown, Tardree, Greenmount Campus
- **Ards Borough Council** - Ballysallagh
- **Armagh City and District Council** - Carnagh, Drumbanagher, Gosford, Loughgall, The Fews
- **Ballymena Borough Council** – Ballyboley, Bann Woods South, Capanagh, Cleggan, Portglenone, Slieveanorra, Tardree, Glenwherry Hill Farm
- **Ballymoney Borough Council** - Bann Woods North, Bann Woods South, Breen, Clare, Craigs, Garry, Slieveanorra
- **Banbridge District Council** – Castlewellan, Drumkeeragh
- **Carrickfergus Borough Council** - Woodburn
- **Coleraine Borough Council** – Aghadowey, Bann Woods North, Bann Woods South, Cam, Downhill, Garry, Garvagh, Gortnamoyagh, Grange Park, Somerset, Springwell
- **Cookstown District Council** – Cookstown, Creggan, Davagh, Drum, Pomeroy, Loughry Campus
- **Derry City Council** – Learmount, Loughermore, Muff Glen
- **Down District Council** – Bohill, Castlewellan, Drumkeeragh, Hollymount, Tollymore
- **Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council** – Altmore, Caledon, Clabby, Cookstown, Crocknagrally, Dunmoyle, Fardross, Favor Royal, Knockmany, Mullaghfad, Parkanaur
- **Fermanagh District Council** – Ballintempo, Belmore, Big Dog, Carnmore, Carrigan, Castle Archdale, Castlecaldwell, Clabby, Conagher, Crocknagrally, Derrylin & Naan Island, Doon, Ely Lodge, Florence Court, Garrison, Grogey, Jenkin, Kesh, Knocks, Lack, Lough Bradan, Lough Navar, Marlbank, Mullaghfad, Necarne, Pubble, Riversdale, Sillees, Spring Grove, Tully, Tullychurry, Enniskillen Campus
- **Larne Borough Council** – Ballyboley, Capanagh, Cleggan
- **Limavady Borough Council** – Ballykelly, Banagher, Binevenagh, Cam, Glenshane, Gortnamoyagh, Grange Park, Loughermore, Moydamlaght, Springwell
- **Lisburn City Council** – Hillsborough
- **Magherafelt District Council** – Banagher, Bann Woods South, Davagh, Derrynoyd, Glenshane, Goles, Iniscarn, Moydamlaght, Moyola, Portglenone
- **Moyle District Council** – Ballycastle, Ballypatrick, Breen, Clare, Glenariff, Slieveanorra
- **Newry and Mourne Council** – Annalong, Camlough, Cold Brae, Drumbanagher, Fathom, Mourne, Rostrevor, Slieve Gullion, The Fews
- **Newtownabbey Borough Council** – Woodburn
- **North Down Borough Council** – Ballysallagh
- **Omagh District Council** – Altmore, Creggan, Davagh, Dunmoyle, Goles, Gortin Glen, Kesh, Killens, Knockmany, Lack, Lough Bradan, Pigeon Top, Pubble, Seskinore, Trillick
- **Strabane District Council** – Aghyaran, Banagher, Bradkeel, Carrickaholten, Castlederg, Glenderg, Goles, Ligfordrum, Lough Bradan, Moneygal, Slievedoo

Forest Service Land for Wind Farm Developments

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the approach taken in Wales and Scotland where it is ensured that, where publically owned land is opened up to wind farm developments, substantial community benefits are an integral part of the development plans; and what steps she will take to ensure that the proposed commercialisation of Forest Service land for wind farm developments incorporates appropriate community benefits.

(AQW 11418/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am aware of the approach in Wales and Scotland to deliver community benefits from wind farm developments on public land. The recent report by Fermanagh Trust “Maximising Community Outcomes from Wind Energy Developments” helpfully presents good practice models in place in these jurisdictions.

I am in favour of models such as these, through which communities derive benefits from wind farm projects in their locality. I intend to develop policy to provide for community benefits in my consideration of the business options for windfarms on Forest Service land, taking account of existing models and the Executive’s intentions for community involvement in public procurement as outlined in the Programme for Government.

Rural Development Programme

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development which sports clubs in the Upper Bann area have received funding through the Rural Development Programme in each of the last three years; and how much was allocated to each club in each year.

(AQW 11565/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Rural Development Programme does not provide core funding to sports clubs. However, where such an organisation wishes to promote a project that benefits the wider rural community and where it is separate from their primary activity, this may be considered for funding.

In the last three years no such projects were funded in the Upper Bann area.

Rural Childcare Programme

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of the Programme for Government commitment to implement a strategy for integrated and affordable childcare, what discussions she has had with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on rural specific childcare; and how much of her budget will be dedicated to reopening the Rural Childcare Programme, which was introduced by her predecessor, or implementing an equivalent programme.

(AQW 11575/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: As you know, DARD does not hold primary responsibility for childcare service provision. The Rural Childcare Programme was an innovative pilot run as part of the Department's wider anti poverty and social inclusion budget. The aim of this was to enhance the rural evidence base for development of future policies and priorities in childcare. An evaluation of this programme is being finalised and will, as I previously advised you, be provided to OFMDFM once approved.

At present my Department has no plans to reopen the Rural Childcare Programme, however, DARD is represented on a cross departmental working group led by OFMDFM which aims to bring forward a childcare strategy for all citizens in the north, including those living in rural areas. I recently met with Junior Ministers Bell and Anderson to discuss a range of issues including rural childcare and I will ensure that the childcare strategy takes into account the specific needs of those living in rural areas.

While there are no plans to reopen the Rural Childcare Programme, there are ongoing opportunities under Axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 for childcare project infrastructure expansion or piloting of new initiatives.

Consumer Focus Scotland Report 'Reaping the Benefits of Renewables'

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the report by Consumer Focus Scotland 'Reaping the Benefits of Renewables - The role of community benefit funds in tackling fuel poverty and energy efficiency', including what lessons her Department might learn from this report.

(AQW 11608/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department welcomes the findings of the report, 'Reaping the Benefits of Renewables' by Consumer Focus Scotland. Similar to the situation in Scotland, fuel poverty is more pronounced in rural areas of the North as there is less access to alternate fuels, such as piped gas. Community benefit funds may have a role to play in addressing this issue.

Under the Rural Development Programme my Department supports Social Economy Enterprises and Community Groups seeking to introduce renewable technologies, 75% of eligible costs may be funded up to a maximum of £170,000. A feasibility study may also be supported through technical assistance up to a maximum grant rate of £5,000.

The issues raised in this report cut across the responsibility of the Department of Finance and Personnel, the Department of Social Development and the Department of the Environment and I shall raise these important issues with my Executive colleagues from these Departments to ensure a better deal for rural dwellers.

Rural Development Programme: Sports Clubs in North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to list the sports clubs in the North Down constituency which have received funding under the Rural Development Programme, in each of the last five years; and to detail the amount received by each club in each year.

(AQW 11651/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Rural Development Programme does not provide core funding to sports clubs. However, where such an organisation wishes to promote a project that benefits the wider rural community and where it is separate from their primary activity, this may be considered for funding.

In the last five years, no such projects were funded in the North Down constituency area.

Rural Development Programme's Budget

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the percentage of the Rural Development Programme's budget that was spent on (i) programme administration; and (ii) project administration in the last twelve months; and how this compares with the recommended limits of funding for administration in each category.

(AQW 11669/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The NI Rural Development Programme (NIRDP) 2007-2013 is part financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). Under Council regulations (EC) No 1698/2005 and No 1974/2006 there is no distinction between programme administration and project administration costs. Therefore I can only refer to total administration costs, where expenditure on administration in the 2011-12 financial year was equivalent to about 20% of the total funding allocated towards administering the 2007-13 Programme.

Mistreatment of Animals

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 10755/11-15, whether there are any recorded incidents of similar mistreatment of any animals which were unwell or unfit for sale in Northern Ireland; and if so, whether she can give an assurance that future incidents will be dealt with appropriately.

(AQW 11675/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I would refer the Member to my earlier answers and in particular to AQW 10755/11-15, in which I stated that to date my officers have not found any evidence to suggest such mistreatment occurs in the north of Ireland.

My Department affords high priority to the welfare of animals and operates a vigorous enforcement policy to ensure full compliance of the Welfare of Animals Act 2011. Any breaches are investigated thoroughly and offenders prosecuted as necessary. I would point out that the fines and penalties for breaches of animal welfare legislation here are the most robust on these Islands.

I would take this opportunity to reassure the Member that the Department's Veterinary Service will respond to any report of poor animal welfare on farms here and will commence legal proceedings where breaches of welfare legislation are found.

I would also advise the Member that officials work closely with the Humane Slaughter Association. The Association is a registered charity which provides detailed guidance for farmers and livestock owners on how to humanely slaughter animals on farms.

Livestock: Bans on Owning

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many farmers or handlers have been banned from owning livestock, because of cruel practices, in each of the last ten years.

(AQW 11710/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The following table lists the bans arising from DARD convictions:

Year	Number of people banned from keeping animals
2002	1
2003	1
2004	0
2005	0
2006	0
2007	0
2008	3
2009	0
2010	3
2011	0
2012	0
Total	8

Bovine TB

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 10920/11-15, to detail the difference between a Temporary Veterinary Officer and a Veterinary Officer Testing.

(AQW 11804/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Temporary Veterinary Officer (TVO) and Veterinary Officer Testing (VOT) groups are both Veterinary surgeons employed by DARD primarily to TB test cattle.

While TVOs and VOTs carry out the same testing duties, they are retained under different pay and conditions.

TVO duties exclusively relate to TB testing. However, VOTs can be allocated alternative duties on non testing days and a different daily rate is payable on these days. Also, VOTs are eligible for occupational sick pay, for public holidays and to join the NICS pension scheme.

All new entrants into this category of staff are employed as VOTs, and existing TVOs do have the option to convert to the VOT contract should they so wish.

Village Street Regeneration Schemes

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much her Department has spent on village street regeneration schemes in each of the last five years; and to list the relevant villages.

(AQW 11812/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I can advise that under Axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme there is a budget of £12m available for Village Renewal and Development. I am happy to report that to date 26 projects have been completed, with spend of £309,000, and a further 52 are under way across a range of types. In the main these are providing support for engagement of local people and groups and development of village plans. This is in line with the three-phased approach to village renewal adopted by my Department to ensure the best and most sustainable outcomes for villages.

Saintfield Streetscape Scheme

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what consideration her Department has given to developing a streetscape scheme for Saintfield.

(AQW 11813/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department does not have a specific budget for streetscape schemes. However I can advise that under Axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme there is a budget of £12m available for Village Renewal and Development. This funding, in the main, is to provide support for the engagement of local people and groups in the development of village plans and the subsequent funding of such plans.

The RDP, as you will be aware, is being delivered on behalf of my Department by Council clusters who have formed into Joint Council Committees and Local Action Groups.

The Joint Council Committee that covers the Saintfield area is the Down Rural Area Partnership (DRAP).

I am advised that Saintfield Town Regeneration Committee have been issued a Letter of Offer, by DRAP for funding to develop a village plan. DRAP intend to open a call for applications to the Village Renewal Measure later this year. Dependent on the completion of the village plan, this will provide Saintfield Town Regeneration Committee with the opportunity to apply for relevant project funding

Disallowances Imposed by the European Commission

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 5468/11-15, what specific issues the European Commission raised in relation to entitlements that were established on an area less than the overall area declared; what reasons the Commission gave for its concerns and what were the outcomes.

(AQW 11826/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: In 2005, some farmers decided not to enter all their agricultural land into the Single Farm Payment (SFP) Scheme. This meant that they did not establish entitlements on all of their agricultural land.

The Department considered that, under the regional model of decoupling introduced in the north, the EU Regulations allowed farmers to decide how many entitlements they wished to receive in 2005. However, the Commission view was that all agricultural land declared on the Single Application Form in 2005 should have been considered when allocating SFP entitlements and not just the land that the farmer entered into the SFP scheme. The Commission considered that, by declaring less land to establish SFP entitlements than they actually had on their holding, these farmers were artificially creating conditions to obtain subsidy.

The Department did not accept this and argued that the allocation of entitlements to these farmers was in accordance with the EU Regulations. The Commission did not accept the arguments and applied disallowance.

EU Regulations deem all entitlements allocated to farmers before 1 January 2009 as legal and regular from 1 January 2010 except in cases of farmer error. Therefore, since 1 January 2010 it has not been possible for the Department in any event, to take any action on this issue in relation to entitlements allocated in 2005.

The Commission applied a financial correction of £307,215 in 2005 and €1 346,503 for 2006 and 2007 for this and other related issues. The Commission view was that entitlements had issued to the wrong beneficiary (landowners) and some land used to establish entitlements was not in agricultural use.

The Commission has also proposed a correction for 2008 and 2009. A clause in EU regulations deems all entitlements allocated to farmers before 1 January 2009, legal and regular from 1 January 2010, except in cases of farmer error. This precludes DARD from taking any further action on this issue.

Equine Industry: Value to the Economy

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the value of the equine industry to the economy, in each of the last three financial years.

(AQW 11834/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The equine industry here makes a significant contribution to our economy. However, there is limited, independently verifiable, data which precludes an annual assessment over the last three financial years.

The latest study, by BDO Stoy Hayward in 2005, which was used in producing the 'Strategy for the Equine Industry in NI', estimated the value of spend by the equine industry on the main services and products at £110 million, creating around 5,660 full-time job equivalents with a labour value in the order of £54 million. Sales revenue generated from the sale of horses and ponies has been estimated at £6 million per annum.

The two racecourses, at Down Royal and Downpatrick, generate sales revenue of approximately £1.7 million per annum.

Rural Childcare: Funding for New Initiatives

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she has any plans to provide funding for new rural childcare initiatives; and, if so, how she plans to do so and the amount and source of the funding available.

(AQW 11839/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: As you know, DARD does not hold primary responsibility for childcare service provision. The Rural Childcare Programme was an innovative pilot run as part of the Department's wider anti poverty and social inclusion budget. The aim of this was to enhance the rural evidence base for development of future policies and priorities in childcare.

At present my Department has no plans to provide further funding for new rural childcare initiatives, however, DARD is represented on a cross departmental working group led by OFMDFM which aims to bring forward a childcare strategy for all citizens in the North, including those living in rural areas. I will share the evaluation of the Rural Childcare Programme with OFMDFM once approved in order to ensure that this strategy takes into account the specific needs of those living in rural areas.

I recently met with Junior Ministers Bell and Anderson to discuss a range of issues, including rural childcare. While there are no plans to reopen the Rural Childcare Programme, there are ongoing opportunities under Axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 for childcare project infrastructure expansion or piloting of new initiatives.

Northern Ireland Paying Agency: Penalties for Farmers and Financial Corrections

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in relation to the 'differences of interpretation' of legislation between the European Commission and her Department which resulted in penalties for farmers and financial corrections for the Northern Ireland Paying Agency (i) to detail the differences involved; and (ii) for her assessment of how the differences arose.

(AQW 11853/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The following significant differences of interpretation of EU legislation arose during EU Commission audits:

- 1 The method used to calculate the scaleback to be applied to Single Farm Payment (SFP) entitlements in order to create the National Reserve was different.
- 2 The allocation of SFP entitlements to landowners was different.
- 3 The Commission disagreed that farmers should have been allowed to establish SFP entitlements on less area than that declared by the farmer.
- 4 The Commission disagreed that different farmers should normally be allowed to claim different schemes on the same agricultural land parcel.
- 5 The method used to calculate penalties when entitlements are retrospectively revised due to land used to establish entitlements in 2005 being subsequently found to be ineligible was not acceptable to the Commission

None of these differences in interpretation resulted in additional penalties being applied to individual farmer payments. However, as in the Commission's view, these differences created a risk to EU Funds they were taken into account in the application of financial corrections. However

The issue highlighted at point 5 has a very significant impact on the level of financial correction being applied for inaccuracies in the DARD field mapping system and associated controls. It is central to the subsequent challenge taken by DARD to the EU Court of Justice.

The differences arose for two reasons. Firstly, Commission clarification on their view of the regulations was received only after an audit was carried out, at which stage, implementation had already taken place. Secondly, the view expressed by the Commission was, in the opinion of DARD, either not supported by the EU legislative provisions or resulted from a lack of clarity in the provisions. Attempts are being made to achieve legislative clarity during the current CAP Reform negotiations.

Greenmount College, Antrim: Staff

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 10882/11-15, to detail the religious breakdown of the members of staff who are on long-term sick leave.

(AQW 11872/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Community background information is collected to enable the NI Civil Service to fulfil its obligations under the Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998, which are to submit an annual monitoring return to the Equality Commission and to carry out regular reviews of the workforce composition and employment practices. Community background data is also used to monitor the effectiveness of NICS' policies on equality of opportunity. The examination of sick absence levels by community background is not relevant to the management of sickness absence and is not carried out.

European Commission

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what instructions her Department received from the European Commission regarding the eligibility of agricultural land, prior to the establishment of entitlements, under the Single Farm Payment scheme in 2005; and what amendments to these instructions were received in each year from 2006 to 2010.

(AQW 11903/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The EU legislation that introduced the Single Farm Payment (SFP) Scheme in 2005, and subsequent legislation has been consistent in specifying that only land which is used for agricultural activities is eligible for SFP.

My Department worked to this principle and has issued guidance each year emphasising the need for ineligible features (such as buildings, and farmyards) and vegetative ineligible features (such as scrub) to be deducted from the areas declared for payment.

EU Commission audits carried out from 2006 – 2009 re-enforced the need for ineligible features, particularly scrub to be deducted from farmer's claims. In light of these audits, the Department refined the guidance on land eligibility that is issued to farmers.

In 2011, to provide additional clarification for farmers, DARD issued comprehensive guidance on eligibility. Prior to issuing this, the Department clarified a number of eligibility issues including scrub, hedges and woodland with the Commission. In addition, through DEFRA, the Department confirmed its handling of heather with the Commission.

Department of Education

Nursery or Preschool Places

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Education, for each of the last five years, to detail (i) how many children were eligible to apply for a nursery or pre-school place; and (ii) how many children applied for a (a) statutory nursery school place; and (b) pre-school place, broken down by Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 10567/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): The tables below detail the number of children in the pre-school cohort for each year based on the relevant live birth statistics compiled by NISRA. Newcomer children in their final pre-school year would be additional to this figure.

2007/08

	No. of children born between 1 July '03 and 30 June '04	No. of 1st preference applications for final pre-school age children to statutory nursery settings	No. of 1st preference applications for final pre-school age children to voluntary/private providers	Total no. of 1st preference applications for final pre-school age children
BELB	3,479	2,626	399	3,025
WELB	3,744	2,276	1,188	3,464
NEELB	5,027	3,351	1,577	4,928
SEELB	4,744	2,734	1,369	4,103
SELB	5,024	*	*	*

* These figures are not available due to a change in IT system

2008/09

	No. of children born between 1 July '04 and 30 June '05	No. of 1st preference applications for final pre-school age children to statutory nursery settings	No. of 1st preference applications for final pre-school age children to voluntary/private providers	Total no. of 1st preference applications for final pre-school age children
BELB	3,339	2,588	408	2,996
WELB	3,777	2,371	1,178	3,549
NEELB	5,225	3,401	1,692	5,093
SEELB	4,745	2,743	1,419	4,162
SELB	5,350	2,690	1,803	4,493

2009/10

	No. of children born between 1 July '05 and 30 June '06	No. of 1st preference applications for final pre-school age children to statutory nursery settings	No. of 1st preference applications for final pre-school age children to voluntary/private providers	Total no. of 1st preference applications for final pre-school age children
BELB	3,363	2,659	425	3,084
WELB	3,997	2,387	1,261	3,648
NEELB	5,111	3,428	1,726	5,154
SEELB	4,803	2,972	1,308	4,280
SELB	5,411	2,909	1,810	4,719

2010/11

	No. of children born between 1 July '06 and 30 June '07	No. of 1st preference applications for final pre-school age children to statutory nursery settings	No. of 1st preference applications for final pre-school age children to voluntary/private providers	Total no. of 1st preference applications for final pre-school age children
BELB	3,516	2,845	481	3,326
WELB	4,025	2,526	1,232	3,758
NEELB	5,403	3,597	1,750	5,347
SEELB	5,169	3,151	1,434	4,585
SELB	5,710	3,008	1,916	4,924

2011/12

	No. of children born between 1 July '07 and 30 June '08	No. of 1st preference applications for final pre-school age children to statutory nursery settings	No. of 1st preference applications for final pre-school age children to voluntary/private providers	Total no. of 1st preference applications for final pre-school age children
BELB	3,779	3,087	526	3,613
WELB	4,225	2,666	1,281	3,947
NEELB	5,699	3,067	2,008	5,075
SEELB	5,451	3,346	1,528	4,874
SELB	6,026	3,311	2,045	5,356

It should be noted that the movement of families and applications to settings outside the Board of residence can influence the number of applications in each Board area.

Preschool Places

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Education how many children were unable to secure a place at their preferred pre-school provider in each of the last five years, broken down by Education and Library board area.

(AQW 10571/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The table below details the number of children unplaced at the end of the Pre-School Admission process in each of the last 5 years in 4 of the Education and Library Boards. The WELB continue to track unplaced children beyond this point and therefore their figures are the position as at the start of September each year

	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
BELB	146	70	128	246	133

	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
WELB	47*	83*	59*	47*	44*
NEELB	157	143	102	184	82
SEELB	215	234	243	308	185
SELB	364	298	294	299	213
Total	929	828	826	1084	816

* position at start September

It should be noted that when the Admissions Process concludes parents who may not have applied for a place during the process or those who have not secured a place will be given a list of settings by the ELB where places may still be available. Parents then make application directly to these settings. This can result in a significant number of additional children being placed before the start of the new school term in September.

Information on the exact number of children in funded pre-school places is collected as part of the Annual School Census in October.

As you are aware in recent years there has been significant additional investment in pre-school places both through the creation of new statutory nursery units and allocation of funding to support additional places in the voluntary/private sector. I will be keeping this under review in light of the work on the Programme for Government commitment and if further investment is necessary I will consider it.

Nursery and Preschool Places

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education, for the 2012/13 academic year, to detail the number of (i) nursery and pre-school places available; and (ii) applications received, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 10760/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The number of statutory nursery places in each constituency is listed in the table below. As the information sought is in relation to the Pre-School Admissions Process for the 2012/13 academic year, and this is a 2 stage process which will not complete until 1 June 2012, final figures in relation to the number of places being funded in the voluntary/private sector cannot be given until after that time.

It should be noted also that whilst Stage 2 of the formal admissions process concludes on 1 June with the issue of letters to parents advising whether or not they have secured a place, children will continue to be placed between this time and the start of the school term in September as natural movement occurs in the system and any remaining places are allocated directly by individual settings.

The Pre-school Admissions Process is a preference based system with parents stating, in some cases 6 or more preferences on their application form. Assessing how many applications every setting received at each preference stage could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. However you may wish to note, as I indicated in the Assembly on 23 April, at the end of Stage 1 of the Process 94% of those who had made application had been offered a place at a setting stated as a preference on their application form.

Parliamentary Constituency	Number of statutory nursery places
Belfast East	806
Belfast North	1,196
Belfast South	858
Belfast West	1,300
East Antrim	754
East Derry	520
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	572
Foyle	1,274
Lagan Valley	728
Mid Ulster	494
Newry & Armagh	936

Parliamentary Constituency	Number of statutory nursery places
North Antrim	770
North Down	546
South Antrim	780
South Down	546
Strangford	520
Upper Bann	1,222
West Tyrone	754
Total	14,576

EU School Milk Scheme

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of nursery school children (i) who have benefited from; and (ii) who were eligible for, free milk through the EU School Milk Scheme in each of the last five years.

(AQW 11199/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information requested is as follows:

	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
(i)	8,837	9,225	9,001	9,444	9,597
(ii)	13,953	14,095	14,151	14,408	14,580

Source: (i) Education and Library Boards; (ii) NI School Census 2007/08 – 2011/12

Figures for (i) relate to claims for subsidised milk made by nursery schools through the Education and Library Boards. The Department does not hold information in relation to claims made by nursery schools to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety through its Day Care Food Scheme.

Nursery Provision in the Banbridge Area

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister of Education for an update on the proposals to address the shortage of nursery provision in the Banbridge area.

(AQW 11257/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Pre-School Admissions Process is a 2 stage process which will not complete until 1 June 2012. However, the SELB have advised that at the end of Stage 1 of the process on 30 March 2012 there were 26 children who had applied to settings in the Banbridge area who did not secure a funded place.

The PEAG has allocated additional places to an existing setting and has brought a new provider into the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme in Banbridge. It is anticipated that these measures will address any shortfall in the area.

It should be noted also that whilst Stage 2 of the formal admissions process concludes on 1 June with the issue of letters to parents advising whether or not they have secured a place, children will continue to be placed between this time and the start of the school term in September as natural movement occurs in the system and any remaining places are allocated directly by individual settings.

Education Other Than At School Projects

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) how many children attending Education Other Than At School projects have been issued with notes instead of statements in each Education and Library Board area; and (ii) what legislation facilitates this process.

(AQW 11322/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I understand from the Education and Library Boards that 4 young people who attend Education Other Than At School in the Belfast Education and Library Board area have been issued with a Note-in-Lieu.

There is no specific legislation relating to the issue of a Note-In-Lieu. The Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs, at paragraphs 4.12 to 4.15 provides guidance to the Education and Library Boards on the circumstances whereby a Board may issue a Note-In-Lieu.

Primary Schools in the North Down Area

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education which primary schools in the North Down area have (i) applied for; and (ii) been granted an upwards variation in their P1 intake in each of the last five years; and to detail the figures in each case.

(AQW 11429/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The schools in the North Down area which have applied for a temporary variation of their admissions number in each of the last 5 years, and the outcome of the applications, are as follows:-

2008/09

Bangor Central IPS (Increased from 79 to 81)

2009/10

Bangor Central IPS (Increased from 79 to 87)

2010/11

None

2011/12

Rathmore PS (Increased from 79 to 86)

Towerview PS (Not approved)

Ballyvester PS (Not approved)

2012/13

St Comgall's PS (Increased from 41 to 46)

Note: The above figures include all requests for temporary variations, including those which were made during the course of the school year to which they relate after the completion of the admissions process.

School Budgets

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the current surplus and deficit financial position of school budgets in each (i) primary school; and (ii) post- primary school, broken down by (a) Education and Library Board; and (b) sector.

(AQW 11453/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The latest full financial year for which this data is currently available is 2010-11 i.e. the year ending 31 March 2011. Information on every Education and Library Board; Voluntary Grammar and Grant-Maintained Integrated Primary and Post-Primary school may be found in the 2010/11 Outturn Statements which are deposited in the Assembly Library. Alternatively, the information may be found at the following links to the Education and Library Board websites and, in the case of Voluntary Grammar and Grant-Maintained Integrated Schools, on the Department of Education website.

BELB: http://www.belb.org.uk/Downloads/lms_ot_1011_p3.pdf

NEELB: <http://www.neelb.org.uk/about/finance/lms-outturn-statements/?assetdet124=13987>

SEELB: http://80.4.159.11/school_man_new/pdfs/outturn2011.pdf

SELB: http://www.selb.org/lms/Documents/2010/All_schools.pdf

WELB: <http://www.welbni.org/index.cfm/go/publications/key/3FE22D42-95F5-0080-95D05699CEC62E47:1>

Voluntary Grammar Schools

http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/schools_funding_pg/9_schoolfunding_localmanagementofschools_pg/9_schoolfunding_vgshomepage_pg/9_schoolfunding_outturnstatements_pg/9-voluntarygrammarschools201011outturnstatement-4.htm

Grant-Maintained Integrated Schools

http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/schools_funding_pg/9_schoolfunding_localmanagementofschools_pg/9_schoolfunding_gmshomepage_pg/9_schoolfunding_gmisoutturnstatements_pg/9-grantmaintainedintegratedschools201011outturnstatement-5.htm

Young People: Consultation

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what role the Education and Library Board youth services play in any formal consultation undertaken by his Department to ascertain the views of young people.

(AQW 11454/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education and Library Boards' youth services are one of a number of areas which have been involved in Departmental consultations with young people. Depending on the policy area under consideration, other areas have also been involved, such as schools, early years groups/organisations and Education Other than at School settings, as well as other voluntary and community sector organisations that work with young people.

Through youth groups and participative forums in the statutory and voluntary youth sector, Boards have access to youth workers and peer educators who are skilled and trained in engaging with young people, for example, through the dissemination of consultation documents, facilitating direct engagements, organising focus groups, hosting consultation events and representing the views and interests of young people to the Department in both written and verbal reports.

The Department is committed to ensuring that the views of all key stakeholders, including young people, are taken into consideration throughout all relevant stages of the policy making process. Examples of recent DE consultations in which Boards' youth services have contributed include the Community Relations, Equality and Diversity Policy, the Sustainable Schools Policy, pre-consultation on Priorities for Youth as well as the Network for Youth and consultations on a range of local issues such as the Shared Education Campus at Lisanelly.

Nursery Provision in the North Down Area

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) how many children in the North Down area have not received a nursery place for the 2012/13 academic year; and (ii) how many places are still available, broken down by electoral ward area.

(AQW 11461/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information sought relates to the admissions process for places in pre-school education for the 2012/13 academic year. This is a two stage process which is currently ongoing. Statistics will not be available until after the process is completed on 1 June 2012.

It should be noted that when the Admissions Process concludes parents who may not have applied for a place during the process or those who have not secured a place will be given a list of settings by the ELB where places may still be available. Parents then make application directly to these settings. This can result in a significant number of additional children being placed before the start of the new school term in September.

Information on the exact number of children in funded pre-school places is collected as part of the Annual School Census in October.

As you are aware in recent years there has been significant additional investment in pre-school places both through the creation of new statutory nursery units and allocation of funding to support additional places in the voluntary/private sector. I will be keeping this under review in light of the work on the Programme for Government commitment and if further investment is necessary I will consider it.

Education Other Than At School System

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage attendance of pupils in the Education Other Than At School system in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area, in each of the last three years, broken down by site.

(AQW 11466/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department recognises that the most appropriate place for a child to be educated is in school. However for some young people this is difficult to sustain and placement at an Education Other Than At School centre must be provided to meet their educational needs.

The attendance figures for pupils in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area have been provided below and, as requested, are listed by site. However it must be noted that, because of the small numbers of pupils concerned, an individual pupil who has poor attendance will have a substantial negative impact on the overall figure.

Year 2011/12 to date

Redburn	67%
Castlereagh	79%
Downpatrick	68%
Lagan Valley	80%

Year 2010/11

Redburn	64%
Castlereagh	74%
Downpatrick	67%
Lagan Valley	79%

Year 2009/10

Redburn	63%
Castlereagh	72%
Downpatrick	78%
Lagan Valley	81%

Employment and Support Allowance

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Education why Employment and Support Allowance is not considered a qualifying benefit, when determining priority status on the basis of social disadvantage, when allocating pre-school places.

(AQW 11478/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: When the criteria for the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme (PSEEP) was originally established it was based on the criteria for eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM) as that was adjudged to be an appropriate method of targeting children from the most socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

At that time there were funded pre-school places available for approximately 45% of children in their final pre-school. It was, therefore, necessary to target the available provision towards those children most in need and to afford them priority in the admissions process, as research shows that children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds benefit most from a quality pre-school experience.

The original targeting process ensured that, in areas of shortfall, children from disadvantaged backgrounds were able to avail of the limited number of funded pre-school places available.

The Review of Pre-School Admissions Arrangements, published in January 2012, announced that it will examine the definition of children from 'socially disadvantaged circumstances' within the Pre-School Education in Schools (Admissions Criteria) Regulations (NI) 1999 with a view to mirroring the relevant economic elements of the definition of Free School Meal Entitlement.

Social Mobility

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education what research his Department has carried out on social mobility.

(AQW 11577/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department has not undertaken any specific research on social mobility.

However, the annual statistics for the Qualifications and Destinations of School Leavers 2010/11 show that there are major inequities within our local education system. Disadvantaged pupils, as measured by free school meal entitlement (FSME), fare worse than their more advantaged peers.

In 2011, the benchmark of 5 or more GCSEs at A*- C (or equivalent) including GCSEs in English and Maths was achieved by 32% of FSME school leavers, compared to 65% of leavers who were not FSME. Also in 2011, the benchmark of 2 or more A levels at A*- E (or equivalent) was achieved by 28% of FSME school leavers, compared to 59% of leavers who were not FSME.

The statistics also show differences in access to higher education. In 2011, 18% of FSME school leavers entered higher education, compared to 46% of those who were not FSME.

I am determined to take action to break the link between social disadvantage and educational underachievement. I have in place a coherent set of policies designed to improve educational outcomes for young people and to address the root causes when pupils are not achieving to their full potential. In addition, the Programme for Government has a stretching target to raise the percentage of FSME pupils achieving 5+ GCSEs (or equivalent) including English and maths by 2015. It is imperative that we keep raising standards for all pupils, with an emphasis on how our policies contribute to raising standards for those pupils entitled to Free School Meals. The challenge now is to ensure the effective implementation of these policies by schools.

I also want to stress the value of education and work with local communities to ensure that young people receive positive messages about the importance of doing well at school and are encouraged to have high expectations.

Teachers on the Transferred Redundancy List

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) when he plans to (a) examine the list of teachers on the transferred redundancy list; and (b) implement the required redundancies; (ii) the criteria that will be applied; and (iii) whether there will be any provision for senior teachers who have indicated their willingness to accept redundancy.

(AQW 11602/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Teacher redundancies and the date of their implementation are a matter for teachers' employers.

The Employing Authorities operate 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 is intended to create potential redeployment opportunities for teachers who would otherwise be made redundant and thus keep compulsory redundancies to a minimum.

This year a central clearing house has also been established across all employing authorities, with the participation of the teacher unions, for those teachers who cannot be redeployed initially within each Employing Authority. A transferred redundancy list has been issued to all teachers facing redundancy and who are seeking redeployment.

Senior teachers other than principals or vice-principals may volunteer for transferred redundancy. A vice-principal may volunteer for transferred redundancy depending on whether the employing authority in question requires vice-principal posts to be publicly advertised. It is not possible to extend the transferred redundancy arrangements to principals, as the Teacher Appointment Schemes require these posts to be publicly advertised. Such posts can therefore be made redundant only in cases of amalgamation or school closure.

A teacher's employment may also be terminated in the interests of the efficient discharge of the employer's function and leadership staff have in the past been released under the Efficient Discharge scheme. Although such a scheme has not been operated in recent years on grounds of cost, I understand that the employing authorities are currently considering whether an Efficient Discharge scheme might be introduced in future.

C2k Programme: Bullying Component

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education why the bullying component of the C2k Programme, that is used in schools, contains no reference to homophobic bullying, unlike schools in the rest of the UK.

(AQW 11622/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The software available to schools through the C2K Programme facilitates the recording of incidents of bullying and specific details about each incident. The elements of the software that are used to record incidents of bullying are the same in the versions available to schools here and in England. There is the option, within the SIMS Behaviour Management Module, to select a category headed 'bullying - sexual orientation' and to record more details of the actual incident.

Schools are not required to record incidents of bullying. The decision to record incidents, how they might be categorised and to utilise the C2K software for this is a matter for each school.

Irish-medium Education

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education whether his Department has considered how to measure the demand for Irish-medium education in areas where there is a lack of, or no, provision.

(AQW 11666/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Historically, the Department has responded to demand when expressed through the publication of a statutory Development Proposal. However, in the move to area planning, demand for Irish-medium education will be identified through the area planning process.

Pending the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority, it is the responsibility of the Education and Library Boards, working in close conjunction with CCMS and actively engaging with the other school sectors, to develop collective strategic plans on an area basis. The Terms of Reference for area planning, available on the DE website, make clear that Board plans should take account of commitments outlined in the Good Friday Agreement and subsequent legislation in relation to Integrated and Irish medium provision.

Area-based Planning

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education what rights sectoral bodies, such as the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, have under Area-Based Planning.

(AQW 11667/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Area Planning process is being taken forward by the Education and Library Boards, working closely with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools. These are the bodies with legislative responsibility for such planning.

Although they have no equivalent statutory planning responsibility, other sectoral bodies, including the Council for Integrated Education and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, have a role to play. The Terms of Reference and the Guidance issued by the Department of Education require the Boards to engage extensively with the Integrated, Irish Medium and voluntary grammar sectors in developing their plans. The Boards will also consult widely on the proposals, so that the views of all sectors and interests have been accounted for before a final area plan is agreed.

The Terms of Reference and Guidance are available on DE's website at:

- <http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/area-planning/area-planning-terms-of-reference.htm> and
- http://www.deni.gov.uk/area_planning_guidance_-_issued_14_february_2012.pdf

Irish-medium Schools

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 10780/11-15, how much Education and Library Boards have paid for the renting of premises for Irish-medium schools to date.

(AQW 11685/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Based on the information my Department has gathered, I can advise that the Education and Library Boards have paid a total of £1,275,150.61 in the last 10 years for the renting of premises for Irish-medium schools.

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) why he decided to stop the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment from generating income from the sale of examination papers to schools and bodies within the rest of the UK; (ii) the benefits which resulted from his decision; and (iii) what consultation took place prior to making his decision.

(AQW 11687/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: It is completely inaccurate to state that I had any influence on the decision that CCEA would cease offering its qualifications in England. No such instruction has been given either by me or any officials in the Department of Education. The decision was entirely within the remit of the awarding organisation side of CCEA, and was approved by the CCEA Council.

CCEA has a statutory obligation to deliver services in relation to the curriculum, assessment and examinations in the north of Ireland only. Beyond that, CCEA awarding organisation side, in its commercial capacity, is free to make its own decisions, based on economics, and any other factors which it deems appropriate.

Every School a Good School

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 10784/11-15, why he decided to depart from his policy of developing a robust added value framework within the 'School Improvement Policy – Every School a Good School'; and (ii) what research and consultations were undertaken to provide an evidence base to allow him to consider the policy review.

(AQW 11688/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have not taken any decisions that alter the position set out in Every School a Good School, the school improvement policy.

My Department continues to consider the most appropriate arrangements for introducing robust measures of value-added to assess pupil progress and school performance. We have noted the problems associated with the development of contextual value-added (CVA) measures elsewhere. Of greatest concern is the risk that they can entrench low expectations for the most disadvantaged young people and mask underachievement. Whilst CVA appears attractive in promising to show the difference schools can make, in reality such measures are very complex and can be difficult to interpret.

It is important that the value-added measures we use avoid these potential pitfalls. We do not want them to be unnecessarily complex or burdensome to schools. Rather they should be both useful and meaningful for all parties, including schools and parents.

My response to AQW 10784/11-15 advised that the new assessment arrangements being introduced from 2012/13 for Communication and Using Maths and from 2013/14 for Using ICT provide a measure of value-added through capturing the progress made by pupils between each Key Stage. I also highlighted that school inspection reports provide a measure of value-added.

Education and Skills Authority: Directors

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Education how many senior officers in the Education and Library Boards, who received redundancy or severance payments in the last five years, were employed or appointed as directors of the Education and Skills Authority, broken down by (i) posts held; (ii) annual salaries; and (iii) redundancy/severance payments.

(AQW 11691/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Following a recruitment process, Directors (Designate) for the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) were selected. As ESA has not yet been established, these staff remain employed by their respective organisations. The ESA Director (Designate) of Operational Services decided to leave the education sector under the Voluntary Severance scheme 2011-12. My Department does not give details of individuals' salaries or other payments.

Voluntary Schools

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 11194/11-15, to list the name of each voluntary school, broken down by (i) Education and Library Board area; and (ii) sector.

(AQW 11722/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have arranged for the information requested to be placed in the Library.

Special Needs Code of Practice

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children at each stage of the Code of Practice that is used to identify a child's special needs, in each of the last three years, broken down by Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 11724/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information requested is detailed in the table below.

Pupils by SEN stage and ELB, 2009/10 – 2011/12

Year	SEN stage	ELB					Total
		BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	
2009/10	1	4,976	3,226	3,394	2,844	2,300	16,740
	2	5,108	4,192	3,603	4,115	4,012	21,030
	3	2,130	2,383	1,999	1,943	2,051	10,506
	4	318	233	168	279	259	1,257
	5	2,309	2,144	2,577	3,210	3,334	13,574
	Total		14,841	12,178	11,741	12,391	11,956
2010/11	1	4,892	3,228	3,546	3,035	2,313	17,014
	2	5,315	4,373	3,922	4,337	4,250	22,197
	3	2,106	2,397	2,013	2,012	2,065	10,593
	4	352	235	189	239	214	1,229
	5	2,479	2,217	2,634	3,260	3,308	13,898
	Total		15,144	12,450	12,304	12,883	12,150
2011/12	1	4,560	3,721	3,726	2,969	2,346	17,322
	2	5,367	4,590	4,443	4,587	4,445	23,432
	3	2,322	2,487	2,263	2,115	2,058	11,245
	4	313	259	192	245	246	1,255
	5	2,584	2,261	2,667	3,254	3,324	14,090
	Total		15,146	13,318	13,291	13,170	12,419

Source: NI school census

Notes:

- 1 Figures include funded children in voluntary and private preschool centres, nursery schools, primary, (including nursery, reception and year 1 – 7 classes) post primary and special schools.
- 2 Figures for pupils at SEN stages 1 and 2 are collected at an aggregated level in voluntary and private preschool centres and nursery schools. For the purpose of this analysis, pupils at Stages 1 and 2 for these sectors have been included in the Stage 1 column.

Beechlawn School, Hillsborough

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Education whether there are any plans to develop educational provision for children aged 16 and over at Beechlawn School, Hillsborough.

(AQW 11764/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There is no legislative requirement to provide post-16 education in moderate learning difficulty (MLD) schools and it is therefore for each education and library board to determine provision in their area. To date the majority of MLD pupils either leave school at 16 or move onto an appropriate vocational course in further education.

Draft area plans for stand alone special schools were submitted to my Department from each of the Education and Library Boards in February and are currently being considered. Once the area plans have been fully considered and endorsed by DE as compliant with DE Policies they will be issued for public consultation. Only after consultation are they considered for approval.

Until this work has been completed, I am not in a position to outline the way forward for projects such as that for Beechlawn Special School.

Preschool Places: Applications

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of applications for pre-school places for the 2012/13 academic year, broken down by the applicant's postcode area; and (ii) how many of the applicants have obtained a place.
(AQW 11800/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information sought is in relation to the Pre-School Admissions Process for the 2012/13 academic year. This is a 2 stage process which will not complete until 1 June 2012 and therefore final figures in relation to the number of children in their final pre-school year offered a place at settings stated as a preference during the process will not be available until after that date.

However, as I indicated in the Assembly on 23 April, at the end of Stage 1 of the Process 94% of those who had made application had been offered a place at a setting stated as a preference on their application form.

It should be noted also that whilst Stage 2 of the formal admissions process concludes on 1 June with the issue of letters to parents advising whether or not they have secured a place, children will continue to be placed between this time and the start of the school term in September as natural movement occurs in the system and any remaining places are allocated directly by individual settings.

Department for Employment and Learning

Tuition Fees

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions his Department has had with the Scottish Government in relation to Northern Irish university students being exempt from tuition fees.
(AQW 11261/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I am aware that under current student finance arrangements in Scotland, eligible Scottish domiciled students studying full-time undergraduate courses in Scotland qualify for free tuition. I am also aware that, in accordance with European Union law, eligible European Union nationals studying in Scotland must also receive free tuition. It is my understanding that, in order to be eligible, the European Union national must have been ordinarily resident in a member state of the European Union or elsewhere in the European Economic Area and Switzerland for the three years immediately before the first day of the first academic year of the course.

Similarly, European Union nationals studying in Northern Ireland will qualify for tuition fee support provided they have been ordinarily resident in the territory comprising the European Economic Area and Switzerland throughout the three year period preceding the first day of the first academic year of the course.

My Department has been advised by colleagues in the Student Awards Agency for Scotland that Northern Ireland students who hold Irish passports can apply to Scottish Higher Education Institutions as European Union nationals and can apply to have their tuition fees paid provided they satisfy the eligibility requirements of the Student Awards Agency for Scotland.

As this is a matter for the relevant Scottish Authorities, Northern Ireland domiciled students who also hold non United Kingdom European Union nationality are advised to contact the Scottish Higher Education Institution where they intend to study and the Student Awards Agency for Scotland to clarify respectively their fee status and eligibility for tuition fee support.

Careers Fairs Outside Northern Ireland

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to list the careers fairs held outside Northern Ireland which were attended by representatives from Queen's University, Belfast and the University of Ulster in each of the last five years.
(AQW 11331/11-15)

Dr Farry: As the Department does not hold the information requested, my officials contacted Queen's University and the University of Ulster. The information is in Annex A which has been placed in Assembly Library and on the Department for Employment and Learning's website <http://www.delni.gov.uk/>.

Special Educational Needs

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what pathways to work his Department offers children, with Special Educational Needs, who leave school without any qualifications.
(AQW 11389/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department offers a range of assistance to children with special educational needs to facilitate a pathway to work. These are outlined below.

My Department's Careers Service works in partnership with post primary schools, to support all children including those with special educational needs to make effective career choices and develop appropriate career plans.

In support of the career pathway planning process, Careers advisers attend transition planning meetings for children with a statement of special educational need at Year 10 and subsequent annual reviews. Careers advisers provide information, advice

and guidance based on individual needs, abilities and aspirations which includes information on current labour market trends and future opportunities.

My Department's Training for Success (TfS) programme provides a guaranteed training opportunity for all eligible young people aged 16 and 17, generally school leavers, with extended eligibility for those with a disability and those from an in-care background of up to age 22 and up to age 24 respectively.

TfS aims to progress participants to higher level training, further education, or employment by addressing personal and social development needs, developing occupational skills and employability skills and, where necessary, providing Essential Skills in literacy, numeracy and information technology.

Where a young person with a statement of special educational needs indicates an interest in joining TfS, my Department provides a Pre-Entry Training Support assessment. This aims to ensure that support arrangements are put in place for the young person as soon as possible after commencing training.

Specialist support providers such as Disability Action, Sensory Learning Support and the Cedar Foundation, are available to work in conjunction with training suppliers delivering TfS with the aim of providing additional assistance, where needed, for those with disabilities. My Department can provide specialist funding in respect of a participant with a disability to help the training supplier provide additional resources, equipment or support to allow the young person to maximise his or her training opportunity.

My Department also funds 10 training places annually at Parkanaur College through the Disability Employment Service for students over 18 with significant disabilities in areas such as business administration, horticulture, catering and upholstery.

My Department, in conjunction with the European Social Fund, provides financial support to enable approximately 20 local projects throughout Northern Ireland help young people with disabilities progress towards and move into employment. These projects provide services such as employability skills training, vocational qualifications and work placement opportunities.

Further Education colleges provide a number of courses and programmes with no formal entry requirements for students with learning difficulties and / or disabilities, aimed at acquiring a qualification, developing independent living, and preparing for work.

St Mary's University College, Belfast

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what protection or assurances his Department, including his predecessor, gave to St Mary's University College, Belfast, that it would not be subject to any merger with Stranmillis University College, Belfast or Queen's University, Belfast.

(AQW 11514/11-15)

Dr Farry: It is my understanding that no such assurances have ever been given to St. Mary's University College.

Bytes Project

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, given that the Not in Education, Employment or Training Strategy is included in the Programme for Government, whether he intends to ensure that (i) the Bytes Project will retain its current level of funding from his Department; (ii) the project receives transitional support, at the current financial rate, if alternative funding streams are developed for the project; and (iii) the project is provided with the certainty and stability of funding in the interests of a more planned, strategic service.

(AQW 11567/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department, in conjunction with the Department of Education (DE), has been a contributory funder to the BYTES Project since April 2004. DE has transferred responsibility for organisations such as BYTES to the Youth Council for Northern Ireland (YCNi) in 2010. YCNi provided funding of £220,000 to the project in financial year 2011/2012, which was matched by DEL.

The YCNi has advised that it has provided interim funding for the period April to June 2012 with a decision on further funding for the remainder of the financial year 2012/2013 being made following a review by YCNi of the project's operations.

My Department is also providing interim funding for the period April 2012 to June 2012 of up to a maximum of £55,000. Decisions on funding for the remainder of the financial year will be made following the outcome of the review being undertaken by YCNi.

In addition, the Northern Ireland European Social Fund has committed to provide funding to the BYTES Project of £33,999 with match funding from my Department of £21,249 in the financial year 2012-13.

I intend to present the NEET strategy to the Executive presently.

Maternity Leave

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether his Department plans to introduce a similar legislative programme to that recently announced in the Queen's speech, allowing mothers to transfer maternity leave to their partners.

(AQW 11580/11-15)

Dr Farry: Northern Ireland has traditionally operated on the basis of parity with Great Britain in relation to paid leave for working parents. That being so, there is already in place a right for mothers or primary adopters to return to work after having taken a period of paid leave, transferring the residual amount of leave and pay to their partner.

Although there has already been initial consultation in Great Britain on new arrangements for shared leave, the Queen's speech did not go into any detail about what is being proposed. I have asked my officials to liaise with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to get a better understanding of the UK Government's proposals.

Responsibility for the majority of policy on paid leave for working parents lies with my Department; however, the Department for Social Development has the policy lead in relation to Statutory Maternity Pay and Maternity Allowance. Following initial discussions with DSD, I can confirm that, subject to Executive agreement, my Department will take the lead in consulting on the programme of change now being taken forward in Great Britain. If I am satisfied that the proposals are suitable and if there is a positive response to the consultation, I will seek to introduce corresponding measures here allowing working parents to take advantage of improved shared leave arrangements following the birth or adoption of a child.

Steps to Work and Step Ahead Programmes

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the future plans for the (i) Steps to Work; and (ii) Step Ahead programmes.

(AQW 11625/11-15)

Dr Farry: Currently, the Steps to Work programme is due to end on 31 March 2013. My Department is working on the development of a new employment programme which will replace Steps to Work during 2013.

At this time there are no plans to re-introduce the Step Ahead element of Steps to Work.

Step Ahead Programme

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in relation to the Step Ahead Programme, delivered in conjunction with the Enagh Youth Forum and Rutledge Recruitment and Training in Derry, why the eight people who completed the programme on 16 March 2012 have not received their £100 bonus from Rutledge for the completion of a First Aid course, even though payment was due within 7 days; and why Rutledge has not issued P45s to these people, which has resulted in many of them paying emergency tax in their new employment.

(AQW 11692/11-15)

Dr Farry: I understand that the delay in paying the £100 bonus and in issuing the P45s was due to an administrative oversight. The eight people affected by this have now received their bonus payment and P45s. The issue has now been resolved.

St Mary's University College, Belfast

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he, or his Department, have received representations from the Catholic Church in Northern Ireland, including the clergy and the hierarchy, opposing the inclusion of St Mary's University College, Belfast in any proposed merger with Stranmillis University College, Belfast and Queen's University, Belfast.

(AQW 11774/11-15)

Dr Farry: I have met with the Board of Governors of St Mary's University College, Belfast who have stated their opposition to inclusion in any merger with Queen's University, Belfast and Stranmillis University College, Belfast.

Employee Travelling and Subsistence Allowances Scheme

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, under the Employee Travelling and Subsistence Allowances Scheme, which was agreed by the College Employers' Forum, why part-time lecturers in further education colleges are not designated a base for the purposes of claiming travel allowances; and whether he plans to consider amending the scheme to allow part-time lecturers staff to be included in the scheme.

(AQW 11803/11-15)

Dr Farry: Terms and conditions of employment, including the award of travelling expenses, are a matter for each college Governing Body.

I have passed this query to the Chair of the College Employers' Forum, who will respond to the Member directly.

Civil Servants

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many civil servants currently employed in his Department have been re-employed after receiving a redundancy package from the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

(AQW 11810/11-15)

Dr Farry: As of 18 May 2012, there are no civil servants currently employed within the Department for Employment and Learning who have been re-employed after receiving a redundancy package from the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Age-positive Policies

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how his Department is encouraging employers to adopt age-positive policies.

(AQW 11814/11-15)

Dr Farry: Under Section 75(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, my Department is required in carrying out its functions relating to Northern Ireland to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between:

- persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation
- men and women generally
- persons with a disability and persons without
- persons with dependants and persons without.

Through our Equality Scheme, which was approved by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) on 14th September 2011, we demonstrate how the section 75 legislation is applied to all these groups, including the category relating to age.

Specific statutory responsibility for promoting equality in employment rests with the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

Employment Prospects for Older People

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how his Department is improving employment prospects for older people.

(AQW 11824/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department offers a wide range of assistance to clients of every age to help them overcome barriers to work and to move towards and into work.

The main focus for this assistance is through the Department's Adviser Service located in each Jobs and Benefits Office and JobCentre.

Advisers provide help and guidance on a wide range of issues including job search activities and on the Department's main adult return to work programme 'Steps to Work' which helps people who are unemployed or economically inactive to find and sustain employment.

A range of help is available through this programme including advice and guidance on finding and applying for jobs, intensive employability skills training, short vocational training courses, work experience, opportunities to undertake job related qualifications and support to enter self employment. There is no upper age limit for participating on the programme.

'Bridge to Employment' is another pre employment training programme offered by the Department which also helps unemployed people (aged 18+) find work – whatever their experience.

The 'Pathways to Work' programme, is offered by specialist Advisers and helps people of all ages with health conditions and disabilities to consider their options for returning to work.

The Careers Service within my Department provides impartial, information, advice and guidance, not only for school-age students but also for adults throughout Northern Ireland, and delivered by professionally qualified careers advisers.

Finally, the Local Employment Intermediary Service (LEMIS) provision (in Belfast, Londonderry, Strabane, Newry & Mourne, Moyle and Cookstown only) offers an impartial and confidential advice and support service to help people overcome their barriers and find a job that best suits their skills and abilities.

All of these programmes and services focus on improving the employment prospects for older people.

Arm's-length Bodies: Invoices

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what percentage of invoices received by each of his Department's arm's-length bodies, in the last twelve months, were paid within 30 days of receipt.

(AQW 11827/11-15)

Dr Farry: The percentage of invoices received by each of this Department's arm's-length bodies, in the last twelve months, which were paid within 30 days of receipt was as follows:

Construction Industry Training Board	99.9%
Ulster Supported Employment Limited	100.0%
Labour Relations Agency	95.0%

As described in the annual accounts of the organisation, the performance for Ulster Supported Employment Limited is calculated by reference to Trade Payable days.

Deputy Principal Positions

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he has any plans to create Deputy Principal positions within his Department over the next three months which will be located in the North West area.

(AQW 11946/11-15)

Dr Farry: As of 21 May 2012, there are no plans to create any Deputy Principal positions within the Department for Employment and Learning over the next three months which will be located in the North West area.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Tourism Projects: Grant Assistance

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many applications for grant assistance for tourism projects submitted by each local council have been successful in the last two years.

(AQW 10850/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): The table below lists all successful applications for grant assistance for tourism projects submitted by each Local Council over the last 2 years.

The number of applications for financial assistance received from each Local Council within these financial years has also been included. It should be noted that there can be a significant length of time from the receipt of an application to the issue of a grant offer and therefore the successful applications column does not correlate directly with the applications received column.

* For example: Moyle District Council have received 6 offers over the past 2 financial years and have submitted 1 application during the same period. 5 of the 6 offers were in respect of applications received prior to 1 April 2010

	Successful applications 2010/11 and 2011/12	Applications received 2010/11 and 2011/12
Antrim	0	0
Ards	0	3
Armagh	7	15
Ballymena	2	2
Ballymoney	0	1
Banbridge	1	2
Belfast	4	9
Carrickfergus	0	0
Castlereagh	0	0
Coleraine	10	11
Cookstown	0	0
Craigavon	0	2
Londonderry	5	8
Down	14	21
Dungannon	0	3
Fermanagh	0	2
Larne	1	2
Limavady	1	1
Lisburn	2	3
Magherafelt	0	0
Moyle *	6	1
Newry and Mourne	6	14

	Successful applications 2010/11 and 2011/12	Applications received 2010/11 and 2011/12
Newtownabbey	0	0
North Down	4	7
Omagh	0	0
Strabane	0	2
Total	63	106

Hydraulic Fracturing: Correspondence with Organisations

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide copies of all the outgoing and incoming correspondence with organisations and/or individuals, which are not part of Government, that relate to the topic of hydraulic fracturing, since the start of 2012.

(AQW 11169/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I do not consider the Assembly Question system the appropriate vehicle to seek correspondence to and from my Department.

Electricity Generators

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment why some electricity generators have profit margins of between 20 and 50 percent, when most of the top 100 companies are achieving margins of between 1 and 6 percent.

(AQW 11368/11-15)

Mrs Foster: It is not appropriate to compare the profit margins of electricity generators with those of other companies in radically different sectors, due to the different nature of the businesses and the associated capital investment required.

Investment in power plants is very capital intensive and returns are typically earned over a twenty year period. Over this period, year on year profit margins can be volatile, and it is therefore difficult to reach robust conclusions on profitability based on any single financial year.

The Single Electricity Market (SEM) Committee monitors the profitability of generators in the market to ensure that consumers are adequately protected and that investment can be attracted when necessary. In general, profit margins have reduced in the SEM due to increased competition, in particular with the entry of two new efficient gas fired generation plants in 2010. It is also worth noting that generator profitability is expected to fall further from 2013 with the ending of free carbon allowances, which were allocated to generators as part of the European Union Emissions Trading Scheme.

The Utility Regulator instructed cancellation of the two most unfavourable Generating Unit Agreements (GUAs) in November 2010 (their earliest cancellation date), and has also recently stated their intention to instruct cancellation of a further five smaller GUAs, with effect from November 2012. Therefore with generators increasingly exposed to market prices, this will further reduce profit margins for the companies and costs for consumers.

Tourism Strategy

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the urgency of the need for a new Tourism Strategy, particularly given the recent surge in visitor numbers.

(AQW 11396/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The consultation on a tourism strategy document enabled us to garner the views of the industry and ensured we set meaningful and challenging tourism targets and commitments within the Programme for Government and the Northern Ireland Economic Strategy.

Good progress is being made against the key objectives identified as part of the consultation as both industry and government have taken on board the priorities outlined in the high level Action Plan, which formed part of the public consultation document.

However, work has been ongoing to develop and update the high level Action Plan into key priorities for action linked to the PFG commitments and the Economic Strategy themes. This has also allowed us to reflect on our experience of developing new marketing strategies for ni2012 and visitor projections for major projects/events coming on stream in 2012 and 2013. We have also taken account of the impact of the downturn in global tourism, to revise key targets on visitor numbers and tourist revenue to 2014 in light of reducing baselines in some markets.

I intend to finalise a 'Priorities for Action' Plan for tourism to ensure that tourism commitments in the Programme for Government are delivered and I intend to take the Plan to the Executive for endorsement in due course.

Tourism Strategy

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the benefits of the new Tourism Strategy.
(AQW 11397/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The draft Tourism Strategy sets an ambitious target to grow tourism's contribution to the Northern Ireland economy to £1 billion by 2020 i.e. double the current contribution made by tourism to the economy and increase visitors from 3.2million to 4.5million.

It is anticipated that the increased tourism revenue has the potential to create the environment in which the tourism sector could grow by 10,000 jobs by 2020.

Interim targets to 2014 on tourism revenue and visitor numbers have been set under the Programme for Government (PfG) 2011-15. These targets are to increase visitor numbers to 4.2 million and tourist revenue to £676million by December 2014. Work has also been ongoing to develop the Strategy document's high level Action Plan into key priorities for action linked to PfG commitments and Economic Strategy themes. This has also allowed us to take into account the impact to date of ni2012 and visitor projections for major projects/events coming on stream in 2012 and 2013.

I intend to finalise a 'Priorities for Action' Plan to ensure that tourism commitments in the Programme for Government are delivered in order to maximize the contribution tourism makes to the Northern Ireland economy for the benefit of all.

Tourism Strategy

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an estimate of the number of jobs that will be created as a result of the new Tourism Strategy.
(AQW 11398/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The key performance indicators for tourism are measured in terms of increasing tourism revenue and visitor numbers. Challenging targets have been set to 2020, and interim targets are included in the Programme for Government for the period to 2014.

It is anticipated that the long term target to double tourism revenue to £1 billion per annum by 2020 has the potential to create the environment in which the number of jobs supported by tourism in Northern Ireland could grow by 10,000.

Businesses in the South Down Area

Mrs McKeivitt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many businesses in the South Down area have benefited from financial support from InvestNI in each of the last three years.
(AQW 11470/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The table below details the number of businesses that received an offer of assistance from Invest NI in the South Down Parliamentary Constituency Area (PCA) for the 2009-10 and 2010-11 financial years.

Number of Businesses Offered Assistance by Invest NI in South Down PCA (2009-10 and 2010-11)

Year	No of Businesses
2009-10	109
2010-11	86

Note

- As figures relate to the number of businesses within each individual year, they should not be totalled over the two year period. This could result in a business being counted twice.

The question refers to information relating to a time period that includes the 2011-12 financial year. Information for 2011-12 is not yet available due to an ongoing data verification exercise by Invest NI following its financial year end. I have asked Invest NI to make this information available to the member once this process has been completed, which should not be later than the end of May 2012.

Tourism: Promoting Northern Ireland as a Destination

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she is taking to promote Northern Ireland as a tourism destination, specifically during the 2012 London Olympics.
(AQW 11495/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) is working closely with Tourism Ireland Ltd (TIL) and Visit Britain (VB), to ensure maximum exposure for Northern Ireland throughout Great Britain during the 2012 London Olympics.

NITB is supporting specific London 2012 Festival/Cultural Olympiad events through the ni2012 programme of events with TIL maximising publicity around these events and around the Olympic Torch Relay, which comes to Northern Ireland in June.

Key tourism benefits around the Games will come from contacts and media familiarisation trips with non-accredited press and both organisations are working to bring these to Northern Ireland before, during and after the games.

Tourism Ireland will shortly launch an advertising campaign to target those Londoners who want to 'escape' the Games. The campaign will include advertising in train stations and newspapers inviting Londoners to come to Northern Ireland this summer. In addition, NITB is working with Visit Britain under its Memorandum of Understanding to maximise a range of promotional and marketing opportunities with the London Olympics Media Centre during the Games period.

Invest NI: Grants

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the number of grants provided by InvestNI to companies in which InvestNI board members, or their spouses, are employees, shareholders or board members, in each of the last five years; and (ii) the total value of the grants.

(AQW 11530/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Information on Invest NI Board Member interests and transactions involving Invest NI Board Members are published in the agency's Annual Report and Accounts.

Annual Reports covering the period 2002 – 2011 are available on the publications section of Invest NI's website at www.investni.com/index/publications

Invest NI: Grant Aid

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the fifteen companies which received the highest amount of grant aid from InvestNI since 2005; (ii) the amount of grant aid and the number of offers of assistance each company received; and (iii) how each company's grant total compares with the total InvestNI grant awarded in the same period.

(AQW 11531/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The question refers to information relating to a time period that includes the 2011-12 financial year. Information for 2011-12 is not yet available due to an ongoing data verification exercise by Invest NI following its financial year end. I have asked Invest NI to make this information available to the member once this process has been completed, which should not be later than the end of May.

Invest NI: Innovation Voucher Scheme

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the uptake of InvestNI's Innovation Voucher Scheme, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 11546/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Since the Innovation Voucher scheme was launched in June 2008, over 1600 applications have been received, resulting in the award of 874 vouchers to small enterprises across Northern Ireland. A breakdown of voucher distribution is included below.

Constituency	Total Vouchers Awarded
Belfast East	43
Belfast North	24
Belfast South	64
Belfast West	24
East Antrim	41
East Londonderry	34
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	51
Foyle	45
Lagan Valley	54
Mid Ulster	97
Newry & Armagh	67
North Antrim	42
North Down	38
South Antrim	42

Constituency	Total Vouchers Awarded
South Down	70
Strangford	40
Upper Bann	53
West Tyrone	45
	874

Invest NI: Access to Finance Strategy

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the uptake of each fund within InvestNI's Access to Finance Strategy; and (ii) the total funding allocated, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 11547/11-15)

Mrs Foster: There are three equity funds and two loan funds either operational or planned within Invest NI's Access to Finance Strategy. These are as follows:

- £10million NISPO Funds – equity and proof of concept grant operational since 2009.
- £16million Co-Fund NI – equity and operational since July 2011.
- £30million Development Fund – equity; manager raising funds.
- £50million Growth Loan Fund – debt and should be operational in June 2012.
- £5million Small Business Loan Fund – debt and procurement process imminent.

Details of the uptake of each operational fund and total funding allocated, including private sector leverage, by constituency is as follows:

PCA	NISPO £'000	Co-Fund NI £'000	Total £'000
Belfast East	607	1,175	1,782
Belfast North	498	0	498
Belfast South	1,740	0	1,740
Belfast West	149	0	149
East Antrim	237	0	237
East Londonderry	100	0	100
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	0	0	0
Foyle	172	0	172
Lagan Valley	630	544	1,174
Mid-Ulster	417	0	417
Newry & Armagh	117	0	117
North Antrim	43	0	43
North Down	392	0	392
South Antrim	120	0	120
South Down	200	0	200
Strangford	214	0	214
Upper Bann	150	0	150
West Tyrone	20	0	20
Total	5,806	1,719	7,525

- 1 The Development Fund, Growth Loan Fund and Small Business Loan Fund are not yet operational and as such, there has been no uptake on these funds.

Invest NI: Business Start-up Advice

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the uptake of Invest NI's business start-up advice, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 11548/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Since October 2011 Invest NI has responded to 3941 enquiries, held 163 business clinics attended by 1091 individuals and met another 519 individuals which in turn resulted in 615 completed business plans. The breakdown by constituency is:

Constituency	Enquiries	1:1'S	Clinic Attendees	Business Plans
Belfast East	182	14	40	21
Belfast North	216	20	45	22
Belfast South	242	35	68	15
Belfast West	203	20	58	36
East Antrim	157	16	64	36
East Londonderry	220	29	68	38
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	210	32	76	40
Foyle	271	88	27	79
Lagan Valley	236	17	51	18
Mid Ulster	207	27	63	44
Newry And Mourne	243	29	75	39
North Antrim	208	21	57	44
North Down	217	25	48	24
South Antrim	185	24	60	19
South Down	231	31	69	32
Strangford	204	24	41	21
Upper Bann	271	24	79	37
West Tyrone	238	43	102	50
Northern Ireland Total	3941	519	1091	615

HMS Caroline

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she is taking to ensure that HMS Caroline remains in Belfast.

(AQW 11550/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I have been working for some time now to find the best solution for HMS Caroline and have met with various stakeholders who are also keen to have HMS Caroline retained in Belfast.

An economic appraisal which considered the options around retaining the ship has been finalised and discussions with the Royal Navy are ongoing.

Wood-burning Stoves: Grants for Installation

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether her Department intends to introduce grants for the installation of wood burning stoves that are fuelled by wood pellets.

(AQW 11632/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department recently held a public consultation on the introduction of a Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI); details of the proposals are available on the DETI website. The purpose of the RHI is to encourage greater uptake of renewable heating systems in Northern Ireland.

In light of responses to the consultation, some further analysis has been undertaken to inform the final policy position. I hope to make an announcement shortly regarding the final scheme and this will include details of eligible technologies and the levels of support.

Fibre Broadband Roll-out Programme

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether she will grant leverage to allow the current fibre broadband roll-out programme to be extended further into the BT access network, thereby providing faster broadband speeds to rural customers.

(AQW 11709/11-15)

Mrs Foster: There is no scope for additional investment under this programme as the Next Generation Broadband Project is now completed and in its operational phase. Under this contract, fibre services are now available from 1,265 street cabinets across Northern Ireland. This government investment of £19.5m levered initially some £32m of private sector investment.

Prompted by the success of the project, BT has upgraded a further 783 cabinets across Northern Ireland under its own Next Generation Access programme. This is on top of the 110 cabinets upgraded across Londonderry as part of the City of Culture preparations and other upgrades completed prior to this project. This is estimated to be a private sector investment worth some £30-£35m. Once complete some 2480 of the 2900 cabinets will be fibre-enabled across Northern Ireland meaning that some 89% of telephone lines in Northern Ireland will be connected to an enabled cabinet.

The project has been delivered on time, on budget, and in line with DFP spend approvals.

Further investment in this or any other broadband project needs to be subject to a cost benefit analysis that indicates value for money for the public purse.

My Department is in the process of examining options to improve broadband speeds, to ensure how the objectives set out in DETI's Telecoms Action Plan 2011-2015 and by BDUK might best be achieved.

Gas Network: Extension of

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 11244/11-15, whether her Department has commissioned any other research on the extension of the gas network, and, if so, to provide details.

(AQW 11895/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Department recently appointed consultants to prepare a detailed Outline Business Case (OBC) in order to facilitate key decisions on extending the natural gas network, particularly in respect of funding options. The OBC, which is due to be completed in July 2012, represents a further economic appraisal which will review the costs and benefits of gas network extension in more detail than the 2010 high level technical and economic feasibility study.

Departmental Officials: Flights

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many flights in total her departmental officials have taken in each of the last two years.

(AQW 11942/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Departmental Officials took the following numbers of flights:

Financial Year	2010-2011	256 Flights
	2011-2012	262 Flights

Department of the Environment

Radioactive Substances

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the impact of the engagement document 'Revised Proposals for a Future Exemptions Regime Under the Radioactive Substances Act 1993 and the Environmental Regulations 2011', and in particular its relevance for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 10298/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): The document to which you refer was the subject of a UK wide stakeholder engagement in 2010 and followed an earlier consultation (in 2009) on proposals for a future exemption regime for radioactive substances. The revised proposals were broadly welcomed and have resulted in the introduction on 1 October 2011 of two pieces of legislation in Northern Ireland; namely the Radioactive Substances Act 1993 (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 and the Radioactive Substances Exemption (Northern Ireland) Order 2011. The latter introduced a new single Exemption Order that replaced the previous 18.

Exemption Orders are a mechanism for providing a degree of control over minor uses of radioactive substances where there is a clear benefit from their use, whilst ensuring continued protection of the environment and the public. In Northern Ireland Exemption Orders apply mainly to hospitals, schools and local industry.

The impact of the new legislation is to clarify the definition of a radioactive substance and to simplify the exemption process and reduce regulatory burdens while maintaining safety standards.

Wind Turbine: Planning Application

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment whether access sight lines are required for a planning application for a single wind turbine.

(AQW 11269/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department recognises that good visibility is essential for the safety and convenience of all road users and will therefore seek the expert advice of Roads Service in relation to applications which involve a new access or alterations to an existing access.

In cases where a planning application for a single wind turbine involves the creation of a new access or alterations to an existing access, the Department would normally require visibility splays to be provided in accordance with Planning Policy Statement 3: Access, Movement and Parking and DCAN 15: Vehicle Access Standards.

However, not all planning applications for single wind turbines involve the creation or alteration of an existing access. In such cases improved visibility splays may not be required.

Planning Policy Statement 21

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the ongoing performance in the operation of Planning Policy Statement 21 on sustainable development in the countryside.

(AQO 1992/11-15)

Mr Attwood: My assessment is that PPS21 is working effectively and has been well received although action has been required to improve the consistency of its application.

I intend to make a full statement to the Assembly in this regard as soon as practicable after a report on the review of the operation of PPS21 has been finalised.

Magherafelt District Council: E-mail Address

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the discussions his departmental officials have had with Magherafelt District Council regarding its proposal to remove '.gov.uk' from its email address.

(AQO 1994/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Magherafelt District Council officers have discussed that Council's decision to remove '.gov.uk' from its e-mail address with my officials and have been advised that the Cabinet Office in London controls the process for withdrawing the use of a '.gov.uk' domain name. The Council has been referred to the Cabinet Office for further advice on this process. Three other councils in Northern Ireland use other names. Independent of this issue, I very much support the use of townland names, in March I wrote to all council Chief Executives encouraging their use through the pointer system and from April requested all DOE correspondence include townland addresses.

Review of Public Administration

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the timetable for the implementation of the Review of Public Administration proposals.

(AQO 1995/11-15)

Mr Attwood: As the Minister responsible for the implementation of local government reform, I am managing the programme in line with the 2015 timetable proposed in the Executive's Programme for Government 2011-15.

I am taking forward two main pieces of legislation required to give effect to local government reorganisation, the first of which is the draft Local Government (Boundaries) Order (NI) 2012, which was laid before the Assembly on 24 April 2012. The Order is currently being examined by the Environment Committee.

The second is the Local Government (Reorganisation) Bill which, subject to the Executive's agreement, I intend to introduce during the autumn session to give effect to the Executive's decisions on the future shape of local government.

The Bill will provide for the newly elected councils to operate in shadow form between the date of the next local government elections in 2014 until they take up their full powers and responsibilities in April 2015. The Shadow Councils will have a democratic mandate and will be given the statutory authority in the Reorganisation Bill to make decisions and work towards planning and developing the policies and practices that would shape the direction of the new councils before they become fully operational.

In addition to progressing the Bill through the Assembly, a programme of subordinate legislation and guidance will be taken forward to give effect to the Bill. This will include subordinate legislation on shadow arrangements, new governance arrangements, the new ethical standards regime and community planning.

I have also recently established a number of implementation structures to provide political and operational input that will manage and integrate the work required to bring about the delivery of the overall programme. Working groups have also been set up to

undertake key areas of work on transferring functions, finance, HR, legislation, programme delivery and communications, with local Voluntary Transition Committees bringing about convergence of their constituent councils on the ground.

Single-use Carrier Bags

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment when the levy on single use carrier bags will be fully introduced.
(AQO 1996/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I can confirm that I intend to adopt a 2-stage approach to the implementation of the carrier bag levy.

A levy on single use bags is to be introduced in April 2013. This will require subordinate legislation and I plan to bring this to the Assembly in the autumn.

Subject to Assembly approval, the levy will then be extended to certain types of reusable bags in April 2014 – and for this, primary legislation will be required. The Executive has given approval for the introduction of the necessary Bill to the Assembly. Work on that Bill is at its early stages, but will be progressed as soon as possible.

George Best Belfast City Airport

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the process that is under way to establish an improved outcome for local residents in relation to aircraft noise and late flights at George Best Belfast City Airport.
(AQO 1997/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Airport submitted their proposals for a noise management system on 23rd March 2012. The variation proposed by the Airport includes removal of the 'Seats for Sale' limit, the introduction of a noise contour control cap and other noise control measures. Their report includes detailed economic and environmental information to support their proposals, including 3 potential growth scenarios.

On 29th March I announced the next step in this public process, an 8 week public consultation period which is due to finish on 8th June. The consultation has been widely publicised and the local councils and other key consultees have been informed. My Department has developed a system for submitting representations online via the internet and any representations submitted are quickly available for public viewing.

A independent public inquiry or examination will be held in late summer or early Autumn to consider the proposals and the responses to them from the consultation process. After I have considered the independent report and recommendations of the Examination, I will decide what modifications should be included in the Planning Agreement. It is my intention that the process will be concluded by Christmas.

Ballyhornan Beach, County Down

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of the Environment what action his Department is taking to alleviate the environmental impact of raw sewage being pumped into the sea at Ballyhornan beach, Co. Down.
(AQO 1998/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive (UWWTD) requires discharges of sewage to coastal waters to have "appropriate treatment". The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) has determined the appropriate treatment requirements for Ballyhornan to consist of a long sea outfall and fine screening.

NIEA has confirmed that fine screening is not currently in place at Ballyhornan and officials are working to resolve this. The Agency has taken enforcement action including the issue of warning letters in 2009 and 2010 and the issue of a postal caution in 2011 to Northern Ireland Water (NIW), in relation to Ballyhornan being non-compliant with the conditions of its Water Order Discharge Consent. NIW has had ongoing difficulties in securing the necessary land and a right of way agreement to facilitate the installation of fine screens. I am advised that these problems are still ongoing though agreement has been reached on the land purchase.

As Ballyhornan WWTW continues to be non-compliant NIEA is currently in the process of preparing a Water Order Enforcement Notice. The Notice will require that all conditions of the Department's consent are complied with by March 2013. It is an offence for any person to fail to comply with the requirements imposed by an Enforcement Notice.

NIW has advised that it plans, in the longer term, to intercept screened flows and to pump the sewage to an upgraded Ardglass WWTW and will continue to maintain the existing sewerage system in the area until the outstanding issues are resolved.

Areas of Special Scientific Interest

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment when the programme for the designation of Areas of Special Scientific Interest will be completed.
(AQO 1999/11-15)

Mr Attwood: At the current rate of declaration, it is expected that the programme of ASSI declarations will be substantially completed by 2018. By that stage there should be around 440 ASSIs and all those sites on the Department's priority list will have been declared. The programme of declaration may, technically, not reach a conclusion, as science and understanding of the

environment evolve. On an ongoing basis, other mechanisms are deployed to aid protection. The annual target of declarations has reduced by 10 from 25 to 15, a matter I will consider further.

Beaches

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the progress made in cleaning up beaches since the launch of his Good Beach Summit.

(AQO 2000/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I have now hosted four Good Beach Summits and progress has been encouraging. With good participation from government agencies, district councils, user groups, community groups, NGOs and other representative groups, there is real progress in delivering the multi-strand Action Plan and exploring new issues.

The Action Plan was agreed at the first summit under four headings:

- Improve water quality;
- Improve beach cleanliness, facilities, management & signage;
- Keep public & media better informed;
- Support the coastal economy.

There has been specific progress in the areas of:

- Sewerage infrastructure improvements;
- Pollution prevention actions, following catchment studies;
- A beach signage project – in line with revised Bathing Waters Directive;
- Anti-litter publicity in support of the new Clean Neighbourhoods legislation;
- Progress towards a Marine Litter Strategy.
- Review of bathing waters identification, under the EC Directive;
- Increased participation in beach awards schemes, including North South co-ordination;
- Development of a dedicated beaches web site – BeachNI.

Much of this will be further highlighted at the forthcoming beach awards ceremony on 24 May when I will present more International Blue Flag, Seaside and Green Coast awards than have ever been presented in Northern Ireland before. In part these awards reflect the excellent bathing water quality results in 2011 but they are primarily recognition of excellent management at our most popular bathing beaches and of improving standards.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Public Servants: Remuneration Packages

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, since coming into office, to detail (i) the proposals he has (a) received; and (b) approved for the restructuring of the remuneration packages for public servants; and (ii) which office holders benefitted.

(AQW 10940/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): The information requested is not readily available and can only be compiled at disproportionate costs.

Rates Exemption

Mrs McKeivitt asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of applications for rates exemption received by the Valuations Office since the introduction of rates on empty properties in October 2011, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 11310/11-15)

Mr Wilson: This answer assumes that the question seeks details of the number of applications received by Land & Property Services (LPS) from ratepayers to seek to remove properties from the valuation list, thereby obviating any rate liability, following the introduction of the Rating of Empty Homes in October 2011.

A ratepayer in Northern Ireland may lodge an application at any time with the District Valuer in LPS against the rateable valuation of a property. The District Valuer will register a case, inspect the property and issue a decision amending or retaining the rateable value. If dissatisfied with the District Valuer's decision a domestic ratepayer has a right of appeal to the Commissioner of Valuation with a further right of challenge to the Northern Ireland Valuation Tribunal.

All domestic applications, whether seeking removal of the property from the valuation list or seeking a reduction in the assessed value for any reason, are registered under a single case type. This information is held on a council by council basis and not on a constituency basis. It is therefore not possible to provide a breakdown by constituency showing only those applications seeking deletion from the valuation list.

The table below shows a breakdown on a council by council basis of all domestic applications received by LPS since 1 October 2011.

District	Count
Antrim	94
Ards	227
Armagh	278
Ballymena	161
Ballymoney	103
Banbridge	133
Belfast	857
Carrickfergus	42
Castlereagh	65
Coleraine	197
Cookstown	200
Craigavon	299
Down	203
Dungannon & South Tyrone	285
Fermanagh	293
Larne	78
Limavady	97
Lisburn	191
Derry	140
Magherafelt	159
Moyle	81
Newry & Mourne	455
Newtownabbey	99
North Down	133
Omagh	259
Strabane	103
Total	5232

Public Sector Pensions

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 10695/11-15, to confirm that all pensions across the entire public sector are now exclusively Consumer Price Indexed, including benefits earned by contributions before the change from Retail Price Index; and to specify any exceptions.

(AQW 11330/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Pensions payable from the main unfunded schemes in respect of employments commonly referred to as 'public sector' in Northern Ireland are now Consumer Price Index linked. Schedule 2 of the Pension (Increase) Act (Northern Ireland) 1971 sets out the sectors which include; Civil Service; Health Service; Education sector and Fire & Rescue Service. My Department has the responsibility for introducing the legislative change to cover the uprating of benefits payable from these schemes. I can confirm that pensions payable in respect of Police and holders of judicial office are now also uprated in line with the Consumer Price Index.

I must point out as Minister of Finance and Personnel my area of responsibility for the specific sector rests with the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (Northern Ireland). I can confirm that the change to the Consumer Price Index applies both for pensions in payment and preserved pension benefits attributable to contributions paid before the change from Retail Price Index for this scheme.

I also share responsibility with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform in the Republic of Ireland for the North/South Pension Scheme. When responding to a previous AQ (AQW 10695/11-15) my officials had indicated that they were working on the change from the Retail Price Index to the Consumer Price Index for benefits payable to the Northern members of the North/South pension scheme. This has yet to be implemented; however, I do anticipate this change being introduced for this scheme also.

I do not have responsibility for all public sector pension schemes. There may therefore be exceptions in other areas that I may not be aware of where scheme rules may explicitly refer to Retail Price Index, in terms of benefits earned by contributions paid before the change from the Retail Price Index.

Rates Bills for Businesses in the North Down Area

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many businesses in the North Down area were unable to pay their rates bill in the 2011/12 financial year.

(AQW 11463/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Information is not available on the number of businesses that were unable to pay their rates bill. Information is available on the number of non-domestic properties in the North Down Borough Council Area for which a rates assessment raised in April 2011 has not been fully paid by the end of the year. Of the 2,010 rates assessments raised in April 2011 in respect of the Non-Domestic properties in the North Down Borough Council Area, as at 31st March 2012 some or all of the April 2011 debt was still outstanding for 315 properties. No payments were received in respect of assessments raised in April 2011 for 117 of these properties in 2011/12.

PEACE III Funding Allocated to Victims Groups

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much PEACE III funding has been allocated to victims groups.

(AQW 11475/11-15)

Mr Wilson: To date, PEACE III funding of £12,878,562 has been awarded to projects which include victim and survivor groups as project partners.

In addition, funding of £3,855,565 has been awarded to projects which include victims and survivors as a specific target group.

Public Servants: Bonuses

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 10939/11-15, for what period the requested information could be supplied at a proportionate cost and whether such information will now be provided.

(AQW 11477/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The disproportionate cost in responding to AQW 10939/11-15 arises due to the scope of the question rather than the timeframe it refers to. Information relating to bonus payments to specific office holders is not recorded centrally and would entail writing to all public bodies in order to provide an answer.

If the Member has a specific interest in mind, it may be productive to present the question in a more direct manner.

Dormant Accounts Scheme

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) what progress has been made, since the Executive Paper of 6 November 2007, on reaching an agreement with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on how funds from the Dormant Account Scheme will be allocated; and (ii) when funding will be used to benefit constituents.

(AQW 11483/11-15)

Mr Wilson: During 2011-12, £47 million of funding was released by the Reclaim Fund to the UK Big Lottery Fund. I have no further information in relation to either the timing or quantum of future allocations as this is dependent on what the Reclaim Fund releases to the UK Big Lottery Fund.

The mechanism for distributing the NI share of this funding is still being developed. Proposals for the draft spending priorities have been submitted to the First Minister and deputy First Minister for comment. Any funding relating to 2011-12 can be carried forward into 2012-13 and will not be lost but it is my intention that the funds will be available for distribution in this financial year subject to Executive clearance.

Dormant Accounts Scheme

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the amount of funding that has been earmarked for distribution since the establishment of the Dormant Accounts Scheme; and (ii) how much of the funding will be allocated in the current financial year.

(AQW 11485/11-15)

Mr Wilson: During 2011-12, £47 million of funding was released by the Reclaim Fund to the UK Big Lottery Fund. I have no further information in relation to either the timing or quantum of future allocations as this is dependent on what the Reclaim Fund releases to the UK Big Lottery Fund.

The mechanism for distributing the NI share of this funding is still being developed. Proposals for the draft spending priorities have been submitted to the First Minister and deputy First Minister for comment. Any funding relating to 2011-12 can be carried forward into 2012-13 and will not be lost but it is my intention that the funds will be available for distribution in this financial year subject to Executive clearance.

Rates Revaluation in 2015

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, following the next rates revaluation in 2015, to detail (i) when the new adjusted rates levies will be applied; and (ii) what will be the legal basis for applying the adjusted levies.

(AQW 11500/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I assume that the Member is referring to the new rental values that will apply following the 2015 non-domestic general revaluation. These will be effective for billing purposes from 1 April 2015.

The legislative cover for this is contained in Article 45(1) and (2) of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977. These provide for the preparation, publication and coming into force of a new valuation list (containing a general revaluation of such properties as determined by the Department).

Capital and Revenue Savings

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the capital and revenue savings his Department has made in each of the last three years.

(AQW 11501/11-15)

Mr Wilson: In 2009-10 and 2010-11 my Department delivered revenue efficiencies of £11.3m and £15.8m respectively. In 2011-12 my Department made revenue savings of £5.8m

Capital budgets over the three-year period in question were zero based. Therefore, in common with other departments, my Department was not required to make capital savings in these three years.

Enterprise Zone: Establishment of

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the discussions he has had with HM Treasury to date on the establishment of an enterprise zone(s).

(AQW 11502/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Executive has not finalised its approach to Enterprise Zones in Northern Ireland. Looking at the English approach most of the policy levers available within the Government's Enterprise Zone initiative in terms of rating, planning and broadband delivery are already devolved and being applied across Northern Ireland as a whole. The only really new aspect of this is the potential to offer enhanced capital allowances in a limited number of such zones and I have previously written to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to indicate our interest in exploring how these might be applied in Northern Ireland.

However, what we do on this will naturally follow the work we are taking forward through the Joint Ministerial Working Group (JMVG) with the Government on Rebalancing the Northern Ireland Economy, where if we devolve Corporation Tax powers or get enhanced capital allowances, all of Northern Ireland could potentially benefit.

The final meeting of the JMVG is scheduled for 25th June 2012 and it is anticipated that it will produce its report in the summer. Following that, we expect a decision will be made by the Government on the further steps that might be taken to rebalance the Northern Ireland economy.

Dormant Accounts Scheme

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the level of funds seized from dormant banks accounts that was allocated to public service expenditure in each of the last two years; and (ii) to where it was allocated.

(AQW 11503/11-15)

Mr Wilson: During 2011-12, £47 million of funding was released by the Reclaim Fund to the UK Big Lottery Fund.

The mechanism for distributing the NI share of this funding is still being developed. Any funding relating to 2011-12 can be carried forward into 2012-13 and will not be lost but it is my intention that the funds will be available for distribution in this financial year subject to Executive clearance.

Civil Service: Duplication of Work

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he has identified any duplication of work in the Civil Service in each of the last three years; and what steps he has taken to remedy each situation.

(AQW 11504/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The last two Northern Ireland budgets contained a requirement for each department to produce a plan detailing how they would deliver necessary efficiencies and savings. The associated guidance issued by my department stated that these savings should be sought from reductions in administration and improvements in efficiency in the first instance.

It is ultimately up to individual Ministers and departments to detail how they are delivering their required savings. However, the cessation of unnecessary work would be fundamental to this process.

Small and Medium-sized Businesses

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many small and medium-sized businesses have participated in the tendering process, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 11586/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The numbers of small and medium-sized businesses participating in the tendering process is shown in the table below.

Year	Number downloading tender documents	Number submitting tenders
2009/2010	2,351	747
2010/2011	2,401	756
2011/2012	2,532	807

These numbers relate to all the tender competitions run by the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) on behalf of its customers. All DFP procurements valued at more than £30k must be channelled through CPD.

Government Work and Contracts

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what size businesses can tender for Government work and contracts.

(AQW 11588/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Any size of business can tender for Government contracts. Each tender competition will have its own set of selection criteria which will require tenderers to demonstrate that they have the capability and capacity to meet the size and scope of the contract requirements.

In 2010-2011 more than half (58%) of all contracts awarded by Centres of Procurement Expertise went to small and micro business employing 50 people or less. This clearly demonstrates the opportunities which exist for companies of all sizes to compete successfully for public sector contracts.

Videoconferencing

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the use of video-conferencing by departmental staff in each of the last two years; and (ii) the level of savings achieved as a result.

(AQW 11589/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Detailed records on the use of video-conferencing facilities by departmental staff are not held, so it is not possible to provide the information requested.

Zero-based Budgeting

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether the process of zero-based budgeting has been applied to any aspect of the operation of the Civil Service or arm's-length bodies.

(AQW 11590/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Both Budget 2008-11 and Budget 2011-15 adopted a zero based approach to capital investment. This was appropriate due to the nature of capital expenditure where allocations could be determined based on the consideration of individual capital projects/programmes.

The nature of current expenditure means that it is more suited to an incremental approach. Particularly as a large percentage of the current expenditure budget consists of costs, such as pay, that are incremental in nature and cannot easily be avoided. However, the requirement for departments to deliver efficiencies /savings means that an evaluation of existing activities, one of the key advantages of zero based budgeting, can still be undertaken even with an incremental approach.

The ongoing review of budget allocations to departments will not require a zero-based approach as it will only be assessing whether marginal changes are needed to the original plans. A zero-based assessment is only appropriate where there is a fundamental alteration to the resources available to the Executive.

Budget Income Projections

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to what extent income projections contained in the Budget have been met over the last three years.

(AQW 11591/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Only the first year of the 2011-15 Budget cycle has been completed. The Provisional Outturn data for that year, including income received, is currently being collected from departments.

Budget 2011-15 contained a range of assumptions on income generation. The biggest element was undoubtedly capital receipts, including asset disposals. Work on this is now so advanced that specific disposal receipts have now been included within individual departmental baselines for the remainder of the Budget period.

Work on delivering other sources of income is being progressed by the ministerial Budget Review Group on issues such as plastic bag levies, increased car parking etc.

Civil Service Jobs: Advertising

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, with a view to maximising job applications from outside the Greater Belfast area, where most daily newspaper sales take place, whether he intends to review the current practice of Civil Service jobs not being advertised in weekly local newspapers.

(AQW 11597/11-15)

Mr Wilson: There is no Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) ban on advertising job vacancies in weekly newspapers. The NICS uses a wide range of media to market recruitment opportunities to ensure effective communication and value for money. This may include the use of local newspapers where a selection panel considers this appropriate.

In December 2011 the Northern Ireland Executive agreed to introduce tight controls on advertising expenditure, open classified advertising up to competition and change the legislation to allow greater use of online and

other media for classified advertising. Departments are currently reviewing the level of classified advertising within their own Departments.

Central Procurement Directorate Advertisements

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel why Central Procurement Directorate advertisements are not placed in weekly local newspapers; and for his assessment of whether this disadvantages rural areas where the reach of daily newspapers is less.

(AQW 11599/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Since May 2008, Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) has advertised all its tender opportunities on the eSourcingNI internet portal. This portal is now well established as the single source of all CPD's currently available procurements. Over 30,000 companies have already registered with the portal and, to maintain awareness, a monthly advert is placed in the three local regional newspapers - the Belfast Telegraph, the News Letter and the Irish News.

There are a large number of local weekly newspapers and to advertise in all would significantly increase CPD's advertising costs. The portal is a cost effective means of providing companies with details of all CPD's opportunities and those from other Centres of Procurement Expertise. It is fully accessible to everyone right across Northern Ireland and provides instant, simultaneous, access to each competition. In addition, as tenders are also submitted electronically, the transaction costs for companies based in rural areas are also reduced.

Marriage (Northern Ireland) Order 2003

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel by what practice the statutory duty in Article 4(3) of The Marriages (NI) Order 2003 is currently fulfilled; and for his assessment of the adequacy by which this alerts the public in regard to identifying intended sham marriages.

(AQW 11640/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The statutory duty under Article 4(3) of The Marriages (NI) Order 2003 is fulfilled when the registrar places on public display a list containing the names and dates of each intended marriage for which the registrar has received a marriage notice. This list is displayed during council office opening hours. Any person may examine the list and, if he/she claims to have reason to do so, inspect the full entry relating to the marriage and make an objection in writing.

An objection on the grounds of a legal impediment as defined in Article 6 (6) of the Order will be investigated by the Registrar General.

The requirement to place notices on public display is not primarily to alert the public in regard to identifying sham marriages. Separate provisions exist for the express purpose of reporting suspected sham marriages under article 24 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 and the Reporting of Suspicious Marriages (NI) Regulations 2000.

Marriages

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he is aware of a correlation between the discontinuance of the publication of forthcoming marriages, in audited weekly circulation newspapers, and the number of sham marriages.

(AQW 11662/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Family Law (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 abolished the requirement to publish certain forthcoming civil marriages in a local newspaper. There was never a requirement to publish forthcoming religious marriages.

Sham marriages were defined by the introduction of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. This legislation included provisions for reporting suspicious marriages to the Home Office.

Cúnamh: Social Impact Tracker

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) for his assessment of the security of the Social Impact Tracker software designed and owned by Cunamh, and endorsed by the Special EU Programmes Body and used by its project managers; and (ii) whether its hosts have received security clearance.

(AQW 11775/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Advice to the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) is that the Social Impact Tracker product is hosted on a secure server encrypted using 256 bit strong SSL encryption to maintain data privacy and integrity. The system is password protected and secure programming techniques are used to prevent unauthorised access. Data relating to the product is managed by a third party supplier located in a secure data centre, and access to the servers is strictly limited.

Cúnamh ICT has also advised that it adheres to the Data Protection Act 1998 and is registered as a Data Controller with the Information Commissioner's Office.

SEUPB has never itself used the Social Impact Tracker software, and has no role in management or supervision of the software.

SEUPB advise that any endorsement previously provided did not relate to the current online software, but to the previous desktop based version of the product in which the software had to be installed on individual PCs and a central records database setup in-house within the project / client organisation. Additionally, any endorsement does not offer commentary on the adequacy of technical security or data management issues.

I believe that in this instance the issue of security clearance is not relevant.

Housing Benefit: Discretionary Payments

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether there was a Barnett Consequential in the 2011/12 financial year for discretionary Housing Benefit payments; and to detail the amount.

(AQW 11815/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Housing Benefit is demand led and, as such, is included in the Annually Managed Expenditure (AME) budget. AME is funded by the Treasury on the basis of twice yearly forecasts submitted by DFP. In the case of Housing Benefit these forecasts are provided by the Department for Social Development.

For information purposes, the Treasury provide indicative Barnett Consequentials for AME programmes based on changes to the budgets of Whitehall departments. The Autumn Statement 2011 identified an indicative Barnett Consequential of £0.034 million in 2011-12 in respect of Housing Benefit. However, it must be remembered that these amounts are only indicative with the final AME budget for the year being based on forecasts of demand.

Corporation Tax

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the devolution of Corporation Tax powers.

(AQO 2009/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Executive continues to work with Government on the issues involved in devolving responsibility for corporation tax. Following two constructive meetings of the Joint Ministerial Working Group on Rebalancing the Northern Ireland Economy, our final meeting has been arranged for 25th June 2012.

Considerable progress has been made on the work programme agreed at the first two meetings but there are still a number of issues to be resolved over the next few months, particularly around the potential costs and practical implications of transferring corporation tax powers. That said, it is still anticipated that the Ministerial Working Group will produce a report in the summer and a decision will be taken by the Government on whether it will agree to the devolution of these powers following this.

Land and Property Services: Disposal of Government Assets

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the objectivity and transparency of Land and Property Services' role in the disposal of property assets that are owned by Executive Departments.

(AQO 2006/11-15)

Mr Wilson: LPS has a team of Chartered Valuation Surveyors who provide independent professional advice to public bodies at all stages of the disposal process. LPS value surplus properties for transfer to other Departments, undertake direct negotiations with former owners, adjoining owners or sitting tenants, advise on the best means of disposal, appoint selling agents and approve selling prices.

The key role of the District Valuer is to ensure that disposing public sector bodies get best value when selling property assets. I am of the view that LPS is both objective and transparent in how it undertakes these disposals. LPS both applies and advises public bodies on the application of the published guidelines for Disposal of Public Sector Property in Northern Ireland. These guidelines ensure objectivity and transparency.

Furthermore all open market sales use private sector estate agents, appointed through a competitive tendering process. Details of all 67 current sales are available on the LPS website.

Small Business Rate Relief Scheme

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the number of newly eligible businesses that applied for Small Business Rate Relief, following the recent extension of the scheme.

(AQO 2007/11-15)

Mr Wilson: With effect from 1st April 2012, an additional band of 20% relief was added to the existing Small Business Rate Relief (SBRR) scheme for properties with a Net Annual Value (NAV) between £5,001-£10,000.

Businesses do not have to apply for the relief. It is applied automatically by Land & Property Services (LPS).

At 1st April 2012, 8,214 'newly eligible' businesses fell within the new NAV range and were awarded 20% relief.

Special EU Programmes Body

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many funding applications are currently being considered by the Special EU Programmes Body.

(AQO 2008/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Special EU Programmes Body has advised that there are currently four applications for PEACE III funding and twenty-six applications for INTERREG IVA funding under consideration.

Air Passenger Duty

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the devolution of Air Passenger Duty powers.

(AQO 2010/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Precise arrangements for the devolution of Air Passenger Duty (APD) powers are being finalised and discussions with Treasury and HMRC are ongoing in this regard.

The necessary legislative changes to devolve APD powers for direct long haul flights will be made in the 2012 Finance Bill and I would expect this to have Royal Assent by early autumn at the latest. A Legislative Consent Motion is required to seek Assembly agreement to this. The DFP Committee published their report in this regard on 17th May 2012 and I look forward to the Assembly debate on the Motion on 28th May 2012.

Following Royal Assent, an Assembly Bill will be required to enable the Executive to follow through on the commitment to reduce APD on direct

long haul flights to zero. Executive approval to a draft Bill will be sought during the summer and the Bill, once approved, is likely to be introduced to the Assembly in the early autumn.

Trade Unions: Industrial Action

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many union members took part in the strike on 10 May 2012.

(AQO 2011/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The provisional figures show that a total of 7754 civil servants took part in industrial action on 10 May 2012. It is not known how many of these are union members. The Department of Finance and Personnel does not hold information about the number of people outside the Northern Ireland Civil Service who took part in the strike action.

Empty Premises Relief Scheme: East Londonderry

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an estimate of the number of empty properties, in the East Londonderry area, which would qualify for rate relief under the Empty Premises Rate Relief scheme.

(AQO 2013/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Empty Premises Relief Scheme is available from 1st April 2012 for a period of 12 months. The scheme is application based and the property must meet certain eligibility criteria. To be eligible, a business ratepayer must move into premises which were previously used for retail purposes and have been unoccupied for 12 months or more. The applicant will be asked to provide detail of the previous use of the property and sign a declaration that it has been unoccupied for 12 months or more. Land & Property Services (LPS) will then check the details on the application and decide if an award should be made.

While it is not possible to accurately estimate how many properties would qualify for rate relief under the Empty Premises Rate Relief scheme, given the eligibility criteria, LPS records indicate that 643 properties were empty for 12 months or more prior to 1st April 2012, within the East Londonderry constituency.

Dormant Accounts Scheme

Mr Murphy asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the implementation of the Dormant Accounts Scheme.

(AQO 2014/11-15)

Mr Wilson: During 2011-12, £47million of funding was released by the Reclaim Fund to the UK Big Lottery Fund.

The mechanism for distributing the NI share of this funding is still being developed. Any funding relating to 2011-12 can be carried forward into 2012-13 and will not be lost.

Rates: Commercial Properties

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the timetable for the review of the Rating of Commercial Properties.

(AQO 2015/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Executive has agreed that the next revaluation will take place in April 2015, based on 2013 valuations.

LPS has already begun to prepare and plan. The exact date for publication of the new Valuation List cannot be decided until the valuation date is confirmed but it is expect to be ready before the end of 2014.

Key stages in the process include:

- data and systems improvement - 2012 and ongoing;
- forms of return (to gather rental evidence) issued to business ratepayers - late 2012, early 2013;
- market info analysis - 2013 and beyond;
- developing detailed valuation guidance and model development - late 2013 and beyond;
- running preliminary valuations - early 2014 and beyond;
- impact assessment - mid 2014 and beyond;
- finalising valuations - second half of 2014; and
- communication and consultation - throughout but increasing.

This revaluation will align Northern Ireland with the rest of the UK for the first time. The last general revaluation here took place in 2003.

In terms of the impact of the revaluation this will depend on how rental values have changed between 2001 and 2013, not simply the position over the last couple of years.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Patient and Client Council

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the effectiveness and value for money of the Patient and Client Council.

(AQW 11613/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): The PCC have been set a challenging agenda in its first three years of operation. This agenda included objectives for the PCC establishing itself, for improving public representation and for promoting wider public involvement to take forward its statutory obligations. The Department regularly monitors performance against these objectives through its performance review process, and I can confirm that the PCC is making good progress in carrying out its statutory obligations. I continue to look at ways of maximizing the efficiency of the Council's operations and all other Arms Length Bodies.

Fluoride Added to Drinking Water

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how he will ensure that all scientific and medical views are adequately heard prior to taking a decision on whether fluoride is added to drinking water.

(AQW 11664/11-15)

Mr Poots: I indicated on 25 April 2012 that it is appropriate I should give consideration to fluoridation of the water supplies. I will consult with my executive colleagues to seek their views on water fluoridation in the first instance.

Pending my assessment of the views of my executive colleagues, I would only make a decision to enter any fluoridation arrangements after my department has consulted, and ascertained public opinion, and considered the appropriate evidence from reputable scientific and medical sources.

Craigavon Area Hospital: Accident and Emergency

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average turnaround time between ambulances arriving at the Accident and Emergency Department at Craigavon Area Hospital and the admission of patients, from November 2011 to date.

(AQW 11668/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information on the length of time between ambulances arriving at the Craigavon Area Hospital emergency care department and the admission of patients is not available. Information is available however, on the turnaround time measured from when an ambulance arrives at the Craigavon Area Hospital emergency care department until it has 'cleared' the location. This includes the time taken for patient handover to relevant clinical personnel and ensuring the vehicle is ready for the next call.

With this in mind, between 1st November 2011 and 15th May 2012, the average ambulance turnaround time at Craigavon Area Hospital emergency care department was 28 minutes and 20 seconds.

Craigavon Area Hospital: Accident and Emergency

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the turnaround time between ambulances arriving at the Accident and Emergency Department at Craigavon Area Hospital and the admission of patients, from November 2011 to date.

(AQW 11679/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information on the length of time between ambulances arriving at the Craigavon Area Hospital emergency care department and the admission of patients is not available. Information is available however, on the turnaround time measured from when an ambulance arrives at the Craigavon Area Hospital emergency care department until it has 'cleared' the location. This includes the time taken for patient handover to relevant clinical personnel and ensuring the vehicle is ready for the next call.

Ambulance turnaround times at the Craigavon Area Hospital emergency care department between 1st November 2011 and 15th May 2012 are detailed in the table below:

Ambulance Turnaround Time	Total
Within 15 minutes	2,049
Between 15 and 30 minutes	4,781
Between 30 and 45 minutes	1,937
Between 45 and 60 minutes	605
Greater than 60 minutes	615
Total	9,987

Source: Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS)

Hospital Waiting Times

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to ensure that elderly people are not left on trolleys in hospitals for excessive periods of time.

(AQW 11694/11-15)

Mr Poots: I have set targets for the treatment of patients attending an emergency department. These targets apply to all patients regardless of their age.

I am aware of the poor performance at some emergency departments in recent months. That is why I announced the establishment of an Emergency Department Improvement Action Group to improve patient outcomes and the patient experience in emergency departments. This Group is tasked with driving down waiting times. The aim is to see an improvement in the 4 hour

discharge target from emergency departments and breaches in the 12 hour waiting time target to be rare occurrences. The HSC Board and Public Health Agency are leading the Group, working in collaboration with HSC Trusts.

Primary Schools: South Belfast

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on what date the offer to provide a new site for the consolidated Inner-South Belfast primary schools, at the City Hospital site, was withdrawn.

(AQW 11700/11-15)

Mr Poots: The potential use of part of the BCH site for the proposed new primary school remains subject to the Trust's future requirements on the site and the normal public sector processes for the disposal of land. The Belfast HSC Trust is not yet in a position to declare the site surplus and neither the Trust nor the DHSSPS have ruled out the potential to use the site for a school.

Social Work: Out-of-hours Service

Mr Brady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the rationale for the proposed changes to the out-of-hours social work service.

(AQW 11712/11-15)

Mr Poots: The HSCB and five HSC Trusts established a Project Team to develop proposals for the introduction of a regional Out-of-Hours Social Work Service. This initiative follows the recommendations contained within the Social Services Inspectorate Child Protection Inspection Report in 2006 and the Independent Review in 2008 by

Mr Henry Toner into the death of Mr McElhill and his family. In addition, the Agenda for Change: HSC On-Call Circular (HSC (JMF) (8) 2011) was introduced on 1 October 2011. This Circular had implications in relation to on-call payments, particularly for social workers, making the current out-of-hours arrangements untenable into the future. More recently, Out-of Hours Social Services was identified as a priority in the DHSSPS Social Work Strategy (2012) which recognises the need to design a model and produce regional standards for a dedicated out-of-hours service.

Capital and Revenue Savings

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the capital and revenue savings his Department has made in each of the last three years.

(AQW 11715/11-15)

Mr Poots: Over the CSR2007 period, my Department achieved cumulative revenue efficiencies of £118m/£223m/£343m in 2008/09, 2009/10 and 2010/11 respectively. In 2011/12, further revenue efficiencies of £168m were achieved.

Although capital savings were not required to be made in each of the last three years, capital funding has been used in 2010/11 and 2011/12 for projects which will deliver either revenue savings or an income stream.

Nurses

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many nurses were employed by the Health Service on (i) 1 April 2011; and (ii) 1 April 2012.

(AQW 11733/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information requested is published (as at 31st March) within the Key Facts Workforce Bulletin on the DHSSPS website and can be found at:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/key_facts_bulletin_march_2012.pdf

Nurses: Vacancies

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many nursing vacancies existed within the Health Service (i) 1 April 2011; and (ii) 1 April 2012.

(AQW 11734/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information on the number of workforce vacancies within Northern Ireland Health and Social Care is collected by means of a survey (bi-annually as at 31st March and 30th September) and is published within the NI HSC Vacancy Survey Report on the DHSSPS website. The report can be found at:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/workforce-statistics/stats-hsc.htm

The latest published information available is as at 30th September 2011. The vacancy survey is a large-scale exercise for NI HSC Trusts and Organisations to complete. The March 2012 survey has been issued to all NI HSC Trusts and Organisations and is due to be published by August 2012.

Belfast City Hospital: Accident and Emergency Department

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when the temporary closure of the Accident and Emergency Department at the Belfast City Hospital will be reversed.

(AQW 11736/11-15)

Mr Poots: As I said in the Assembly on 13 September last year, there will be a full and open process of consultation and engagement on the long term configuration of A&E services in the Belfast Trust area including with the public, their elected representatives and trade unions.

The Health and Social Care Board, in collaboration with the Belfast Trust, has been asked to develop consultation options for the permanent provision of A&E services across the greater Belfast Area.

I expect to make a final decision on the reconfiguration of A&E services by the end of the year.

Nurses: Vacancies

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many nursing vacancies in the Health Service were reduced without being filled between 1 April 2011 and 31 March 2012.

(AQW 11737/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information requested is not collated centrally and could only be obtained at a disproportionate cost. The whole time equivalent (WTE) qualified nursing workforce increased by 1.3% in the period 1 April 11 to 31 March 12.

Nurses: Vacancies

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether any nursing vacancies were suppressed between 1 April 2011 and 31 March 2012.

(AQW 11738/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information requested is not collated centrally and could only be obtained at a disproportionate cost. The whole time equivalent (WTE) qualified nursing workforce increased by 1.3% in the period 1 April 11 to 31 March 12.

Thalidomide: Funding for Sufferers of

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when a decision on long-term funding for the remaining thalidomide sufferers in Northern Ireland will be announced.

(AQW 11739/11-15)

Mr Poots: Officials from each of the UK Administrations are engaged in discussions about the future funding for thalidomide survivors across the UK. I will announce my decision on the future funding for thalidomide sufferers in Northern Ireland following the outcome of these discussions.

Waiting List: Inpatient Treatment

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, for each of the last three years, to detail how many people, on a Health Service waiting list for in-patient treatment, have been offered treatment at a private clinic in order to meet waiting time targets, broken down by type of treatment.

(AQW 11740/11-15)

Mr Poots: The number of Health and Social Care patients transferred to an Independent Sector provider for inpatient treatment, by speciality of treatment, in each of the last three years, is outlined in the table below.

Specialty	Financial Year		
	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
General Surgery	2,996	415	2,937
Urology	2,059	318	97
Trauma & Orthopaedic Surgery	3,953	3,126	6,062
ENT	633	15	99
Ophthalmology	2,861	355	1,567
Oral Surgery	975	174	159
Restorative Dentistry	0	0	24
Paediatric Dentistry	29	0	1

Specialty	Financial Year		
	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Neurosurgery	10	0	0
Plastic Surgery	1,524	350	223
Cardiac Surgery	295	203	199
Paediatric Surgery	73	0	17
Thoracic Surgery	14	1	0
Pain Management	766	151	343
General Medicine	1,608	384	1,359
Gastroenterology	1,569	216	2,497
Dental Medicine Specialties	0	0	12
Cardiology	5	1	0
Obstetrics	0	0	96
Dermatology	553	1,125	0
Neurology	58	1	0
Rheumatology	11	51	0
Gynaecology	1,412	297	213
Total	21,404	7,183	15,905

Source: Health and Social Care Board

Private Clinic: Inpatient Treatment

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why a patient who was offered in-patient treatment at a private clinic in order to reduce waiting times and who, after an initial visit, did not have confidence in the treatment offered, was then informed that their Health Service date for treatment would be reset or that they would be moved to the bottom of the waiting list.

(AQW 11741/11-15)

Mr Poots: Where a patient has agreed to have their treatment provided by the independent sector and subsequently declines further treatment after an initial assessment, the current policy is that the waiting time is re-set. Policies on reasonable offers have been put in place to ensure that those patients, who have opted to wait for assessment and treatment by an NHS provider, are not unfairly delayed by those who refuse reasonable offers of assessment/treatment.

Information on the reasons why patients have declined treatment is not collected to the level of detail requested.

Patients must be given a minimum of three weeks' notice of the date of their assessment and/or treatment; and at least one offer must be within Northern Ireland, except for a small number of regional specialties where there are no alternative providers in Northern Ireland. If a reasonable offer for treatment is made to a patient, which is then refused, the waiting time will be recalculated from the date of the refused admission.

Private Clinic: Inpatient Treatment

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people, who have been offered in-patient treatment at a private clinic in order to meet waiting times, and who have declined the treatment due to a preference for Health Service treatment or a lack of confidence in the private alternative, have consequently had their date for Health Service treatment reset or have been moved to the bottom of the waiting list in each of the last 12 months.

(AQW 11742/11-15)

Mr Poots: Where a patient has agreed to have their treatment provided by the independent sector and subsequently declines further treatment after an initial assessment, the current policy is that the waiting time is re-set. Policies on reasonable offers have been put in place to ensure that those patients, who have opted to wait for assessment and treatment by an NHS provider, are not unfairly delayed by those who refuse reasonable offers of assessment/treatment.

Information on the reasons why patients have declined treatment is not collected to the level of detail requested.

Patients must be given a minimum of three weeks' notice of the date of their assessment and/or treatment; and at least one offer must be within Northern Ireland, except for a small number of regional specialties where there are no alternative providers in Northern Ireland. If a reasonable offer for treatment is made to a patient, which is then refused, the waiting time will be recalculated from the date of the refused admission.

Private Clinic: Inpatient Treatment

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether a patient on a Health Service waiting list for in-patient treatment who declined treatment offered at a private clinic due to a preference for Health Service treatment or lack of confidence in the private care offered, and consequently had their date for treatment reset, will have their date reset again if they decline treatment at a private clinic on a further occasion,

(AQW 11743/11-15)

Mr Poots: Where a patient has agreed to have their treatment provided by the independent sector and subsequently declines further treatment after an initial assessment, the current policy is that the waiting time is re-set. Policies on reasonable offers have been put in place to ensure that those patients, who have opted to wait for assessment and treatment by an NHS provider, are not unfairly delayed by those who refuse reasonable offers of assessment/treatment.

Information on the reasons why patients have declined treatment is not collected to the level of detail requested.

Patients must be given a minimum of three weeks' notice of the date of their assessment and/or treatment; and at least one offer must be within Northern Ireland, except for a small number of regional specialties where there are no alternative providers in Northern Ireland. If a reasonable offer for treatment is made to a patient, which is then refused, the waiting time will be recalculated from the date of the refused admission.

Waiting List: Inpatient Treatment

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of a situation whereby a patient who is on a waiting list for Health Service in-patient treatment for over a year, and who declines treatment at a private clinic due to lack of confidence in the private care offered, will not receive Health Service treatment until after other patients, who joined the waiting list at a later date, receive their treatment.

(AQW 11744/11-15)

Mr Poots: Where a patient has agreed to have their treatment provided by the independent sector and subsequently declines further treatment after an initial assessment, the current policy is that the waiting time is re-set. Policies on reasonable offers have been put in place to ensure that those patients, who have opted to wait for assessment and treatment by an NHS provider, are not unfairly delayed by those who refuse reasonable offers of assessment/treatment.

Information on the reasons why patients have declined treatment is not collected to the level of detail requested.

Patients must be given a minimum of three weeks' notice of the date of their assessment and/or treatment; and at least one offer must be within Northern Ireland, except for a small number of regional specialties where there are no alternative providers in Northern Ireland. If a reasonable offer for treatment is made to a patient, which is then refused, the waiting time will be recalculated from the date of the refused admission.

Health Service: Chief Executive Officer

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety who is the Chief Executive Officer of the Health Service; and which office is ultimately responsible for all Health Service staff.

(AQW 11746/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Permanent Secretary of my Department is the Chief Executive of Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland. My Department has overall responsibility for terms and conditions of employment for HSC staff but individual employees are the responsibility of their HSC employer.

Health Service: Accountability

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an organisational chart showing lines of accountability between the Department and the Health Service, including the Health and Social Care Board, the Health and Social Care Trusts and the Health Service.

(AQW 11749/11-15)

Mr Poots: The assurance and accountability arrangements between the Department and the Health and Social Care Bodies are set out in the HSC Framework Document. This includes a diagram, shown at section 2.1 of the framework, depicting the relationship between the Department and the various HSC bodies.

The Framework Document is published on the Department of Health and Social Services and Public Safety's website and can be accessed by using the following link:

www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/framework_document_september_2011.pdf.

Health Partnerships

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of Health Partnerships; (ii) when they were established; (iii) the purpose of the Partnerships; and (iv) the agendas and resulting forward work programmes of each meeting which took place in the last 12 months.

(AQW 11752/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) My Department has three main Health Partnerships that meet on a quarterly basis.
- (ii) The Regional Partnership Forum was established in 2005; the Joint Negotiating Forum was established in 2006, and the British Medical Association Joint Forum was established in July 2009.
- (iii) The aim of the Partnership Forum is to provide the opportunity for me and my Department's officials to engage with Trade Unions and HSC Employers on strategic discussion about the delivery of health and social care; e.g. health inequalities remain a central focus. The aim of the Joint Negotiating Forum is to oversee the local application of the national pay and conditions of employment for non medical staff. Members negotiate on matters arising from reorganisation of services and their possible impact on terms and conditions of employment. The British Medical Association Joint Forum enables regional negotiation and consultation on local policies relating to terms and conditions of service of doctors employed in the HSC; including salaried GPs working in HSC organisations.
- (iv) The request for the agendas and work programmes of each meeting in the last 12 months amounts to a considerable volume of information. I have therefore placed the material in the Assembly library.

Firefighters Taking Part in the Whole-time Recruitment Exercise

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given recent events such as the irregular overtime and expenses claims submitted by firefighters taking part in the whole-time recruitment exercise, whether he will carry out an immediate investigation into the present management of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service,

(AQW 11772/11-15)

Mr Poots: I do not consider that such an investigation would be helpful. There have been two reviews in recent years, conducted by Delivery and Innovation Division of the Department of Finance and Personnel and by the Audit Commission, on behalf of the Northern Ireland Audit Office. The recommendations from these reports are currently being implemented. In addition, as a result of issues relating to overtime and expenses claims submitted by fire-fighters, an independent review of the whole-time recruitment exercise has been commissioned

Craigavon Area Hospital: Memory Clinic

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the Memory Clinic at Craigavon Area Hospital only takes referrals for patients aged over 65 and why this is the case.

(AQW 11777/11-15)

Mr Poots: Southern HSC Trust has advised that there are three Memory Clinics currently operating in the Southern Trust within the community; however, there is none in Craigavon Area Hospital.

The criteria for referral to these memory services are:

- Must reside within the Southern Trust area;
- Presenting with memory difficulties; and
- Age – 65+ years.

As the service is resourced within the Older People Directorate, the baseline remit is for those aged over 65 years. Users receive the service of the Consultant Psychiatrist for Old Age; Social Work; Mental Health Nurses; AHP and domiciliary provision.

Those under 65 years are currently managed through general psychiatry, and thereby access the same range of services as those managed through the Memory Service for those over 65 years.

Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people aged under 65 are currently diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease or dementia.

(AQW 11778/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information is not available. Although a dementia disease register (which will include recording of Alzheimer's disease) is maintained under the Quality and Outcomes Framework of the GMS Contract; this does not contain patient-specific information and therefore an age breakdown is not available.

Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what strategy is in place for referring people aged under 65 for treatment for Alzheimer's disease or dementia.

(AQW 11779/11-15)

Mr Poots: Dementia is a particularly difficult diagnosis for younger people to accept, as they will often be in employment, have a family to support and have financial commitments. Moreover, many of the services available for older people with dementia are inappropriate to people with early onset dementia.

You will recall that I launched the document entitled Improving Dementia Services in Northern Ireland – A Regional Strategy, on 8 November 2011. The strategy states that a specific care pathway for younger people with dementia should be developed on a regional basis, in view of their particular needs. Where appropriate to do so, this should link in to a regional tertiary service, where referral for assessment of more complex conditions and second opinion can be obtained.

Work is ongoing to develop the regional care pathway for younger people with dementia and the tertiary service for diagnosis of more complex cases.

Craigavon Area Hospital: Consultant Psychiatrists

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of consultant psychiatrists currently working at Craigavon Area Hospital, and how this compares with other hospitals.

(AQW 11780/11-15)

Mr Poots: There are 5 (5.00 WTE) Consultant Psychiatrists employed at Craigavon Area Hospital.

Information on the number of Consultant Psychiatrists employed at hospitals within Northern Ireland Health and Social Care is given in the table below. These figures have been supplied by the Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Trusts and have not been validated by the Department.

Consultant Psychiatrists employed within Northern Ireland Health and Social Care by Hospital as at May 2012

Trust	Hospital	Headcount	WTE
Belfast	Belfast City Hospital (Windsor House)	25	22.90
	Knockbracken Healthcare Park	10	8.03
	Muckamore Abbey Hospital	7	6.20
	Mater Hospital	3	3.00
Belfast	Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children	5	3.02
	Forster Green Hospital	1	1.00
	College Gardens	1	1.00
Northern	Causeway Hospital	2	1.80
	Holywell Hospital	17	15.40
South Eastern	Ards Hospital	10	9.90
	Downshire Hospital	6	5.70
	Lagan Valley Hospital	4	3.20
	Maghaberry Prison	2	2.00
Southern	Craigavon Area Hospital	5	5.00
	Daisy Hill Hospital	4	4.00
	South Tyrone Hospital	2	1.40
	St. Luke's Hospital	9	8.00
	Trustwide / Area Service	2	2.00
Western	Lakeview Hospital	2	2.00
	Gransha Hospital	2	2.00
	Tyrone & Fermanagh	2	2.00

Source: Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Trusts

Notes:

- 1 WTE = Whole-time equivalent.
- 2 A further 11 (9.45 WTE) consultants within the Northern Trust are community-based.
- 3 Western Trust also employ a number of consultants who are dedicated to community and specialist services and are not based in a hospital setting, e.g. Primary Care Liaison, Forensics and Addiction Services.
- 4 A number of the staff listed above also provide community-based services.

Social Work: Out-of-hours Service

Mr Brady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the Health and Social Care Trusts and other bodies, including the PSNI, out-of-hours GPs, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and councils have been consulted on the proposed changes to the out-of-hours social work service

(AQW 11787/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Health and Social Care Board issued a commissioning specification on Proposed New Arrangements to Support Regional Emergency Social Work Services on 15 May 2012 for consultation. My Department has been assured that all of the relevant internal and external stakeholders will be invited to comment on the proposals during the consultation period, which closes on 12 June 2012.

Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast: Cardiology Department Vacancies

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of vacancies in the Cardiology Department at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast, broken down by post.

(AQW 11798/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information on the number of staff vacancies within the Cardiology Department at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast is given in the table below. These figures have been supplied by the Belfast Trust and have not been validated by the Department.

Staff Vacancies in the Cardiology Department at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast as at May 2012

Grade	WTE
Admin & Clerical	3.80
Qualified Nursing Staff	2.80
Nurse Support Staff	0.75

Source: Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

Notes:

- 5 WTE = Whole-time equivalent.
- 6 The cardiology department of the Royal Victoria Hospital comprises an Outpatients department, diagnostic, interventional, day procedure, Inpatients, Coronary Care Unit, technical, research, data management and administrative facilities.

Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast: Cardiology Department

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are employed in the Cardiology Department at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast, broken down by post.

(AQW 11799/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information on the number of staff employed within the Cardiology Department at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast is given in the table below. These figures have been supplied by the Belfast Trust and have not been validated by the Department.

Staff employed in the Cardiology Department at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast as at May 2012

Grade	Headcount	WTE
Admin & Clerical	35	29.37
Qualified Nursing Staff	111	101.87
Nurse Support Staff	16	15.43
Radiographer	8	7.60

Grade	Headcount	WTE
Medical Technical Officer / Assistant Technical Officer	39	37.25
Consultant	14	14.00
Staff Grade / Associate Specialist	4	3.60
Specialty Registrar	15	15.00
Foundation House Officer	11	10.50
Total	253	234.62

Source: Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

Notes:

- 7 Figures exclude staff with a whole-time equivalent of 0.03 or less.
- 8 The cardiology department of the Royal Victoria Hospital comprises an Outpatients department, diagnostic, interventional, day procedure, Inpatients, Coronary Care Unit, technical, research, data management and administrative facilities.
- 9 A number of the staff included in the above table are based in the Royal Victoria Hospital but also provide support across Cardiology within the Belfast Trust.

Patient Client Council

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given that the Patient Client Council has estimated that 56 percent of young people get their information on health and social care from the internet, (i) for his assessment of whether enough information is provided by his Department on the internet; (ii) what action his Department is taking to ensure that young people do not receive harmful health advice from the internet; and (iii) what engagement has his Department had with schools and young people's groups on this issue.

(AQW 11821/11-15)

Mr Poots: In line with Executive policy all citizen-facing information relating to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) is published on the www.nidirect.gov.uk website.

DHSSPS manage the 'Health and well being' and 'Caring for someone' themes.

The nidirect website also has a dedicated Young People section which covers a range of issues, including health, and has recorded 51,291 page views and 30,790 visits between 1 May 2011 and 30th April 2012.

The nidirect website also provides valuable information about the dangers of buying medicines over the internet. It also advises on how best to use health and social care services in Northern Ireland.

The Public Health Agency has a number of health topic websites with information specifically for children and young people. These are www.enjoyhealthyeating.info (nutrition), www.mindingyourhead.info (mental health), www.helpprotectyourself.info (HPV vaccine information) and www.getalifegetactive.com (physical activity).

PHA topics with publications aimed at children and young people include physical activity, nutrition, mental health, childhood immunisations, substance misuse and sexual health.

The Department has been involved in promoting the Click Clever, Click Safe, a UK-wide campaign which provides useful information and advice for young people and parents about the safe use of the internet: www.nidirect.gov.uk/click-clever-click-safe

Listed Properties

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the listed properties that are owned by his Department.

(AQW 11822/11-15)

Mr Poots: The following listed buildings are owned by the Department:

	Facility Name
1	The Clarendon Committee, 63 Clarendon Street, Londonderry, BT48 7ER
2	Fort James, Ardmore Road, Londonderry, BT47 8QP
3	Pathways, 24 Pump street, Londonderry, BT48 6JG
4	The Beeches, 23 Hampton Park, Belfast BT7 3EN

Belfast Mental Health Rights Group Report

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the Belfast Mental Health Rights Group report on the treatment, support and follow-up given to people presenting with self-harm and suicidal thoughts at Accident and Emergency departments.

(AQW 11825/11-15)

Mr Poots: 'The report 'Services at Breaking Point: Fighting to Have Our Voices Heard' was recently submitted to my Department by the Belfast Mental Health Rights Group. The report contains the findings of the experiences of 58 people who attended Accident and Emergency Departments in Belfast in the past year due to mental health problems.

I welcome the views of people who use our health services. Their views help service commissioners and service providers to make those services more responsive to the needs of patients and their carers.

Civil Servants

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many civil servants currently employed in his Department have been re-employed after receiving a redundancy package from the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

(AQW 11848/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department is not aware of any staff currently employed who have been re-employed after receiving a redundancy package from the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Social Work: Out-of-hours Service

Mr Brady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the proposed changes to the out-of-hours social work service will create a new service model or will it be an extension of the current Belfast scheme which is primarily urban.

(AQW 11852/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Health and Social Care Board issued a commissioning specification on Proposed New Arrangements to Support Regional Emergency Social Work Services on 15 May 2012 for consultation. The proposed changes to Emergency Social Work Services build upon much of the work already undertaken within all of the Trusts to enhance the delivery of high quality Out-of-Hours Social Work Services to the public. The model proposes a regional service, in line with the strategic direction set out in the Social work Strategy for NI, published by my Department in April 2012.

Any decisions regarding the configuration of a regional Out-of-Hours Social Work Service will be taken after consultation has period has ended on 12 June 2012.

Prisoners: Medication

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 11606/11-15, to detail what procedures have been put in place as a result of the incident when a patient did not receive their medication; and (ii) who is in charge of implementing the new procedures.

(AQW 11870/11-15)

Mr Poots: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust is responsible for the delivery of prison healthcare services. The Trust has advised that following the incident in April when a patient did not receive their medication, it has put in place arrangements to ensure that at the end of each shift, nursing staff check and record that this patient has received his "supervised" medication. In addition, it has been explained to the patient that, if for some exceptional reason, a nurse does not ask him to attend the Treatment Room at the scheduled time for his "supervised" medication, he should inform landing staff who will contact healthcare immediately. The Trust has also confirmed that additional stocks of his regular medications would be kept in the prison pharmacy so that they could be dispensed promptly when needed.

The Trust has advised that the patient in question is familiar with, and understands the medicines management regime in relation to his conditions. The Trust has stressed with the patient the importance of working with healthcare staff in order to effectively manage his conditions.

The Trust is continuously reviewing its policies, procedures and guidelines in order to reflect patient need and to promote the delivery of evidence based care. In addition, individual patient assessments may well result in unique care plans being compiled and implemented. These care plans are monitored and evaluated on a regular basis to assess efficacy.

Stereotactic Body Radiotherapy Treatment Equipment

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he has any plans to purchase Stereotactic Body Radiotherapy Treatment equipment to treat suitable cancers.

(AQW 11876/11-15)

Mr Poots: New equipment planned as part of the expansion of radiotherapy capacity at the Cancer Centre NI Cancer Centre (Belfast) will have the technical capabilities to deliver this treatment.

A business case is being prepared to allow for the recruitment of additional staff and the purchase of new software required for stereotactic radiotherapy. It is hoped that the new equipment will be in place by 2014.

Health Visitors

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the recommended contact a health visitor should have with a baby from birth to school age; and (ii) the percentage of cases, in each of the last three years, where this contact fell below the recommended levels.

(AQW 11887/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (1) An updated Child Health Programme has been on offer to all families with new babies since 1st October 2010. Recommended contacts are:
 - New birth review visit (10 – 14 days)
 - 6 – 8 weeks Health Review
 - 14 – 16 weeks Health Review
 - 7 – 9 month contact by the Visiting Team Member
 - 12 months Health Review
 - 24 months Health Review
- (2) It is not possible to provide this specific data at the present time. Whilst IT software is already in place to record aspects of the child health promotion programme, new software is currently being developed and introduced which will provide data regarding contact details in the future.

Health and Social Care Trusts: Ratio of Staff

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the ratio of administrative staff to front-line medical staff in each Health and Social Care Trust area.

(AQW 11894/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is not appropriate to compare the ratio of administrative staff to front-line medical staff (i.e. doctors). The proportion of staff employed for administrative roles against total staff is similar across all Trusts, however, Belfast Trust provide many regional medical services and hence have the highest percentage of medical staff against total staff. Not all Trusts are hospital oriented, and those Trusts with a higher emphasis on community services tend to have a lower percentage of medical staff against total staff. Those Trusts will therefore have a higher ratio of administrative staff to medical staff, and Trusts with a greater emphasis on hospital services will have a lower ratio of administrative staff to medical staff.

To show this the ratios of administrative staff to medical staff, alongside the proportions of total staff who are employed as administrative and medical staff, are provided in the table below.

HSC Trust	Ratio of Administrative staff to Medical staff	Proportion of Total Staff employed as Administrative staff	Proportion of Total Staff employed as Medical staff
Belfast	2.0	18.0%	8.9%
Northern	3.3	17.3%	5.3%
South Eastern	2.8	17.7%	6.3%
Southern	2.6	17.6%	6.7%
Western	3.1	17.8%	5.7%

Source: Human Resource Management System as at 31st March 2012

- 1 Figures exclude bank staff, staff with a whole-time equivalent less than or equal to 0.03 and staff on career breaks.
- 2 These figures will include individuals who are not employees of the Trust but who are on the system for payment purposes only.

Social Work: Out-of-hours Service

Mr Brady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the proposed changes to the out-of-hours social work service, whether there will be any job losses as a result.

(AQW 11902/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department has received an assurance from the HSCB which is responsible for the review of Out-of-Hours Social Work Services that there will be no compulsory redundancies as a result of any new staffing arrangements pursuant to the review and the introduction of a regional out-of-hours service.

Public Bodies: Board Members

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) how many former civil and public servants are employed as (a) paid; and (b) unpaid board members of public bodies sponsored by his Department; and (ii) what is this figure as a proportion of the total number of board members.

(AQW 11912/11-15)

Mr Poots: My department does not hold the requested information as the Code of Practice issued by the Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland (paragraph 3.21) requires departments to 'ask only what is truly required', therefore, my department does not ask applicants for their full employment history as this plays no part in the selection process. The full list of appointees by my department and remuneration received can be found in the OFMDFM Annual Report <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/index/making-government-work/public-appointments.htm> (pages 168 - 193 refer to my department).

In my capacity as Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety I have responsibility for making 159 appointments to HSC agencies, trusts and boards with 17 Chairs and 138 Members appointable. In addition, a Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland is to be established in 2012 and a Chair 'Designate' and three Lay Members have been appointed.

Prisoners: Medication

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) why some prisoners in Maghaberry Prison are having to wait a number of days for important medication; (ii) why stocks are continually running out; and (iii) what mechanisms he intends to put in place to ensure that prisoners receive their medication at the time required.

(AQW 11925/11-15)

Mr Poots: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust provides healthcare services at HMP Maghaberry. Since assuming responsibility for this service, the Trust has improved the services delivered in all prison establishments. It has audited its current service provision against national standards for the delivery of prison healthcare, and benchmarked the results against similar prison establishments in GB.

During the month of April, there was one reported incident where the prisoner did not receive his prescribed medication. The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has advised that this was managed appropriately as per SE Trust Policies and procedures and the patient came to no harm. Additional checking procedures have been implemented as a result of this incident.

Occupational Therapists

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of occupational therapists, per head of population, in the Fermanagh area; and how this figure compares with other areas.

(AQW 11962/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information on the number of Occupational Therapists employed per head of population within Northern Ireland Health and Social Care is not available at County level. However, information on the number of Occupational Therapists per head of population is provided at Trust level in the table below.

Occupational Therapists employed within Northern Ireland Health and Social Care per 100,000 population by Trust as at March 2012

Trust Area	Staff in post WTE	WTE Per 100,000 Population
Belfast	210.97	62.8
Northern	186.99	40.8
South Eastern	115.78	33.4
Southern	152.78	42.6
Western	107.82	36.0
Overall	774.34	43.0

Source: Occupational Therapists – Human Resource Management System

Population – Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

Notes:

- 1 WTE = Whole-time equivalent
- 2 Figures exclude bank staff, staff on career break and staff with a whole-time equivalent of 0.03 or less.
- 3 The latest population figures relate to the mid-year population estimate for 2010.

Protect Life Strategy: Publication

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the publication of the Protect Life Strategy. (AQW 11973/11-15)

Mr Poots: Executive approval has been sought for publication of the refreshed Protect Life Strategy. Subject to that approval, it is intended to publish the refreshed strategy at the start of June.

Foster Carers

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 11073/11-15, for his assessment of (i) the average waiting time for prospective foster carers to be assessed; and (ii) how waiting times sit with the current Health and Social Care Board advertising campaign, which highlights that foster carers are required urgently. (AQW 11985/11-15)

Mr Poots: As indicated in response to AQW 11073/11-15 waiting times for the assessment of prospective foster carers varies across Health and Social Care Trusts and are directly linked to the placement needs of each Trust. If the need is for placements for older children/teenagers, siblings groups or children with complex needs then potential carers will be assessed ahead of those who may be available for other types of care. As a consequence, assessment priorities routinely change in line with identified placement requirements.

The advertising campaign is being taken forward by the Regional Fostering and Adoption Service (RAFS) which works across all HSC Trusts. This is a more generalised recruitment campaign based on regional need and is intended to identify potential foster carers, who will be initially screened to determine which category of foster placement they might be suited to and whether they can or are willing to meet urgent need.

Health Service: Dentists

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the (i) number of Health Service dentists; and (ii) how the changes to funding introduced in April 2012 will impact on the number of Health Service dentists. (AQW 11995/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Health and Social Care Board have confirmed that there are currently 1049 dentists on the dental list available to provide health service dentistry in Northern Ireland.

The General Dental Services budget is expected to be under significant pressure 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. A consultation process will commence shortly and any changes made will be subject to the outcome of this consultation.

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.

Therefore, I do not anticipate any significant impact on the number of health service dentists as a result of the proposed changes to the general dental services.

Review of Public Administration

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what powers or functions he plans to devolve to local councils under the Review of Public Administration; and whether this represents a change to his previous commitments. (AQW 12064/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety does not have any plans to devolve powers or functions to local councils and this does not represent a change to previous commitments.

The collaborative working arrangements that are already in place between the Public Health Agency and local councils should support the proposed community planning and well-being role envisaged for local government.

Department of Justice

Badger Baiting

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Justice how many people were (i) charged; and (ii) convicted for badger baiting in each of the last three years. (AQW 11274/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): The Police Service for Northern Ireland has recorded no specific charges for badger baiting in each of the last three years (2008-2011). Four people have however been charged with interfering with a badger sett arising out of incidents in 2012.

Court conviction information in respect of animal protection and cruelty does not routinely record the animal involved. Badger baiting – for example - may be prosecuted under a number of offences under Article 10 of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 or under section 4 of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

In terms of more general convictions for animal protection and cruelty there have been 79 convictions in total between 2004 and 2008 (the latest year for which conviction statistics are available): three for damaging or destroying the shelter of a wild animal and 76 for a range of more general animal cruelty offences.

Prisons: Alternatives to Full-body Searches

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) what is the estimated total cost for the implementation of the alternatives to full body searches in HM prisons, including staff training, equipment and licensing; and (ii) to provide a breakdown of the equipment that has already been purchased.

(AQW 11294/11-15)

Mr Ford:

- (i) Discussions are ongoing with the suppliers of Millimetre Wave Body Scanners. As such it is not possible at this stage to provide information on the likely costs for this pilot.
- Estimated costs have been provided to the Northern Ireland Prison Service by one of the suppliers of X-ray Transmission equipment, but the provision of this information may provide a competitive advantage to another supplier which has yet to provide an estimate of costs. For this reason it is not possible to provide the information requested or to provide an accurate assessment of the associated costs of training or licensing.
- (ii) No full body imaging scanners have been purchased for use in the prisons in Northern Ireland. However, my previous answer on this subject in relation to AQW 4437 confirmed that six items of specialist detection equipment were purchased at a cost of £54,593.

Prisoner Assessment Unit: Closure

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) whether he has received the report into the closure of the Prisoner Assessment Unit; (ii) on what date it will be published; and (iii) why there has been a delay in the publication of the report.

(AQW 11378/11-15)

Mr Ford:

- (i) The investigation into the Prisoner Assessment Unit (PAU) was completed on 15 July 2011 and the report submitted to the Deputy Governor of Maghaberry Prison.
- (ii) As stated in my answers to AQW/6107/11-15 and AQW/7062/11-15, no date has yet been fixed for the publication of the report.
- (iii) NIPS officials are currently working through a number of final issues regarding disclosure of some sensitive personal information, but I can confirm that I have now instructed NIPS to place a redacted version of the report on the NIPS website no later than the end of June.

Colin Bell and John Deery: Investigation into Death of

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many (i) senior staff, including Headquarter staff; and (ii) basic grade officers, broken down by grade, who were involved in the investigation or the disciplining of staff following the death of Colin Bell, were involved in a similar capacity following the death in custody of John Deery.

(AQW 11411/11-15)

Mr Ford: A Prison Governor and a Grade 7 Civil Servant, who were involved in the investigation and/or disciplining of staff following the death in custody of Colin Bell, were also involved in a similar capacity following the death of John Deery.

Prisoner Drug Debts

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice if he will order an investigation into the alleged payment of prisoner drug debts by Prison Service staff, to determine whether the allegations were accurate; and if so, (i) how much was paid to alleviate the prisoners' debts; (ii) for how many prisoners was this practice approved; (iii) why this practice was approved; and (iv) for how long has it been permitted.

(AQW 11412/11-15)

Mr Ford: A full investigation into the operation of the Prisoner Assessment Unit has been satisfactorily completed by the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS). During this investigation the issue of a single prisoner with a £300 drugs debt emerged and has been addressed. NIPS does not consider it necessary to carry out any further investigation into this issue.

The practice of prisoners using their prisoner earnings to pay off drug debts is not and has never been an approved NIPS practice.

Prison Governors: Suspension of

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice in relation to the suspension of two prison governors over the payment of prisoners' drug debts, what disciplinary measures were recommended and subsequently (i) rejected; and (ii) implemented.

(AQW 11414/11-15)

Mr Ford: Following the disciplinary hearing the adjudicating Governor considered the full range of disciplinary measures available under the Code of Conduct and Discipline before awarding both governors a written warning.

Prison Service Staff

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice how many Prison Service staff, broken down by grade, have had security improvements made to their properties in each of the last three years because of terrorist threats.

(AQW 11442/11-15)

Mr Ford: In 2010, 53 prison staff had improvements fitted to their properties under the Prison Service Protection Scheme (PSPS) and a further 11 staff had existing measures reviewed. In 2011 43 staff had measures fitted and 12 had measures reviewed. So far in 2012, nine staff have had measures fitted and one has had measures reviewed. It is not possible to break down the figures by grade.

The separate 'Limited Home Protection Scheme' (LHPS), formerly known as the 'Key Persons Protection Scheme' (KPPS), is administered by the Northern Ireland Office. My Department does not have access to figures in relation to this scheme.

Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings Scheme

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice how many Prison Service staff, broken down by grade, have moved house under the Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings Scheme in each of the last three years due to terrorist threats.

(AQW 11443/11-15)

Mr Ford: In 2010 one member of the Prison Service moved house under the Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings (SPED) scheme. In 2011 the total was two members of staff and the figure for 2012 is one.

Prisoner Drug Debt

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether the two Prison Service staff members, who were disciplined for paying a prisoner's drug debt, have been involved in disciplinary investigations or actions against any other member of the Prison Service staff prior to, or since, they were disciplined.

(AQW 11464/11-15)

Mr Ford: The two prison staff referred to have both been employees of the Northern Ireland Prison Service for a significant number of years. Whilst records of such matters are not retained covering the entire period it is likely that both may have been involved with carrying out disciplinary procedures in the past.

I can confirm that neither have since been involved in any way with the NIPS disciplinary process.

Colin Bell and John Deery: Investigation into Death of

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in light of the Ackah and Deane report which highlighted concerns over the actions of Prison Service senior staff in the investigation of the death of Colin Bell, what changes were made during the investigation and disciplinary process in the case of the death of John Deery in custody.

(AQW 11467/11-15)

Mr Ford: The investigation and disciplinary process into the death in custody of John Deery had commenced prior to the completion of the Ackah and Deane report. The investigation and disciplinary processes were carried out under the provisions of the current Code of Conduct and Discipline (COCD).

The Prison Service is currently developing a new Professional Code of Conduct for operational staff.

Prisoners: Annual Cost

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Justice what was the average annual cost per prisoner being held in 2011 in (i) Maghaberry; (ii) Magilligan; and (iii) Hydebank.

(AQW 11469/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) does not hold the average cost per prisoner by Establishment. However each year NIPS sets out the overall average Cost Per Prisoner Place in its Annual Report and Accounts. The amount for the most recently audited financial year (2010/11) was £73,762.

The Annual Report and Accounts for 2011/12 is currently being audited by the Northern Ireland Audit Office. Once this process has been completed the latest Cost Per Prisoner Place will be available.

Personal Injury Claims: Referral Fees

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Justice what action he will take on the regulation of referral fees in personal injury claims. (AQW 11491/11-15)

Mr Ford: At present, solicitors in Northern Ireland are prohibited from paying or receiving referral fees.

It is a matter for the Department of Finance and Personnel whether any further regulation of the solicitors' profession is appropriate.

County Court Jurisdiction

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the proposals to increase the jurisdiction of the County Court from £15,000 to £30,000. (AQW 11493/11-15)

Mr Ford: The increase in the jurisdiction of the County Court is dependent on amendments being made to the County Court (Northern Ireland) Rules. The necessary amendments are a matter for the County Court Rules Committee. The Committee consulted on the required rule changes in March and July 2011 and have now submitted their proposals to me for my approval. Before giving my approval for the proposed changes I will wish to consult the Lord Chief Justice. I would hope that the agreed changes to the Rules can be made to come into force later this year.

Simpson: High Court Decision

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Justice what steps his Department is taking, following the High Court decision in Simpson (21/2/2012), in which the court concluded that the relevant guidance contained in Home Office Circular 46/200, on the review of injury pensions once officers reach 65, was unlawful. (AQW 11497/11-15)

Mr Ford: In 'Simpson' the judge ruled that specific sections of the Home Office guidance regarding those aged over 65 is inconsistent with the regulations and therefore unlawful. There is no justification for adopting a different approach to the regulations in respect of a former officer who reaches the age of 65 than in the case of a review for former officers of a younger age. The Department has in the past issued equivalent guidance in Northern Ireland.

The Department is therefore considering the legal implications of 'Simpson' for Northern Ireland and updated guidance will be issued as appropriate.

Prisoner Drug Debts

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 5315/11-15, whether cash from any sources within the Northern Ireland Prison Service, other than prisoners' weekly earnings, was used to discharge prisoners' drug debts in the same period. (AQW 11515/11-15)

Mr Ford: No cash, from any source, within the Northern Ireland Prison Service other than the Prisoner's Earnings Scheme was used to discharge any prisoner's drug debts.

Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the criteria applied which permitted the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission to continue to distribute Legal Aid over a number of years when it repeatedly failed to file accounts; and (ii) why this was allowed to go unnoticed for so long. (AQW 11516/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission (NILSC) assumed responsibility for the administration of legal aid in November 2003. The NILSC was established as a Non Departmental Public Body (NDPB) under the Access to Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2003.

The Legal Aid scheme is a statutory scheme and as such the NILSC had statutory responsibilities to discharge despite problems encountered in filing its accounts.

Prior to devolution, the Lord Chancellor was responsible for legal aid in Northern Ireland and he was aware of the delay on the part of the NILSC in producing its Annual Accounts. The reason for this backlog was primarily due to difficulties in preparing estimates of legal aid liabilities (known as provisions). To address this, a handling programme was agreed with both the National Audit Office (NAO) and the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), which was appointed auditor of the NILSC's Accounts on behalf of the NAO. As part of the handling programme, the Northern Ireland Court Service intervened in November 2006, appointing a head of finance and other supporting financial staff in order to drive forward preparation of the accounts.

Since 2008, the NILSC has completed nine sets of Annual Accounts. The 2010/11 Accounts were laid in May 2012. This was the first set of Accounts to be laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly. The 2011/12 draft accounts have recently been submitted in accordance with the Department of Justice timetable.

The Accounts of the NILSC are now up to date.

Ackah and Deane Report

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to Recommendation 13.5 in the Ackah and Deane report that there should be on-going training in the operation of disciplinary and grievance procedures, with particular attention to the conduct of disciplinary investigations and hearings for all levels of officers involved, including Prison Officers Association representatives, what training the Northern Ireland Prison Service has provided to prison officers from December 2009 to date.

(AQW 11517/11-15)

Mr Ford: It has not been possible to provide ongoing training in terms of the conduct of disciplinary investigations due to other pressures on NIPS. Training will however be provided in line with the introduction of the new Professional Standards Unit and in this respect NIPS has been in discussion with the PSNI as a possible training provider.

Prisoner Drug Debts

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether the two members of staff, suspended and disciplined for their part in repaying a prisoners' drug debt, have been suspended or disciplined at any other time during their employment.

(AQW 11518/11-15)

Mr Ford: Under the Data Protection Act the rights of both officers must be maintained. Disclosure of their personal data would not in this case be fair or lawful and would thereby breach the first data protection principle.

Courthouses: Proposed Closure of

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice to detail the projected (i) savings; and (ii) additional costs of the proposed closure of five courthouses.

(AQW 11520/11-15)

Mr Ford: As noted in the consultation document, it is estimated that the NI Courts and Tribunals Service will save approximately £402,000 in annual operating costs through the proposed closure of the five courthouses. These are net savings and take account of the estimated cost of maintaining the buildings prior to disposal. These estimated maintenance costs were set out in my reply to AQW/6191/11-15.

A decision has not yet been taken on the future of hearing centres. The consultee response report is being prepared for my consideration. Any proposed closures would not take effect before 1 April 2013.

Bangor Courthouse: Proposed Closure

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice whether there will be any redundancies or reduced hours of work for employees, as a result of the proposed closure of Bangor Courthouse.

(AQW 11522/11-15)

Mr Ford: Northern Ireland Courts & Tribunals Service staff working at Bangor Hearing Centre are already based at Newtownards Courthouse. There will be no redundancies or reduced working hours for employees as a result of the proposed closure of Bangor Courthouse.

There has been no final decision taken to close Bangor Courthouse.

Bangor Courthouse: Proposed Closure

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice whether a final decision to close Bangor Courthouse has been taken.

(AQW 11523/11-15)

Mr Ford: Northern Ireland Courts & Tribunals Service staff working at Bangor Hearing Centre are already based at Newtownards Courthouse. There will be no redundancies or reduced working hours for employees as a result of the proposed closure of Bangor Courthouse.

There has been no final decision taken to close Bangor Courthouse.

Forensic Science NI: Delays

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the number of cases being delayed as a result of delays in forensic science results; and (ii) the proposed timescale for the addressing the delays.

(AQW 11524/11-15)

Mr Ford: At 19 April 2012, two Forensic Science Northern Ireland (FSNI) reports were required by the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) to progress prosecutions.

One of the forensic reports is due to issue in the week commencing 28 May 2012. The other outstanding report is a drugs case in which a new "designer drug" has been detected. Preparation of that report has been delayed as a UK standard needs to be developed against which the drug can be compared. I am unable to advise when the case will be concluded.

The PSNI also submits samples directly to laboratories outside Northern Ireland for forensic science analysis. It is not possible to identify if any cases are delayed as a result of delays in the return of forensic science results from those laboratories.

Forensic Examinations

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Justice which jurisdictions are currently carrying out work on the forensic examination of evidence material relating to cases from this jurisdiction.

(AQW 11526/11-15)

Mr Ford: At 15 May 2012, forensic examinations of evidence material relating to cases from this jurisdiction were being carried out by forensic science providers in England & Wales and France.

PSNI or Forensic Science NI: Evidence Held

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Justice whether evidence currently being held by the PSNI or Forensic Science NI can be released once tests have been completed.

(AQW 11528/11-15)

Mr Ford: The current policy adopted by Forensic Science Northern Ireland (FSNI) is that exhibits submitted for examination are returned to the submitting authority.

The PSNI treats each exhibit on a case by case basis. The officer in charge of the investigation reviews all exhibits held regularly and will authorise their retention, destruction or return depending on the circumstances of the case. Factors which will be considered include whether criminal proceedings are pending or likely, including the potential for appeals and the potential for future advances in forensic science.

PSNI and Public Prosecution Service: Roles

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to outline the legislation or guidelines which determine whether, in criminal cases (i) the PSNI can lay charges directly and have a defendant appear at court; and (ii) the circumstances in which the file is passed to the Public Prosecution Service for a determination on whether to prosecute.

(AQW 11587/11-15)

Mr Ford: A case may be brought to court by either charge or summons depending on factors such as the complexity of the case, the seriousness of the case and whether a remand in custody is sought. A person may only be charged for an arrestable offence where an arrest has occurred. PSNI does not require the permission of the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) to charge a person but may seek advice from the PPS before doing so. In summons cases, the PSNI will make a recommendation to the PPS for prosecution. The PPS will then review the file and decide how the case should proceed and what, if any prosecution should be brought. Again the PSNI may seek PPS advice before referring a case for summons.

Section 31(1) of the Justice (NI) Act 2002 provides that "the Director of Public Prosecutions must take over the conduct of all criminal proceedings which are instituted in Northern Ireland on behalf of any police force". Therefore when police charge or refer a case for summons in relation to any crime, the PPS must take that case over and make the decision as to prosecution in relation to it.

This means that no criminal complaint is made to the court to commence the prosecution process by charge or summons until the case is reviewed by a prosecutor in the PPS. Proceedings will only begin if the PPS is satisfied that the Test for Prosecution is met or, if the investigation is not complete, that there is a reasonable prospect that the test will be met when the investigated is concluded.

Londonderry Magistrates' Court Case of 10 May 2012

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice for a breakdown of (i) the cost to date; and the (ii) total estimated cost of the case which was dismissed at Londonderry Magistrates Court on 10 May 2012 against four republicans in relation to an illegal rally.

(AQW 11604/11-15)

Mr Ford: The table below sets out the estimated costs associated with the case heard at Londonderry Magistrates' Court on 10 May 2012. The case was not dismissed, the court refused to return the defendants for trial to the Crown Court.

Cost Type	Estimated Cost
PSNI	Not Available ¹
PPS Prosecution	Not Available ²
Defence (Legal Aid Costs) ³	£5,234.00
Court (Judiciary and Staff Costs)	£2,758.50
Facilities (e.g. Courtroom Accommodation)	£455.00

Cost Type	Estimated Cost
Total	£8,447.50

- 1 PSNI have advised that to compile an estimate could not be done with any accuracy and would incur a disproportionate cost.
- 2 No fees paid to prosecuting counsel have been incurred in relation to this case at present. All other ongoing costs fall within the operational costs of the PPS.
- 3 Fees of £234 have been paid to date in respect of legal fees for work completed early in the case. The final claims have not yet been submitted but are estimated to be in the region of £5,000.

Illegal Rally/Parade: Court Cases

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many cases relating to (i) republican terrorist rallies; and (ii) participation in, or organisation of, an illegal parade have been brought to court in each of the last five years; and how many convictions were secured in each court division.

(AQW 11605/11-15)

Mr Ford:

- (i) There was one case in 2011 relating to a rally for a proscribed republican organisation in the County Court Division of Fermanagh & Tyrone. The defendant was acquitted.

There were two further cases in Belfast in 2010 and one in Belfast in 2011 where the nature of the rally was not specified in the charge details. All of the defendants in these cases were acquitted.

- (ii) The table below sets out the relevant details in respect of all defendants dealt with who were charged with offences associated with taking part in or organising an illegal parade in the last five years.

Year	County Court Division	Number of Defendants	Number of Defendants convicted on at least one charge
2007	Londonderry	19 ¹	1
2007	Antrim	1	1
2011	Fermanagh & Tyrone	1	1
2011	Craigavon	3	2
Total		24	5

- 1 Relates to one case with nineteen defendants.

Note: All data in relation to 2011 is provisional.

Prisons: Contingency Accommodation

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice when he will decide on the location of contingency prison accommodation.

(AQW 11617/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Outline Estate Strategy, which was shared with the Justice Committee in April, proposes exploring the potential for contingency accommodation to meet the continued growth in the adult male population.

I intend to launch a full public consultation on the Outline Estate Strategy in early June and no decisions will be taken on any of the proposals that are subject to consultation until that exercise has been completed. A site search and options appraisal will also be conducted.

Prisons: Contingency Accommodation

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice when he will appoint someone to take forward the selection process for the location of contingency prison accommodation.

(AQW 11619/11-15)

Mr Ford: I intend to launch a full public consultation on the Outline Estate Strategy in early June and no decisions will be taken on any of the proposals that are subject to consultation until that exercise has been completed.

There are no plans to appoint anyone specifically to take forward the selection process for contingency accommodation in addition to the staffing resources already available. This matter will be decided upon based on the outcome of the Options Appraisal on Contingency Accommodation.

Car Insurance: Consumer Council Briefing

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Justice what consideration his Department has given to the Consumer Council's briefing 'Legal and Justice Issues Relating to Car Insurance'; and what action he will take in relation to the recommendations.
(AQW 11629/11-15)

Mr Ford: I welcome the work of the Consumer Council in this area which led to the Examination by the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) into the cost of car insurance. During the recent Assembly debate arising from the OFT report, members acknowledged that this is the responsibility of a number of departments.

I intend to increase the general jurisdictional limit of the County Court from £15,000 to £30,000. The County Court Rules Committee is planning to introduce Pre-action Protocols to the County Court. These will encourage early resolution of disputes by requiring information to be shared by parties prior to the issue of proceedings.

I also met recently with the Minister of the Environment to discuss the action our respective departments are taking to address the concerns raised by the OFT report.

Londonderry Magistrates' Court Case of 10 May 2012

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice, in light of the recent judgement by Judge McElholm in the case of four republicans on terrorist charges following a dissident republican rally in Londonderry, for his assessment of a reasonable timeframe for defendants to receive a fair trial.
(AQW 11635/11-15)

Mr Ford: There are a range of factors which may impact on what is considered a reasonable time for defendants to receive a fair trial, including the complexity of the investigation, the number and availability of witnesses and the volume of evidence.

However, the assessment of a reasonable timeframe is a matter for the judiciary to determine in individual cases taking into account all the facts and circumstances of the case and not something on which I can comment.

Londonderry Magistrates' Court Case of 10 May 2012

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice whether he can confirm that the dismissal of charges against four republicans, by Judge Barney McElholm at Londonderry District Court on 10 May 2012, were not dismissals on the merits, and that the Public Prosecution Service can re-issue the proceedings.
(AQW 11639/11-15)

Mr Ford: The charges against the four defendants in the case at Londonderry Magistrates' Court on 10 May 2012 were not dismissed. The District Judge (Magistrates' Court) refused to return the defendants for trial to the Crown Court on the grounds of delay.

It is a matter for the Director of Public Prosecutions whether to challenge this decision or to re-commence the proceedings.

Legal Aid Budget

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Justice to detail the total amount paid from the legal aid budget to each of the top thirty recipient firms of solicitors, including the names of the firms, in each of the last five financial years.
(AQW 11644/11-15)

Mr Ford: The attached tables detail the total amounts paid in legal aid, to the top thirty earning firms of solicitors, over the last five years. The figures provided include details of disbursements and payments made to counsel as these are paid via the solicitors' firm.

NORTHERN IRELAND LEGAL SERVICES COMMISSION Payments Made To Solicitors 2010/11

	Name	Solicitor Fees	VAT On Solicitor Fees	Counsel Fees	VAT On Counsel Fees	Disbursements	Total
1	Kevin Winters & Co	1,825,309	310,935	130,597	14,530	368,365	2,649,736
2	Mckenna Sweeney Mckeown	1,259,669	244,708	141,228	22,289	136,452	1,804,346
3	Madden & Finucane	1,000,897	192,195	175,749	21,819	207,578	1,598,238
4	Trevor Smyth & Co	1,059,961	196,968	139,273	15,272	87,728	1,499,202
5	McConnell Kelly & Co	790,772	144,872	101,969	10,362	115,634	1,163,609
6	Mccann & Mccann	766,589	143,279	132,152	13,614	94,164	1,149,798
7	Macelhatton & Co	727,240	133,156	105,013	12,826	97,013	1,075,248

	Name	Solicitor Fees	VAT On Solicitor Fees	Counsel Fees	VAT On Counsel Fees	Disbursements	Total
8	G R Ingram & Co Solicitors	772,643	147,298	74,992	3,395	71,962	1,070,290
9	Patrick Fahy	704,187	129,955	72,196	5,052	59,125	970,515
10	Sheridan & Leonard	600,824	110,869	120,678	15,852	118,413	966,636
11	Quigley Grant & Kyle	735,319	132,150	23,383	3,615	34,257	928,724
12	Donnelly & Wall	596,007	114,453	111,864	12,980	92,518	927,822
13	Hilary Carmichael	378,243	75,847	259,246	41,954	142,022	897,312
14	Mccormack, Mcgurk & Partners	661,543	121,513	53,809	5,704	43,438	886,007
15	Mcivor Farrell	575,944	112,440	105,014	9,081	62,154	864,633
16	Higgins Hollywood Deazley	449,520	84,396	150,483	25,664	141,873	851,936
17	John Fahy & Co	543,461	96,383	34,346	1,239	114,828	790,257
18	Joe Mulholland & Co	551,641	101,373	57,843	3,809	28,381	743,047
19	Harte Coyle Collins	360,773	68,920	184,812	26,330	68,742	709,577
20	Morgan & Murphy	483,195	91,191	53,290	8,533	51,291	687,500
21	Fahy Corrigan	488,423	87,114	28,787	2,353	69,763	676,440
22	Mccallion Keown	471,944	84,889	14,210	2,028	56,104	629,175
23	John J Rice & Co	438,193	82,588	49,631	7,139	49,673	627,224
24	Bernard Campbell & Co	339,207	66,954	114,205	13,849	88,996	623,211
25	H L Mo & Co.	233,635	40,968	23,682	3,179	294,215	595,679
26	Hunt & Company	342,299	62,474	85,138	10,117	74,449	574,477
27	Breen, Rankin, Lenzi	384,233	72,135	50,231	1,785	60,158	568,542
28	The Elliott Trainor Partnership	334,643	66,087	69,580	8,430	85,323	564,063
29	John Ross & Son	364,869	69,364	51,739	7,695	64,574	558,241
30	Harrison & Hardstaff	252,097	44,117	0	0	257,207	553,421

NORTHERN IRELAND LEGAL SERVICES COMMISSION
Payments Made To Solicitors 2009/10

	Name	Solicitor Fees	VAT On Solicitor Fees	Counsel Fees	VAT On Counsel Fees	Disbursements	Total
1	Kevin Winters & Co	2,391,522	378,324	143,488	13,081	53,593	2,980,008
2	Madden & Finucane	1,076,789	169,996	327,612	48,585	191,939	1,814,920
3	Trevor Smyth & Co	1,212,528	189,241	112,664	12,052	113,037	1,639,522
4	Mcconnell Kelly & Co	951,047	148,934	122,344	16,382	144,373	1,383,081
5	Mckenna Sweeney Mckeown	1,050,674	163,010	39,093	5,681	54,891	1,313,348
6	Mccann & Mccann	728,625	112,998	246,063	35,673	119,545	1,242,904
7	Patrick Fahy	660,974	102,306	139,379	16,018	89,824	1,008,501
8	G R Ingram & Co	665,426	104,910	54,336	4,282	107,870	936,823

	Name	Solicitor Fees	VAT On Solicitor Fees	Counsel Fees	VAT On Counsel Fees	Disbursements	Total
9	John J Rice & Co	586,033	90,408	38,224	5,228	128,644	848,536
10	Sheridan & Leonard	590,138	91,276	24,344	2,978	126,464	835,200
11	Donnelly & Wall	557,165	87,185	76,318	6,353	82,931	809,952
12	Harte Coyle Collins	511,721	81,247	43,903	6,336	85,812	729,018
13	Hilary Carmichael	346,548	52,893	167,985	17,367	132,588	717,381
14	The Elliott Trainor Partnership	358,293	55,259	120,672	17,571	127,369	679,163
15	Macelhatton & Co	483,947	75,362	44,781	4,793	68,729	677,612
16	John Fahy & Co	467,741	73,136	42,437	3,232	90,608	677,155
17	Flynn & Mcgettrick	398,753	62,482	72,650	8,708	89,893	632,486
18	Joe Mulholland & Co	495,129	76,693	15,683	1,169	42,689	631,363
19	Morgan & Murphy	459,477	70,460	41,072	5,034	43,827	619,869
20	John J Mcnally & Co	264,708	40,755	135,603	15,894	115,802	572,763
21	Bernard Campbell & Co	322,686	50,727	101,924	11,264	82,748	569,350
22	Gus Campbell	375,854	59,663	51,427	8,222	67,846	563,012
23	H L Mo & Co	340,114	51,691	40,708	6,182	123,024	561,718
24	Caldwell & Robinson	291,710	44,807	120,280	17,706	84,649	559,152
25	Macdermott, Mcgurk & Partners	411,048	63,212	30,536	1,376	39,395	545,568
26	Archer, Heaney & Magee	369,603	56,833	37,724	5,321	63,438	532,918
27	Higgins Hollywood Deazley	327,320	49,916	82,773	12,969	59,379	532,357
28	Mccallion Keown	334,625	50,479	38,859	4,844	94,921	523,728
29	Robert Murtagh & Co	379,281	56,387	47,267	7,023	33,248	523,206
30	Donard King & Co	352,582	54,490	38,463	4,485	70,497	520,517

NORTHERN IRELAND LEGAL SERVICES COMMISSION
Payments Made To Solicitors 2008/09

	Name	Solicitor Fees	VAT On Solicitor Fees	Counsel Fees	VAT On Counsel Fees	Disbursements	Total
1	Kevin Winters & Co	3,138,540	542,666	145,626	15,883	-540,087	3,302,628
2	Madden & Finucane	1,137,573	196,566	163,303	23,800	193,179	1,714,421
3	Trevor Smyth & Co	1,163,072	199,474	133,691	19,174	153,900	1,669,311
4	H2o	454,322	78,890	414,847	72,562	256,572	1,277,194
5	Mcconnell Kelly & Co	924,409	159,605	55,180	6,214	120,429	1,265,837
6	Higgins Hollywood Deazley	548,560	90,803	366,513	30,964	187,853	1,224,692
7	Mccann & Mccann	760,502	129,454	63,481	8,048	71,418	1,032,904
8	Mckenna Sweeney Mckeown	705,444	119,753	40,757	6,468	105,714	978,136
9	Patrick Fahy	704,879	122,049	43,299	3,183	75,382	948,792

	Name	Solicitor Fees	VAT On Solicitor Fees	Counsel Fees	VAT On Counsel Fees	Disbursements	Total
10	Macelhatton & Co	655,067	110,496	56,731	7,910	89,287	919,491
11	Gibson & Quigley	583,055	99,838	14,428	1,818	61,359	760,497
12	G R Ingram & Co	541,869	92,809	43,674	1,855	73,045	753,252
13	Joe Mulholland & Co	598,133	102,546	6,113	797	40,464	748,053
14	Harte Coyle Collins	519,864	90,132	44,938	6,538	86,402	747,875
15	Donnelly & Wall	468,739	80,131	63,148	5,777	70,160	687,956
16	Sheridan & Leonard	440,384	76,086	41,268	5,589	88,432	651,759
17	John J Rice & Co	433,061	74,389	62,640	8,843	61,640	640,572
18	Hilary Carmichael	365,887	63,513	82,223	8,569	114,061	634,252
19	Macdermott, Mcgurk & Partners	441,728	75,306	33,462	4,800	43,772	599,068
20	Fahy Corrigan	439,837	73,137	18,035	2,026	59,823	592,858
21	Bernard Campbell & Co	324,345	56,122	90,967	12,450	89,322	573,207
22	Donard King & Co	371,832	63,837	34,140	5,511	95,735	571,056
23	John Fahy & Co	412,101	70,772	18,216	692	56,008	557,788
24	John Ross & Son	370,332	64,079	48,365	7,747	56,298	546,822
25	The Elliott Trainor Partnership	318,064	54,399	77,748	13,061	74,530	537,802
26	Archer, Heaney & Magee	396,850	67,965	15,541	2,282	54,654	537,292
27	Flynn & Mcgettrick	298,338	51,178	79,750	13,205	80,680	523,151
28	Caldwell & Robinson	259,426	45,171	96,977	15,652	83,884	501,111
29	Tiernans	408,754	71,217	3,874	382	9,721	493,948
30	H.L. Mo & Co	329,327	55,150	9,813	1,616	49,779	445,686

NORTHERN IRELAND LEGAL SERVICES COMMISSION
Payments Made To Solicitors 2007/08

	Name	Solicitor Fees	VAT On Solicitor Fees	Counsel Fees	VAT On Counsel Fees	Disbursements	Total
1	Kevin Winters & Co	1,463,175	256,299	165,759	21,297	1,251,664	3,158,195
2	Trevor Smyth & Co	1,200,175	210,304	100,812	11,986	138,704	1,661,981
3	G R Ingram & Co	939,406	164,558	28,892	2,778	97,496	1,233,131
4	Madden & Finucane	705,735	123,664	195,081	29,641	118,259	1,172,380
5	Patrick Fahy	714,112	125,009	107,153	11,157	131,323	1,088,755
6	Mcconnell, Kelly & Co	682,360	119,724	65,884	8,916	189,108	1,065,993
7	Mckenna Sweeney Mckeown	850,889	149,057	11,166	1,129	49,082	1,061,324
8	Mccann & Mccann	743,392	130,244	86,980	13,257	58,939	1,032,811
9	Tiernans	761,442	133,252	0	0	13,847	908,541
10	Harte Coyle Collins	669,904	117,249	9,475	1,299	104,100	902,028
11	Hilary Carmichael	410,431	72,201	198,416	28,142	102,430	811,619

	Name	Solicitor Fees	VAT On Solicitor Fees	Counsel Fees	VAT On Counsel Fees	Disbursements	Total
12	Mcevoy Sheridan	267,258	46,800	282,637	48,018	107,495	752,208
13	Flynn & Mcgettrick	367,318	64,412	169,372	26,995	79,535	707,631
14	John J Rice & Co	481,965	84,391	37,545	5,231	47,994	657,125
15	Donnelly & Wall	462,359	81,121	42,723	4,163	39,464	629,829
16	Sheridan & Leonard	406,430	71,321	53,092	8,050	75,596	614,489
17	Macelhatton & Co	464,566	81,374	6,683	476	51,581	604,680
18	John Fahy & Co	428,825	74,972	37,934	2,155	49,001	592,886
19	Bernard Campbell & Co	334,736	58,831	86,262	13,615	88,058	581,503
20	Archer, Heaney & Magee	416,372	72,852	26,853	3,613	54,731	574,421
21	Macdermott, Mcgurk & Partners	382,978	67,078	28,844	3,032	35,552	517,483
22	The Elliott Trainor Partnership	291,142	51,085	79,172	12,000	58,968	492,366
23	Higgins Hollywood Deazley	293,268	51,458	37,554	5,486	79,647	467,413
24	John Ross & Son	305,090	53,574	26,059	3,760	76,656	465,139
25	Morgan & Murphy	344,331	60,331	12,863	1,843	38,010	457,378
26	Mcgrady Scullion	213,485	37,441	114,842	18,974	61,422	446,163
27	Joe Mulholland & Co	366,923	66,540	798	12	6,480	440,754
28	Donard King & Co	306,246	53,691	29,269	4,775	39,662	433,644
29	Caldwell & Robinson	208,340	36,540	101,655	15,690	44,537	406,762
30	Mccallion Keown	279,984	49,007	6,333	933	60,498	396,755

NORTHERN IRELAND LEGAL SERVICES COMMISSION**Payments Made To Solicitors 2006/07**

	Name	Solicitor Fees	VAT On Solicitor Fees	Counsel Fees	VAT On Counsel Fees	Disbursements	Total
1	Kevin R Winters & Co	1,594,260	279,237	85,905	4,905	524,499	2,488,806
2	Trevor Smyth & Co	1,313,694	230,166	186,852	25,679	191,261	1,947,652
3	Mcconnell Kelly & Co	822,541	144,154	48,232	4,599	146,848	1,166,375
4	Madden & Finucane	668,838	117,359	191,849	27,026	115,233	1,120,304
5	John J Rice & Co	566,888	99,263	35,026	3,927	87,384	792,488
6	Mccann & Mccann	570,206	100,068	40,016	3,961	54,711	768,962
7	Hilary Carmichael	317,997	56,009	124,883	12,165	109,268	620,322
8	John Fahy & Co	427,370	74,884	33,339	2,389	71,899	609,881
9	Bogue & McNulty	369,884	64,763	5,920	576	136,770	577,912
10	Donnelly & Wall	399,820	70,040	56,110	4,279	43,071	573,319
11	Patrick Fahy	410,969	72,007	23,138	2,170	64,430	572,714
12	Mckenna Sweeney Mckeown	425,505	74,617	16,561	1,443	43,707	561,833

	Name	Solicitor Fees	VAT On Solicitor Fees	Counsel Fees	VAT On Counsel Fees	Disbursements	Total
13	Sheridan & Leonard	334,210	58,700	53,351	8,085	81,843	536,189
14	Archer, Heaney & Magee	375,004	65,659	26,895	1,418	47,496	516,472
15	Flynn & Mcgettrick	260,290	45,679	92,572	14,503	50,755	463,799
16	John Ross & Son	271,664	47,778	65,106	7,339	64,986	456,874
17	Bernard Campbell & Co	248,928	43,767	80,288	11,439	61,591	446,012
18	Caldwell & Robinson	236,527	41,555	82,747	13,132	65,619	439,579
19	The Elliott Trainor Partnership	263,343	46,199	62,429	6,373	60,350	438,694
20	Murtagh Breen & Co	296,978	52,170	52,523	6,580	29,265	437,516
21	Mcgrady Collins	202,016	35,445	121,564	15,585	54,809	429,419
22	Morgan & Murphy	296,122	51,848	31,086	4,999	43,915	427,969
23	Macelhatton & Co	313,954	54,960	26,297	3,478	28,309	426,997
24	Gus Campbell	238,722	41,857	81,718	12,539	49,678	424,515
25	Desmond J Doherty	171,647	30,038	11,334	1,782	196,778	411,579
26	Richard Monteith	314,590	55,074	881	412	20,665	391,623
27	Higgins Hollywood Deazley	238,344	41,924	42,515	5,070	57,904	385,756
28	Macdermott, Mcgurk & Partners	261,544	45,867	41,530	4,275	31,374	384,591
29	G R Ingram & Co	282,087	49,591	11,664	1,138	25,371	369,851
30	Gibson & Quigley	283,405	49,688	10,861	1,084	12,140	357,178

Prisons: Cancellation of Visits

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Justice how many security related incidents necessitating the cancellation of prison visits have occurred at (i) Maghaberry; and (ii) Magilligan prisons in each of the last three years.

(AQW 11654/11-15)

Mr Ford: During 2010 visits were partially cancelled at Maghaberry Prison on two occasions. In 2011 visits at Maghaberry were cancelled on one occasion for two consecutive days and partially cancelled on another occasion. There have been no visits cancelled due to security incidents during 2012. Magilligan Prison has not been affected by visits closure due to security incidents in the past three years.

Clamping

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Justice, given that Northern Ireland is now the only place in the UK where vehicles can still be clamped on private land, whether he plans to reconsider the introduction of legislation preventing such clamping.

(AQW 11673/11-15)

Mr Ford: I launched a consultation on the future regulation of the private security industry in Northern Ireland on 17 May 2012. It is available on the consultations section of the DOJ website. One of the issues in the consultation document concerns the practice of vehicle immobilisation (which includes wheel clamping) on private land. I will want to analyse the outcome of the consultation before deciding whether to bring forward proposals to ban the practice here.

Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice to outline the timescale for the transfer of the remaining four under 18 year old prisoners to the Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre.

(AQW 11747/11-15)

Mr Ford: There are no plans to transfer the small number of juveniles currently in Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre to Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre. All are either due for release or will attain the age of 18 very shortly or are otherwise

settled on a long-term basis in Hydebank Wood. I will be announcing, in the context of the Youth Justice Review, how custodial arrangements will operate in future for this age group.

Juvenile Justice Centres

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice whether his Department has any plans to change legislation to ensure that offenders, who are under 18 years old, are placed in juvenile justice centres rather than young offenders centres.

(AQW 11750/11-15)

Mr Ford: I will be announcing, in the context of the Youth Justice Review, how custodial arrangements will operate in future for this age group and will be considering legislative requirements as part of this process.

Criminal Injuries: Compensation

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how much has been paid in compensation for criminal injuries that were sustained by victims of crime, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 11935/11-15)

Mr Ford: The figures below are from the Compensation Agency's Annual Report and Accounts. The 2011/12 Annual Report and Accounts have still to be verified.

Financial Year	Criminal Injuries 1988 Order	Tariff Scheme (introduced 2002)	Total
2007/08	£11.5m	£15m	£26.5m
2008/09	£7.7m	£13m	£20.7m
2009/10	£8.8m	£13.2m	£22m
2010/11	£8m	£12.3m	£20.3m
2011/12	£4.2m	£11.9m	£16.1m

Police Support Groups: Funding

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Justice what funding is available for Police Support Groups.

(AQO 2031/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Department funds four organisations that provide support to serving and former police officers. The budget for these organisations for 2012/13 is as follows:

	2012/13 Budget £
RUC GC Foundation	152,000
Police Fund	1,712,000
Police Rehabilitation & Retraining Trust	2,156,000
RUC GC Widows	38,000
Total	4,058,000

The NI Police Fund in turn funds the Disabled Police Officers Association, RUC GC Parents Association, the Northern Ireland Retired Police Officers Association, the RUC/PSNI Benevolent Fund, Forgotten Families and the Carers Association.

Multi-agency Risk Assessment Conferences

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice when an Information Sharing Agreement will be in place in relation to Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences.

(AQO 2037/11-15)

Mr Ford: In the MARAC process a wide range of organisations share highly personal and sensitive information relating to vulnerable victims and I acknowledge the importance and need for an Information Sharing Agreement, aimed at facilitating the legitimate and secure disclosure of such information, between all those involved in the MARAC process.

It is important to ensure that the Information Sharing Agreement is fit for purpose and work to finalise it has been ongoing. The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) is considering the most recent draft of the Information Sharing Agreement and recently met with the MARAC Operational Group to discuss it. Following receipt of final comments from the Information Commissioner's

Office, it is the aim of the MARAC Operational Group to get it signed by all parties at the next MARAC Operational Group meeting which has been scheduled for 18 June.

Legislation: Department of Justice

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Justice to outline his Department's plans for legislation during this Assembly term.
(AQO 2038/11-15)

Mr Ford: Subject to Executive approval I plan to introduce three Department of Justice Bills during the current Assembly term: a Criminal Justice Bill on the retention of DNA material and fingerprints, sex offender notification requirements and strengthening measures for introduction before the 2012 summer recess; a Justice Bill to provide for a faster, fairer and more efficient justice system including jurisdictional reform, changes to committal proceedings and the reform of fine enforcement for introduction at the start of next year; and a Bail Bill which is currently being prepared by the Northern Ireland Law Commission on which I will be consulting.

I am also working closely with the Minister for Health and his Department in the development of new Mental Capacity legislation which will also apply to the justice system. The Bill will be introduced in December 2013 by the Minister for Health.

Avoidable Delay: Criminal Cases

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice what discussions have taken place with the Judiciary to address avoidable delay and the most efficient and effective processing of criminal cases.
(AQO 2043/11-15)

Mr Ford: There are regular meetings at various levels with the Lord Chief Justice and his representatives to discuss issues of mutual interest, including the programme of work to speed up justice. I know the Judiciary take this issue very seriously and share my commitment to speeding up justice.

Over the last twelve months, I have had three discussions with the Lord Chief Justice and I will be meeting with him again next month, to discuss my plans for the introduction of statutory time limits and other issues related to delay. Since September, the Director of Access to Justice has had eight business meetings with the Lord Chief Justice; the work to tackle delay is a regular part of these discussions.

The Lord Chief Justice is also represented by his senior officials at the Criminal Justice Board and on the Speeding up Justice Programme Executive. In addition, the Judiciary meet with the representatives from the criminal justice agencies and the voluntary and community sector at the Criminal Justice Issues Group, which has considered specific proposals for speeding up justice such as the reform of committals. The Criminal Justice Issues Group is chaired by a senior member of the Judiciary - Lord Justice Higgins.

Whilst the Judiciary do not comment on policy matters, they are always willing to give early views and advice on the operational implications of our proposals. Indeed, the Lord Chief Justice has recently contributed to consultations on both measures to encourage earlier guilty pleas and the reform of committals.

The Judiciary is independent of government, however, this clearly does not mean that we cannot work together to make the justice system more effective and efficient.

High Court: Adjourned Cases

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Justice to outline the number and overall cost of High Court cases which have been adjourned in the past 3 years due to the defendant not being available.
(AQO 2044/11-15)

Mr Ford: I am advised by the Courts and Tribunals Service that the question cannot be answered. While the courts make a record of adjournments and who requested them – the prosecution, the defence or the court – the record would not show that the case was adjourned specifically because the defendant did not appear. Therefore, the necessary data cannot be extracted from the adjournment record.

Northern Ireland Police Fund

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Justice whether the Northern Ireland Police Fund has been reviewed recently, with particular emphasis on the provision of longer term funding for organisations.
(AQO 2045/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Police Fund was reviewed in 2009 by an external reviewer who recommended the continued existence of the Fund as presently constituted to the continued provision of core service. The Fund is due to be reviewed again in 2014/15 in line with good practice. Adequate funding has been provided over the Spending Review period and longer term funding cannot be considered beyond this period.

Department for Regional Development

Northern Ireland Water Mains Supply

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Regional Development how many homes in Co. Fermanagh are not connected to the NI Water mains supply.

(AQW 11170/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): Northern Ireland Water maintains records of its customers i.e. those who are connected to the mains network. However, it estimates that around three hundred domestic properties in the Fermanagh Co area are not connected to the water mains network.

A consultation carried out by my Department as part of the Review of Financial Assistance For Domestic Properties Not Served By A Water Main identified around 60 properties in County Fermanagh that are not served by a water main. Properties that are 'not served' are those that do not have a water main in the public road nearest to the property (or within 100m of the nearest access point) as opposed to those who are not connected to the mains supply as a matter of choice.

On 9 May 2012, I announced the launch of the Rural Borewell Scheme, which will provide a grant to households in isolated rural areas for a private borewell where the cost of a water mains requisition is prohibitively high. This innovative cross-departmental scheme will help provide affordable access to a wholesome water supply for households who are outside the reach of the public network. The scheme will come into operation this summer and will run for four years subject to demand.

Roads

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail how Roads Service notifies district councils when a road is adopted.

(AQW 11259/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: When my Department's Roads Service adopts a new road, it forwards a copy of the Adoption Certificate, along with an appropriate plan showing the newly adopted road, to the relevant council.

Northern Ireland Water: Future Governance

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Regional Development when he will bring forward his proposals on the future governance of NI Water.

(AQW 11260/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Executive's PfG commitment not to introduce additional household charges for water means that, during the current Assembly mandate, NIW will continue to be subject to full public expenditure controls.

As decisions on water funding are cross-cutting, because of their significant public expenditure implications, it remains my intention to bring a paper to the Executive in the coming months.

Traffic-calming Measures and Speed Humps

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what process is in place to monitor the effectiveness of speed humps and traffic calming measures.

(AQW 11262/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service gives careful consideration to the design and placement of speed humps. It also undertakes extensive consultation with local residents and stakeholders, prior to commencing works on traffic calming schemes. This process helps to ensure that the most appropriate traffic calming measures are implemented.

Roads Service reviews traffic calming schemes that have been in place and operational for at least six months to ensure the intended objectives have been fully met. In addition, analysis of road traffic collisions at each location is undertaken by comparing the three year periods prior to and after implementation of each scheme. Changes in traffic speeds can also be measured as part of the monitoring process.

Speed Humps

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development how many times speed humps have been removed or reduced in areas in each of the last three years.

(AQW 11263/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service takes considerable care in the design and placement of road humps. It undertakes extensive consultation with local residents and stakeholders before any traffic calming measures are implemented, to ensure that speed humps are sited at the most appropriate locations.

Roads Service has advised that it has no records of road humps being removed in the last three years. However, two speed humps have been altered after installation to accommodate drainage problems.

Kinnegar Lagoons, Holywood: Sewage Pollution

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the proposed timeline for implementation of a solution by NI Water to address on-going sewage pollution at Kinnegar Lagoons, Holywood.

(AQW 11275/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it is currently developing a project to resolve the sewage pollution at Kinnegar Lagoons, Holywood. Detailed consultations are on-going with relevant stakeholders and a tender package will be finalised subject to the completion of all statutory processes and the availability of funding. NIW anticipates that construction will commence at the end of this financial year and work will take 12 months to complete.

Kinnegar Lagoons, Holywood: Sewage Pollution

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total funding awarded to NI Water to enable the implementation of a solution to address on-going sewage pollution at Kinnegar Lagoons, Holywood.

(AQW 11277/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that a project to resolve the sewage pollution at Kinnegar Lagoons, with a capital value of £3.5 million, is included in NIW's PC13 Business Plan submission. The Business Plan is subject to detailed review by the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for delivery by January 2015.

Parking

Mrs McKeivitt asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he is taking to ensure that residents refrain from parking in an area that is a designated turning point in a residential area.

(AQW 11309/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the 'hammerhead', which is often provided in residential cul-de-sac areas, is intended to facilitate vehicle turning. However, there is no general prohibition from parking in these areas.

Roads Service officials further advise that a Traffic Attendant can issue a Penalty Charge Notice (PCN) to a vehicle which is parked in contravention of parking restrictions e.g. on yellow lines, at any location where restrictions are in place.

Road Bonds for New Housing Developments

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the average bond, per house in a new housing development, required by the Roads Service to cover sewerage and roads infrastructure in each of the last three years.

(AQW 11326/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it does not maintain a quantitative record of houses related to road bonds in new housing developments, as the number of houses served is not a factor in the calculation of bond values.

Roads Service officials further advise that they calculate the value of a road bond based on the length, width and type of road, along with any special features, such as culverts or retaining walls. By using rates from typical contemporary contracts, Roads Service estimates the construction costs of the road, and the bond value is determined accordingly.

I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the calculation of a sewer bond is based on the cost of installing sewers within new developments, using a schedule of rates prepared by the Company. The bond security is set at 40% of the estimated installation cost.

It is not possible to determine average bond per house data because installation costs can include a number of variables, such as the diameter and material of the sewer pipes and the depth of the excavation required. However, Northern Ireland Water estimates that in a small development, the average value of the bond security for each house would be in the region of £1,500. Where a wastewater pumping station is also required, it is estimated that the average cost of the bond security would be approximately £4,000.

Traffic-calming Measures: South Belfast

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Regional Development how much his Department has spent on traffic calming measures in the South Belfast constituency in each of the last three years.

(AQW 11335/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service maintains details of traffic calming measures by council area rather than on a parliamentary constituency basis.

Details of expenditure on traffic calming measures in the Belfast and Castlereagh Council areas, are provided in the table below:

Year	Spend on traffic calming in Belfast and Castlereagh Councils
2009/10	£278,785

Year	Spend on traffic calming in Belfast and Castlereagh Councils
2010/11	£126,006
2011/12	£236,031

Disabled Parking Bays

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of applications received for disabled parking bays outside peoples' homes which have been rejected in each of the last three years in the South Belfast constituency.

(AQW 11336/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service maintains details of applications for disabled parking bays by council area rather than on a constituency basis. Details of the number of applications for disabled parking bays outside applicants' homes in the Belfast and Castlereagh Council areas, which have been rejected by Roads Service in each of the last three financial years, are provided in the table below:

	Number of Rejected Applications for Disabled Parking Bays		
	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Castlereagh	9	13	3
Belfast	49	30	40*

* One application for a disabled parking bay in the Belfast City Council area remains pending.

Road Bonds for New Housing Developments

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development how the average cost of bonds, per house, that are required for new housing developments in Northern Ireland, compares with the cost of road and water bonds that are required in other parts of the United Kingdom; and to outline the reasons for any differences.

(AQW 11348/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my response to his Assembly Question, AQW 11326/11-15.

I can also advise that my Department's Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water do not maintain details of the cost of road and water bonds in other regions of the United Kingdom.

Road Traffic Accidents

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of road traffic accidents that have occurred at Marine Parade, Shore Road, A2 Bangor to Belfast Road Junction, Holywood, in each of the last five financial years.

(AQW 11362/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I should explain that any information on road traffic collisions, involving personal injuries, is provided to my Department's Roads Service by the PSNI.

During the last five financial years, from April 2006 to March 2011, there have been two traffic collisions, involving personal injury, at this junction. Both these accidents occurred in the 2008/09 financial year.

Marine Parade, Holywood: Junction Improvements

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Regional Development whether any junction improvements are planned at Marine Parade, Shore Road, A2 Bangor to Belfast Road Junction, Holywood, to improve road safety as a result of the limited passage provided by traffic signals for Marine Parade and Shore Road traffic.

(AQW 11364/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Given the volume of traffic passing through this junction on the A2 at Marine Parade, and that information supplied to my Department's Roads Service by the PSNI indicates that two road traffic collisions, involving personal injury, have occurred at this junction in the last 5 years, Roads Service considers this junction has a good safety record.

In these circumstances and given the current financial constraints arising from reductions in its budget, it currently does not have any proposals to carry out any works to the junction. The situation will, however, be kept under review.

M1

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) how many complaints his Department has received about two roads being named M1 on the island of Ireland, both leading to Belfast; and (ii) whether he would consider raising this matter with his counterpart in the Dublin Government, with an aim to reducing the level of confusion amongst motorists, particularly overseas visitors.

(AQW 11365/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Departments Roads Service has advised that it has not received any complaints about the two roads being named M1. However, my Department recently received correspondence from Mr Leo Varadkar TD, Irish Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, regarding the direction signs to Dublin from the M1 for south-bound traffic. I explained that the signing regime in place complies with the national guidance for motorways, but I can advise that Roads Service has plans to make the final direction sign on the M1 more prominent, to further assist drivers travelling south-bound. This work is programmed for completion within the current financial year.

In view of the above, I do not consider it necessary at this stage to raise the matter with my counterpart in the Irish Government.

Road Bonds for New Housing Developments

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development how the average cost of a road bond, per house, in a new housing development compares with the cost of road bonds that are required in other parts of the UK; and to outline the reasons for any differences.

(AQW 11369/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my response to his Assembly Question, AQW 11326/11-15.

I can also advise that my Department's Roads Service does not maintain details of the cost of road bonds in other regions of the United Kingdom.

Roads: Routine Maintenance

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the funding allocated to routine road maintenance in each Roads Service division for each year since 2007/08.

(AQW 11401/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Details of my Department's Roads Service initial allocation to each of its four Divisions for routine maintenance, in each financial year since 2007/08, are set out in the table below:

Roads Service Division	Initial Routine Road Maintenance Allocation					
	2007/08 £k	2008/09 £k	2009/10 £k	2010/11 £k	2011/12 £k	2012/13 £k
Northern	3,547	3,968	3,968	3,897	4,060	3,997
Southern	3,214	3,330	3,576	3,608	3,580	3,122
Eastern	4,640	4,798	4,865	4,677	4,157	4,002
Western	3,773	3,863	4,008	4,175	3,762	3,414
Total	15,174	15,959	16,417	16,357	15,559	14,535

Routine road maintenance covers such functions as grass cutting, weed control, verge maintenance and gully emptying.

Translink: Fuel Subsidy for School Buses

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the reduction in Translink's fuel subsidy for school buses in each of the (i) last; and (ii) next two years.

(AQW 11421/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Fuel Duty Rebate (FDR) is paid by the Department to operators of bus services towards defraying customs or excise duty charged on eligible fuel used in operating a bus service.

Rebate on the duty paid on fuel is a key support for road operators to help them maintain affordable accessible public transport services.

All operators who possess a valid Road Service Operators License to run stage carriage services are eligible to apply to join the Fuel Duty Rebate scheme. Translink stage carriage services are used to some extent for school services.

The current rate of rebate, which has been in place since December 2008, is 43.21p per litre. There are currently no plans to reduce this rate.

Translink: Passenger Numbers

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail Translink's passenger numbers in each of the last three years. (AQW 11422/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The table below provides details of Translink's passenger journey numbers for the last three years.

	2009/10 '000	2010/11 '000	2011/12 '000
No. of passengers	78,203	76,972	77,249

Translink: Bus Fares

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department is aware of any further plans by Translink to increase bus fares.

(AQW 11423/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Each year, Translink produces a three-year corporate plan which is discussed with my Department and has to focus on the year ahead. Although I have endorsed the position for the current year, I have not done so for the following two years as there is more work to be done. I recognise that the funding position for Translink in 2013-14 and 2014-15 is constrained and this combined with cost pressures on fuel and existing wage agreements means that a financial deficit is projected by Translink at this stage. I expect Translink to draw up plans which take account of their legal obligations under the Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 and the Companies Act 2006 to consider going-concern issues and to break even year on year, in addition to consideration of their funding costs, fare income and levels of service. I am also asking my officials to look at funding.

It is important to recognise that any planned reviews of budgets or future in-year monitoring rounds will also impact here. It will take some time to develop these plans and they will continue to be subject to change.

Landscape Architects

Mrs McKeivitt asked the Minister for Regional Development how many landscape architects were employed for road scheme developments in the last three years.

(AQW 11473/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that landscape architects are generally only employed on major road works schemes. Due to their scale, these projects are developed with the assistance of Consulting Engineers, procured through a framework contract.

Technical input on landscape works is sourced directly from staff within the contracted organisation at the appropriate points as a scheme develops. Details are, therefore, not readily available as to the number of occasions when landscape architects were engaged on these projects.

Landscape architects are generally not required on minor works and none have been employed directly by Roads Service in the last 3 years.

Translink: Incident Monitoring System

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development how many reports have been filed by staff with the Railway Control Office, for inclusion on the Translink Incident Monitoring System, expressing concern about safety and supervision issues on the North-West line since staffing and related changes were made in February 2012; and whether he will inspect all these reports with a view to evaluating the impact of the changes.

(AQW 11476/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink has advised that during the period 3 to 25 February 2012 a total of 5 incidents were recorded. These ranged from minor damage to locomotives which were located in the siding at Londonderry to staff expressing concerns for safety. Three of these incidents, which occurred between 15-16 February, are inter related in that the PSNI advised of a potential threat to throw paint bombs at trains or at railway station premises and additional security measures were put in place at the time to deal with this situation. No relevant incidents have been recorded after this 'cluster', which occurred in the period immediately following the implementation of revised working arrangements in the Londonderry station.

The safety of staff is of course a priority and Translink will continue to monitor the situation. The nature of the particular incidents recorded above do not require further investigation by the Department.

Waste-water Treatment Plant in Newcastle

Mrs McKeivitt asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the upgrade of the wastewater treatment plant in Newcastle.

(AQW 11536/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I recently visited Newcastle to view progress on the first phase of a £7 million contract for the upgrading of the wastewater treatment works. I was impressed with the ongoing work and the benefits it will bring to Newcastle. These will include the provision of enhanced level of treatment, improved effluent quality and the provision of effluent storage prior to treatment for storm conditions.

Northern Ireland Water anticipates that the upgraded Works will be operational by May 2013 with the completion of work on site by the end of Summer 2013.

Listed Properties

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail listed properties that are owned by his Department.
(AQW 11554/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I can advise the Member that my Department's Roads Service's Section Office at 6 Tullybroom Road, Clogher, Co Tyrone is a listed property.

In addition, Roads Service owns Craigowen Lodge, 208 Bangor Road, Hollywood, a property that is also listed. This property was purchased to accommodate the completion of a road scheme, but is now deemed surplus to requirements and is expected to be disposed off during the current financial year.

Translink: Bus Services

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he intends to reduce the number of Translink (i) bus services; and (ii) bus drivers in and out of the Derry City Council area.
(AQW 11578/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: In respect of the current financial year Translink has not indicated to my Department any intention to reduce bus services in the Derry City Council area. Translink will be working to clarify its plans for 2013/14 and 2014/15 which, based on current projections, suggest that measures to get closer to a financial balance will be required. It is not clear at this point if these measures will impact on the Derry City Council area.

Translink: Bus Services

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department intends to introduce saving measures to prevent cuts to Translink bus services.
(AQW 11579/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink faces a combination of cost pressures together with constrained funding over the next few years. I expect my Department to ensure Translink maximise efficiencies and savings to help relieve pressures across the whole of our public transport side. Clearly NITHC/Translink has the primary responsibility to develop effective remedial plans of action which minimise the risk of cuts to services. Each year Translink produces a 3 year Corporate Plan which is discussed with my Department. The focus of the plan is on the first year. Translink is obligated under the Transport and Company acts to consider going concern issues and must break even year on year. Plans are drawn up which take account of this obligation, funding, costs, fare income and levels of service.

I have endorsed the position for the current 2012/13 financial year. I have not done so for the later 2 years of the plan as there is more work to be done. Translink have projected a deficit for 2013/14 and 2014/15. I expect Translink to develop plans to address this and I have also asked my officials to look at funding options. Following two earlier efficiency reviews of Translink, as part of the programme for Reform of Public Transport; my Department is in the process of initiating a further efficiency review of Translink to inform this task.

Rural Community Transport Organisations: Grant Offers

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the formal grant offers to rural community transport organisations for the current financial year; and whether the delay in the release of funds caused Down Community Transport to stop the delivery of its services for a number of days.
(AQW 11620/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Each Rural Community Transport Partnership has now been advised of the level of funding they will receive for 2012/13. Formal letters of offer will issue soon. It is important that each of the Community Transport organisations is clear about the level of funding available for the year and understands and plans for this.

I am aware that the Board and manager of Down District Accessible Transport (DDAT) did decide to cease providing Dial-A-Lift services from 1 May 2012 to 3 May 2012 due to lack of cash. This is regrettable given that on the 24 April 2012 an interim payment to DDAT of £76,000 was approved. In addition an official spoke to the Chair of the Board of Directors on 30 April 2012 to explain the situation and again reassure the Board that an interim payment had been processed by my Department.

I am not in a position to comment on the actual level of cash resources available to Down Community Transport.

Bogside, Derry: Residents' Parking Scheme

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the reasons for the delay in introducing legislation for the Residents' Parking Scheme in the Bogside area of Derry; and when the legislation will be implemented.

(AQW 11627/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Residents' Parking Scheme proposed for the Bogside area of Londonderry is one of a number of such schemes being developed in parallel by my Department's Roads Service. These proposed schemes are the first for Northern Ireland, and as such, it is important that all the issues relating to operation and enforcement are fully addressed and accurately provided for in the legislation before moving to implementation.

While the underlying aim for each scheme is the same i.e. parking being controlled for the benefit of residents, there will be slight differences in the operation of each scheme to reflect local circumstances and each will need to be legislated for separately.

There have also been a number of technological advancements since Residents' Parking was first considered by Roads Service, for example, the potential for the automation of permits and their enforcement will have an impact on how the schemes will operate and Roads Service is assessing the legislative implications arising from such developments.

Roads Service will continue to progress the Residents' Parking Schemes and the associated legislation as quickly as possible and anticipates that schemes will be delivered mid-late 2013.

Rural Transport Fund: Grant Aid

Mr Rogers asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail, for the period 1 April 2011 to 31 March 2012, (i) the amount of Rural Transport Fund grant aid awarded to each of the seven regions; and (ii) the number of Dial-a-Lift trips completed in each region.

(AQW 11643/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The information requested is detailed in the table below.

REGION	Total Admin Costs	Total Dial-A-Lift Operational Support	Total Group Support	Total Annual Grant Funding	Total No. of Dial-A-Lift Trips
CDM (Cookstown, Dungannon and Magherafelt)	£224,166.31	£355,816.86	£20,000.00	£599,983.17	45,103
Down District Accessible Transport	£206,186.20	£284,432.66	£nil	£490,618.86	13,731
Easilink (Strabane, Foyle and Omagh)	£203,226.22	£326,228.46	£20,000.00	£549,454.68	41,891
Fermanagh	£178,527.24	£330,637.66	£20,000.00	£529,164.90	37,997
Loughside (Lagan Valley, South Antrim)	£171,762.00	£153,749.56	£nil	£325,511.56	18,991
NCCT (Roe Valley, Coleraine, Ballycastle, Ballymena)	£207,278.85	£361,330.03	£30,000.00	£598,608.88	36,230
Southern Area (Armagh, Newry & Mourne & Banbridge)	£202,777.75	£200,652.03	£20,000.00	£423,429.78	33,533
Overall Totals	£1,393,924.57	£2,012,847.26	£110,000.00	£3,516,771.83	227,476

The regions listed relate to combinations of Rural Transport Partnerships who have merged recently or who, it is hoped, are working towards formal merger. The statistic for Dial a Lift trips does not record length of journeys.

Translink: Buses

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Regional Development, in light of the number of instances in which buses have caught fire in recent years, what steps are being taken to ensure the safety of passengers, including school children.

(AQW 11646/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department can and does raise safety issues at regular accountability meetings with Translink officials and its Board has longstanding governance arrangements in place to monitor safety issues. Translink has advised that all such incidents are investigated and recommendations developed on the basis of that investigation are rigorously implemented.

Recent recommendations have included:

- Campaign modification/replacement of a component

- Revision of vehicle inspection instruction
- Re-training of employees on vehicle maintenance issues
- Continued market research in strategies and equipment to mitigate the risk and control of fire
- Withdrawal of buses for immediate checking

These recommendations are then used in the procurement of new vehicles, ensuring that:-

- There is close liaison with the manufactures in order to design out known causes of vehicle fires
- The vehicle specification is enhanced to improve the vehicle's performance in reducing the possibility of fire

Salters Bridge Housing Development, Magherafelt

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Regional Development whether the Saltersbridge Housing Development, Magherafelt is included in the list of unfinished estates that are under consideration by his Department for the completion of roads, lighting and sewer facilities; and if so, when the work is expected to begin.

(AQW 11776/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service advises that the Saltersbridge Housing Development, also known locally as Sandy Braes, proposes the construction of 117 dwelling units, only 13 of which have been completed to date.

Access to the development is via a developer constructed bridge, for which, the developer has yet to submit to Roads Service the requisite design and checking certification. NI Water has also advised that the developer has not yet made an application for the adoption of the sewers. Consequently, the sewers remain the property and responsibility of the developer. Roads Service has also advised that there are difficulties in relation to the bonds/sureties relating to the development.

Given the absence of the requisite certifications and bond/sureties, Roads Service will not be taking enforcement action to complete the roads, lighting and sewer works associated with this development.

Department for Social Development

Welfare Reform

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development when he, or his predecessor, first met with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions as a consultee on Welfare Reform; and what subsequent meetings they have had on this matter.

(AQW 11041/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I met with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on 13 March 2012 to discuss a range of matters including Welfare Reform. I understand that my predecessor met with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in September 2010.

Rathgill Park, Bangor: Refurbishment of Flats

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the refurbishment of flats at Rathgill Park, Bangor.

(AQW 11082/11-15)

Mr McCausland: A window replacement scheme is scheduled to go on site in July, a heating replacement scheme will follow later this financial year and a kitchen replacement scheme has been provisionally programmed for 2014/15.

West Green Area, Loughview Estate, Hollywood: Social Housing

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the timescale for the new social housing units in the West Green area in Loughview Estate, Hollywood.

(AQW 11159/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Clanmil Housing has already been appointed to take this scheme forward and expect construction to start on site before the end of this financial year.

Benefits: Change to Levels

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the change to benefit levels by linking them to the Consumer Price Index rather than the Retail Price Index.

(AQW 11270/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Firstly I am sure the member will want to join me in welcoming the increase of 5.2% in benefits from April this year using the Consumer Prices Index especially at a time when inflation has fallen and is predicted to fall further. While I accept that, currently, the Retail Prices Index (RPI) is higher than the Consumer Prices Index (CPI), using the CPI to up-rate benefits will ensure they keep their value in relation to the headline measure of inflation used by the Bank of England.

In Northern Ireland, the Department has no power to vary the percentage rate by which benefits are increased from the rate used by the Secretary of State in respect of Great Britain. The percentage increase in benefit levels from April 2013 will be known when the 2013 up-rating figure is announced in the autumn fiscal statement which is normally made at the end of November.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive: Under-occupancy

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development how many under-occupied homes are owned by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, broken down by district office.

(AQW 11351/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not have definitive data on the current occupancy of its total housing stock. This is because household composition can significantly change over time subsequent to the allocation of a tenancy. However, figures from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency suggest that approximately 65% of Housing Executive properties are under occupied on the bedroom standard.

Village Designs: Tendering Process

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Social Development how many Northern Ireland based companies were successful in the tendering process for the preparation of Village Designs; and what is this figure as a percentage of the overall number of applicants.

(AQW 11419/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department is currently working with the Central Procurement Directorate to establish a framework contract for the appointment of consultants to undertake regeneration and planning work such as the preparation of masterplans.

At the first stage of the procurement process, interested firms were invited to submit pre-qualification questionnaires. 21 firms submitted valid pre-qualification questionnaires and of these, 3 were from Northern Ireland owned firms, 13 were from firms with headquarters in Great Britain and branch offices in Northern Ireland, 4 were from firms based in Great Britain with no Northern Ireland presence and 1 was from a firm based in the Republic of Ireland with no Northern Ireland presence. Firms which are either locally owned or have a Northern Ireland Office account for 76% of applicants.

12 firms have been short-listed to proceed to the second stage of the competition. Of these, 2 are Northern Ireland owned firms, 8 are UK firms with branch offices in Northern Ireland, 1 is from a UK firm with no Northern Ireland presence and 1 is from a Republic of Ireland firm with no Northern Ireland presence. Firms which are either locally owned or have a Northern Ireland Office account for 83% of those shortlisted.

The appointment of up to 5 firms to the contract will be confirmed in June. It is a condition of the contract that the appointed firms must either already have a Northern Ireland office or establish one before they are awarded any work from the framework.

Regional Infrastructure Support Programme

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the staff time and cost incurred by his Department in developing the new arrangements for the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme; (ii) the cost incurred by his Department in advertising for the generic provider of infrastructure support; (iii) the staff time and costs involved in assessing Expressions of Interest for the provision of generic infrastructure support; and (iv) the number of Expressions of Interest received for the provision of generic infrastructure support.

(AQW 11480/11-15)

Mr McCausland: It is not possible to provide a meaningful answer in respect of the staff time and cost incurred by my Department in developing the new Regional Infrastructure Support Programme because the review was conducted a part of normal business activity and specific records were not kept.

The cost incurred by my Department in advertising for the generic provider was £1,938.00. The staff time and costs involved in assessing the two Expressions of Interest received for generic infrastructure support were approximately 12 hours, amounting to approximately £318.00.

Community and Voluntary Sector: Support

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) which organisation or consortium has been selected by his Department to deliver generic infrastructure support to the community and voluntary sector; and (ii) if a consortium has been selected, the level of funding allocated to each organisation within it.

(AQW 11481/11-15)

Mr McCausland: A consortium led by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA), to include Chief Officers 3rd Sector (CO3), Rural Community Network (RCN), and Community Evaluation Northern Ireland (CENI), has been selected following receipt of expressions of interest.

The level of funding has not yet been determined and is subject to normal application, appraisal and decision making procedures.

Regional Infrastructure Support Programme

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development (i) what plans his Department has to evaluate independently the new Regional Infrastructure Support Programme; and (ii) for his assessment of the extent to which the programme meets the infrastructure support needs of the community and voluntary sector.

(AQW 11482/11-15)

Mr McCausland: A programme evaluation will be conducted by individuals not involved with the management or implementation of the programme, in accordance with Department of Finance and Personnel guidance.

My assessment is that the programme fully meets the infrastructure support needs of the voluntary and community sector as reflected in the responses to the consultation process.

Social Housing: Under-occupancy

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Social Development what percentage of social housing is currently considered to be under-occupied.

(AQW 11506/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency figures suggest that approximately 65% of Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties are under occupied on the bedroom standard. No comparable statistics are available for Housing Associations but research is underway to determine those figures.

Housing Executive: Double-glazing Scheme

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development, prior to his announcement in the Assembly about postponing the Housing Executive double-glazing scheme, whether he ensured that the companies involved were informed and did not order stock for the current Housing Executive specification which would be of huge cost to the companies concerned.

(AQW 11509/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I wrote to the Housing Executive's Chief Executive asking him to rigorously and urgently review the specification for double glazing. I made it clear in a Press release issued on 9 May that where current Egan Contractors had placed a contract with a window manufacturer for the delivery of frames and cancellation would lead to nugatory expenditure, these contracts can proceed. As part of the Housing Executive's review I have agreed what category groups and schemes should now proceed and I have asked the Housing Executive to urgently write to all contractors to confirm the position.

Housing Executive: Double-glazing Scheme

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development why he did not ensure that the Housing Executive's current specification to contractors for double-glazing installation was to his satisfaction before the scheme began.

(AQW 11513/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive initially advised me that the costs of the double glazing programme, originally estimated at 48,000 homes, would be around £120m. As a result I became concerned that the Housing Executive's specification for the supply and fitting of double glazing did not offer value for money and there may be potential for significant savings to be made. I asked my officials to research the specifications used as I was particularly concerned about the requirement to remove and replaster around frames, which necessitates the payment of redecoration grants and causes inconvenience to tenants and also the specification for hinges and handles, as these are much higher than industry standards for domestic properties. I therefore asked the Housing Executive to rigorously review the specification.

I can confirm that all homes will remain in the double glazing programme and no tenant who was promised double glazing will lose out. It is estimated that around 30,000 homes will be included in the double glazing programme and this will be completed in the current CSR period, by 2015, as set out in the Executive's Programme for Government.

Housing Executive: Double-glazing Scheme

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties affected by the double-glazing scheme being put on hold, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 11534/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information requested is not currently available. I wrote to the Housing Executive's Chief Executive asking him to rigorously and urgently review the specification for double glazing. This review will not have an impact on the Programme for Government target date of 2015 and, although there may be slight delays, all the estimated 30,000 homes will remain in the programme and no tenant who was promised double glazing will lose out. As part of the Housing Executive's review I have agreed what category groups and schemes should now proceed. I have asked the Housing Executive to urgently write to all contractors to confirm the position.

Housing Executive: Double-glazing Scheme

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development (i) why the fitting of double-glazing to Housing Executive properties has been suspended; (ii) how he came to this decision; and (iii) when the programme will recommence.

(AQW 11566/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive initially advised me that the costs of the double glazing programme, originally estimated at 48,000 homes, would be around £120m. As a result I became concerned that the Housing Executive's specification for the supply and fitting of double glazing did not offer value for money and there may be potential for significant savings to be made. I asked my officials to research the specifications used as I was particularly concerned about the requirement to remove and replaster around frames, which necessitates the payment of redecoration grants and causes inconvenience to tenants and also the specification for hinges and handles, as these are much higher than industry standards for domestic properties.

I subsequently wrote to the Housing Executive's Chief Executive asking him to rigorously and urgently review the specification for double glazing. This work will be completed before the Procurement Strategy is approved by the Housing Executive Board at the end of June. As part of the Housing Executive's review I have agreed what category groups and schemes should now proceed and I have asked the Housing Executive to urgently write to all contractors to confirm the position.

While it is estimated that around 30,000 homes will be included in the double glazing programme, and this will be completed in the current CSR period, any delay will be as short as possible while the Housing Executive carries out the review requested by me.

Employment and Support Allowance: Assessments

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the level of (i) medical training; and (ii) qualifications required for staff who carry out assessments of claimants for Employment and Support Allowance; and how the staff ensure that a clinically informed decision on the full medical capability of the claimant is made, particularly in relation to the mental health descriptors.

(AQW 11571/11-15)

Mr McCausland:

- (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. Healthcare professionals are required to complete a paper based examination at the end of their classroom training. The standard to be achieved is a minimum pass mark of 85%. All Healthcare professionals are approved by the Social Security Agency's Health Assessment Advisor.
- (ii) All Health Care Professionals carrying out medical assessments on behalf of the Social Security Agency are required to be fully qualified Doctors or Nurses with a minimum of three years full time relevant post qualification experience and unconditional registration with the General Medical Council or the Nursing and Midwifery Council.

Health Care Professionals are subject to a 100% audit during initial training to ensure that they are making clinically informed decisions on the full medical capability of the customer, before their appointment is approved. Reports continue to be audited monthly using an agreed sample size to ensure quality and consistency.

Specific mental health training is provided to all Health Care Professionals and Mental Health Champions are in place to ensure correct choice of mental health descriptors.

Co-ownership Housing Scheme

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the success of the additional funding allocated to the Co-Ownership Housing Scheme.

(AQW 11581/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In total the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association has received £28.25 million of funding from my Department in the 2011/12 financial year.

In conjunction with private finance resources, such funding has allowed Co-Ownership to support the purchase of 643 affordable homes; helping to meet the aspirations of those seeking to be homeowners but who cannot do so without the assistance the Co-Ownership Scheme brings.

Housing Executive: Double-glazing Scheme

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development (i) for an estimate of the jobs that might be lost as a result of his review of the double-glazing scheme installation specification; and (ii) what value of stock purchased by companies will be unusable as a result.

(AQW 11593/11-15)

Mr McCausland: As part of the Housing Executive's review I have agreed what category groups and schemes should now proceed and I have asked the Housing Executive to urgently write to all contractors to confirm the position. I am therefore not prepared to speculate on job and financial losses to double glazing firms. I committed funding to this programme and I believe it will create jobs for NI companies over the next four years. It is estimated that around 30,000 homes will be included in the double glazing programme and this will be completed in the current CSR period, by 2015 as set out in the Executive's Programme for Government.

Housing Executive: Double-glazing Scheme

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development when the review of the Housing Executive's double-glazing scheme will be completed.

(AQW 11594/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The review will be completed just as soon as the Housing Executive rigorously reviews its entire glazing specification, especially the requirement to remove and replaster around frames thus necessitating the payment of redecoration grants and their standards for reversible windows, hinges and handles. This work will be completed before the Procurement Strategy is approved by the Housing Executive Board at the end of June.

Consumer Focus Scotland Report 'Reaping the Benefits of Renewables'

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the report by Consumer Focus Scotland 'Reaping the Benefits of Renewables - The role of community benefit funds in tackling fuel poverty and energy efficiency' including what lessons his Department might learn from this report.

(AQW 11610/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Improving the energy efficiency of fuel poor households is an important part of the new Fuel Poverty Strategy "Warmer Healthier Homes". Community benefit funds could have a role to play in tackling fuel poverty and reducing energy inefficiency. I welcome this report and will consider the recommendations along with other Executive colleagues as this issue cuts across the responsibilities of the Department of Finance and Personnel, the Department of the Environment and the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development.

Bloomfield, Bangor: Bungalow Improvements

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development (i) for an update on the proposals to transfer the bungalows that require multi-element improvements in Bloomfield, Bangor, to a housing association; (ii) whether a preferred housing association has been appointed; and (iii) whether the nature of the proposal has been confirmed and communicated to residents.

(AQW 11633/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Following a public meeting held on the 29 March 2012, Oaklee Homes Group has been nominated to work with the Housing Executive and tenants on the stock transfer proposal for 71 bungalows in the Bloomfield Estate and have recently met with Bloomfield Community Association to introduce themselves.

Oaklee is now undertaking a feasibility study on the scheme and will prepare improvement proposals on which the tenants will be formally consulted in the coming months.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister for Social Development what measures he is considering, under the Warm Homes Scheme, to help people afford heating oil, given that its cost has risen dramatically.

(AQW 11695/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Over the last 3 months my Department, in conjunction with Carillion Energy Services and Kingspan Renewables, has been piloting a Pay as You Go for Oil scheme. The technology being used enables householders who use oil to heat their home to purchase oil as they need it, similar to the option available for gas and electricity customers. The pilot is coming to an end and will be fully evaluated however early indications are that the pilot has been successful. This technology will remove householders need to pay in advance for oil and their reliance on emergency drums which are significantly more expensive per litre than buying oil in larger quantities.

Once the pilot has been completed and I have received an evaluation I will assess the options available to include the technology in new or existing schemes delivered by my Department.

Fuel Poverty

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister for Social Development what assistance his Department offers to people in fuel poverty to change their heating systems from oil to gas.

(AQW 11696/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In June 2011 my Department launched a pilot Boiler Replacement Scheme offering assistance to older householders on low income who missed out on other Government energy efficiency improvement schemes to replace old inefficient boilers. The pilot scheme entitled eligible householders to a grant of up to £1,500 towards the cost of installing a new boiler. Householders could use the grant to replace oil boilers with new gas or oil boilers. The scheme was administered by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and has been very successful. The scheme closed on 31 March 2012 and has been subject to an evaluation. I am currently examining the evaluation and expect to be in a position to make an announcement about a new Boiler Replacement Scheme in the near future.

Capital and Revenue Savings

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the capital and revenue savings his Department has made in each of the last three years.

(AQW 11718/11-15)

Mr McCausland: There are no annual capital savings targets, as Departments are obliged to manage and live within the capital budgets set (from a zero base) in the course of the Budget Review process. The 2010 Budget Review set the budgets for 2011-12 to 2014-15. To put this in context, capital spend in 2011-12 was approximately £171.3 million, whereas the opening capital budget allocation for 2012-13 is only £120.4 million.

The revenue savings target and achievement figures for the Department over the last 3 years are as set out in the table below:

Year	Savings Target	Savings Achieved
2009-10	£38.10m	£39.77m
2010-11	£56.30m	£59.22m
2011-12	£25.53m	£26.09m

Personal Independence Payments: Criteria

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development what consideration he has given to the recommendation of the UK Joint Committee on Human Rights on allowing 'some additional discretion to exempt disabled people facing exceptional hardship from the under-occupation provisions', as part of the new criteria for Personal Independence Payments.

(AQW 11761/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The introduction of Personal Independence Payment is intended to create a fairer, more transparent and sustainable system, which provides support to those people with a disability who face the greatest barriers to leading full, active and independent lives. The assessment for Personal Independence Payment will look at disabled people as individuals and does not label them by their health condition or impairment. It has been designed to consider an individual's personal circumstances and the impact their impairment has on their lives. It will consider a person's ability to perform a range of everyday tasks. This will include preparing food and drink, bathing and grooming, engaging socially, moving around and planning and following a journey. The assessment will also take into account whether such activities can be carried out safely or if support from another person, aids or appliances are needed. It will not, however, assess a person's housing needs or costs.

While arguments can be made for exempting certain categories from the size criteria restrictions to be introduced for new and existing working-age Housing Benefit claimants living in the social rented sector, a blanket exemption for any group is not the most effective or affordable approach. Rather than creating exemptions for broad categories, Discretionary Housing Payments provide the right approach to supporting people in more vulnerable circumstances, as they offer flexibility and are based on local decisions which can be targeted as needed. While additional exemptions may seem attractive, their application may not be straight forward, making them difficult to administer. Discretionary Housing Payments funding has already been substantially increased to help with the impact of Housing Benefit reforms and further funding of £1.005m in each of the years from 2013-14 to 2016-17 will be available specifically to help people in significantly adapted accommodation (as well as foster carers). This is because it is accepted that there will be circumstances where it makes no sense for someone to move from a property which has already been significantly adapted to a different property which would require money to be spent on adaptations.

Housing Benefit: Foster Carers or Approved Kinship Carers

Mrs Overend asked the Minister for Social Development how many foster carers or approved kinship carers have been adversely affected by the changes to the Housing Benefit calculations that came into effect in April 2011.

(AQW 11855/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested because the Housing Executive cannot identify Housing Benefit applicants who are foster carers or approved kinship carers in the Housing Benefit system as this is not a determining factor in the awarding of Housing Benefit.

Housing Benefit: Foster Carers or Approved Kinship Carers

Mrs Overend asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) how many foster carers or approved kinship carers have had their overall rate of Housing Benefit reduced since April 2011; and (ii) how many have been offered transitional protection or discretionary payments.

(AQW 11856/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested because the Housing Executive cannot identify Housing Benefit applicants who are foster carers or approved kinship carers in the Housing Benefit system as this is not a determining factor in the awarding of Housing Benefit. However, if a foster carer or approved kinship carer has had their Housing Benefit entitlement affected due to the April 2011 legislative change, then transitional protection would have applied as with all other affected cases.

Housing Benefit: Discretionary Payments

Mrs Overend asked the Minister for Social Development whether foster carers and approved kinship carers are a priority for discretionary Housing Benefit payments.

(AQW 11857/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Fostering arrangements do not warrant the award of priority under the Discretionary Housing Payment scheme. Fostering arrangements are not recognised under the Housing Benefit management system, as income derived from fostering is disregarded in the assessment of Housing Benefit entitlement.

Housing Executive: Double-glazing Scheme

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the review of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's double-glazing specification that he requested due to concerns over value for money.

(AQO 2019/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive initially advised me that the costs of the double glazing programme, originally estimated at 48,000 homes, would be around £120m. As a result I became concerned that the Housing Executive's specification for the supply and fitting of double glazing did not offer value for money. I believe there are further significant savings to be made around the Housing Executive's specification and bespoke procurement process.

I subsequently wrote to the Housing Executive's Chief Executive asking him to rigorously and urgently review the specification for double glazing. The review will be completed urgently and will not have an impact on the target date of 2015, and although there may be slight delays while this is carried out, all homes will remain in the programme and no tenant who was promised double glazing will lose out. As part of the Housing Executive's review I have agreed what category groups and schemes should now proceed and I have asked the Housing Executive to urgently write to all contractors to confirm the position.

While it is estimated that around 30,000 homes will be included in the double glazing programme, and this will be completed in the current CSR period, by 2015 as set out in the Executive's Programme for Government any delay will be as short as possible while the Housing Executive carries out the review requested by me.

Girdwood Site: Housing Developments

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister for Social Development whether the two housing developments that will be located on the Girdwood site will be one Common Landlord Area for people applying to live in the area.

(AQW 12070/11-15)

Mr McCausland: This will ultimately be an issue for the Housing Executive to consider once detailed plans for the residential aspect of the Girdwood Redevelopment proposals are finalised.

Public Realm Schemes: Bangor and Holywood

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Social Development what support his Department is proposing to give to North Down Borough Council for the proposed Public Realm Works in Bangor and Holywood town centres.

(AQO 2025/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In July last year I launched a masterplan for Bangor town centre. The masterplan proposes a range of public realm works to enrich the town centre and make Bangor a more attractive and appealing place to visit and spend time in. In December last year I also visited Holywood and saw at first hand that there is a need to overhaul the public realm to help Holywood to remain a vibrant and busy town centre.

My Department is working with North Down Borough Council to initiate the process to establish the scope, nature and initial design of the proposed public realm works in both towns. As part of this process, my Department will support Council the procurement, design and contract management process by bringing in project management expertise from the Central Procurement Directorate.

My Department has included indicative allocations of funding for both Bangor and Holywood in its Forward Work Programme for the public realm works. £2.5 million has been allocated for Bangor in the 2013/14 and 2014/2015 financial years and £1 million has been allocated for Holywood in the 2014/15 financial year. I would advise that both amounts are subject to the completion of a satisfactory business case, all necessary approvals being in place and sufficient funding being available in my Department's budget.

I understand that North Down Borough Council intends making a significant contribution to the public realm works in Bangor and Holywood and that this matter will come before Council next month. Council should be commended for making this commitment, as this joint investment will enable us create the ideal town centre setting for encouraging more visitors and shoppers to spend time in Bangor and Holywood town centres.

Co-ownership Housing Association: Funding

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the impact of the additional funding provided for the Co-Ownership Housing Association.

(AQO 2026/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In total the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association received £28.25 million of funding from my Department in the 2011/12 financial year. Initially they started the year with just £15m, however thanks to the intervention from Sammy Wilson and myself, we increased that funding with a further £13.5m and as a result we are now delivering more affordable homes than in previous years.

Alongside the private finance that Co-Ownership lever in, this total funding has allowed Co-Ownership to support the purchase of 643 affordable homes; helping to meet the aspirations of those seeking to be homeowners but who cannot do so without the assistance the Co-Ownership Scheme brings.

This represents a significant increase of up to 30% from previous years and underlines my commitment to promoting and more importantly supporting affordable home ownership. I am also pleased to see that local banks have honoured the commitments they made when Sammy Wilson and I met them last year to make the case that if we put more resources into the Co-Ownership scheme, they would have to match that with increased lending to those applicants. This is a good example of how the public and private sector can work together to deliver positive results for people, even in the midst of what are still very difficult economic times.

Child Maintenance

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Social Development how he plans to address the increasing child maintenance debt of absent parents.

(AQO 2028/11-15)

Mr McCausland: It is a priority for my Department to promote and embed behavioural changes amongst parents so that they take financial responsibility for their children and pay regular child maintenance. Regular payments of child maintenance can make a significant difference to the wellbeing of children, particularly those living in poverty.

Parents are supported in making their own maintenance arrangements through the Child Maintenance Choices Service. This is a free, confidential helpline service to help parents decide the Child Maintenance arrangement that best suits their needs.

Child maintenance arrears is money owed by non-resident parents as a result of their failure to meet their financial responsibilities towards their children. Arrears have accumulated over 19 years of operating the statutory child maintenance schemes, therefore a significant amount of the arrears are historic and cannot be resolved at this point in time. My Department does not currently have the legislative power to write off child maintenance arrears. Responsibility for unpaid maintenance rests ultimately with non-resident parents and regrettably some parents go to great lengths to avoid their financial responsibility to their children.

My Department remains focussed on pursuing arrears of child maintenance and continues to robustly apply the full range of enforcement tools available. Tougher strategies have been introduced to recover arrears and additional enforcement powers allow for recovery of child maintenance from a non-resident parent's bank/building society account as well as recovery from deceased estates. Available powers also enable the Department to prevent non-resident parents disposing of their assets to avoid paying child maintenance and to reverse transactions where an asset has already been disposed of.

Housing Executive: Property Transfer to Housing Associations

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the basis on which his Department intends to transfer properties currently owned by the Housing Executive to Housing Associations.

(AQO 2029/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive's multi element improvement programme ended in 2008/09 because of a lack of funding caused by the collapse of the land and property market. There are however still 5,706 Housing Executive properties in need of this sort of multi element improvement work.

I have therefore asked the Housing Executive to prepare a programme that could see up to 2,000 homes transferred into Housing Association ownership over the next three years. This move would of course be subject to a successful tenant vote.

That programme has not been completed and sent to me yet. Once available, I will be happy to publish it outlining what schemes will be included and when. As part of the process, a business case for each individual scheme will be prepared and tenants will be fully consulted with details of the transfer set out in a series of public meetings that will culminate in a tenant vote on the proposals. Tenants will also have access to an Independent Tenant Advisor to guide them through the transfer process.

The stock transfer option would allow Housing Associations to use their own finance to undertake this work, thus delivering the improvements tenants need without the reliance on public resources, the lack of which has stalled this work for some years now.

Welfare Reform Bill

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Social Development when he intends to introduce the Welfare Reform Bill in the Assembly. **(AQO 2030/11-15)**

Mr McCausland: As the Member may know the Welfare Reform Act in GB received Royal Assent at Westminster on 8th March this year. In keeping with the principle of 'parity' in terms of Social Security matters, I will shortly be introducing my proposals for a Welfare Reform Bill for Northern Ireland to this Assembly. Parity dictates that an individual in Northern Ireland is paid the same benefits and subject to the same conditionality as an individual elsewhere in the UK.

I am of course aware of the concerns which are being raised in advance of Bill being introduced and as Minister responsible I take these very seriously. I have established an Executive Sub-Committee to consider issue arising from Welfare Reform and in particular to consider what, by way of mitigation we as an Executive need to consider to protect the most vulnerable in Northern Ireland.

I would also advise the member that my officials have been working closely with their counterparts in GB and that I have held a number of discussions with Ministerial colleagues at Westminster to inform the overall reform process for Northern Ireland and in particular to identify matters where circumstances differ significantly for Northern Ireland.

I have also commissioned work on assessing the impacts of some of the proposed reforms and my officials have developed a 'Policy Simulation Model' for Northern Ireland similar to that used by the Department for Work and pensions in GB.

I trust that this offers you some assurance as to how seriously I am considering the whole reform agenda and that the matter of Welfare Reform in particular is and will remain a priority for both myself and my Ministerial colleagues,

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Political Parties: Financial Assistance

Mr McNarry asked the Assembly Commission what financial allocations have been made under the arrangements for financial assistance to political parties, to each political party in each of the last three years. **(AQW 11425/11-15)**

Mr Weir (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The amounts paid to each political party under the Financial Assistance for Political Parties Scheme 2007 in each of the last three years is detailed in Table 1 overleaf. While the amounts for the 2011/12 financial have still to be audited, it is not anticipated that the final figures will vary significantly from those shown.

Table 1: Payments made under the Financial Assistance to Political Parties Scheme 2007

	2011/12*	2010/11	2009/10
Alliance	£92,115	£83,606	£91,175
DUP	£207,892	£200,869	£189,888
Green	£26,375	£28,723	£25,213
Independent Health Coalition	£2,487	£29,636	£28,125
PUP	£0	£5,102	£28,134
SDLP	£128,194	£135,010	£128,166
Sinn Fein	£176,515	£169,650	£161,318
TUV	£22,894	£0	£0
UUP	£133,914	£134,042	£131,808
Total	£790,386	£786,638	£783,827

* Unaudited figures

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 1 June 2012

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

European Union: Non-structural Funds

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what progress has been made towards increasing EU non-structural funds by 20 percent.

(AQW 6266/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The Executive is committed to increasing the drawdown of competitive EU funding over the current budget period to 2015. EU competitive funds include non-structural funds and INTERREG B and C monies. In 2011/12, £15,826,939 of competitive funding was secured, an increase of £4,868,926 from the 2010/11 baseline of £10,958,013.

The table below gives the non-structural funds element of this drawdown.

Financial Year 2010-11 (baseline)	Financial Year 2011-12
Total drawdown of EU non-structural funds (£ value)	Total drawdown of EU non-structural funds (£ value)
£8,327,361	£13,936,160

Substantial capacity building has been undertaken in 2011 to deliver long-term benefits. Four Thematic Desk Officers took up posts in March 2012 and are now located in the Executive's Brussels Office providing dedicated support to departments in delivering the Executive's European Priorities, including increased engagement in EU competitive funding programmes.

Freedom of Information Act 2000: Review of Operation of

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the process, including Ministerial involvement, in the drafting of the Civil Service's submission to the review of the operation of the Freedom of Information Act by the Westminster Justice Committee.

(AQW 10044/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Secretary of State for Justice, Kenneth Clarke, wrote to us on 1 December 2011 with details of a post-legislative assessment of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 being carried out by the Justice Committee, and invited us to submit evidence to the Committee.

As each of the departments here are separate 'public authorities' under the terms of the legislation, we agreed to a cross-departmental consultation taking place at official level, and to a co-ordinated submission of evidence to the Justice Committee being composed by our officials. Ministers had no role in drafting the Civil Service's submission.

Community Relations Council: Funding

Mr Wells asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what proportion of Community Relation Council funding for 2011/12 was awarded to victims groups (i) from the unionist community; (ii) from the nationalist community; and (iii) that are cross-community. **(AQW 10360/11-15)**

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: A total of £7,323,556.26 was awarded by the Community Relations Council (CRC) in 2011/12 to victims groups.

A breakdown of funding as requested is not available. Funded groups provide CRC with information on the perceived community background of end beneficiaries but CRC have not yet received information from all groups for 2012. Groups themselves are not classified by community background. The community background of groups is not and cannot be a factor considered in any decision-making process for the allocation of funds from the CRC.

Disability: Work Placements and Employment

Lord Morrow asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will introduce legislation to encourage employers, particularly those with a large workforce, to employ more people with disabilities rather than offering voluntary placements.
(AQW 10485/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: As we continue to legislate to meet our commitments under Programme for Government, EU obligations, case law requirements and emerging issues, we are currently considering the need for legislative reform in the area of disability.

Part 2 of the Disability Discrimination Act says that it is unlawful for an employer to discriminate against a disabled person:

- in the arrangements made for determining who should be offered employment;
- in the terms on which the disabled person is offered employment; or
- by refusing to offer, or deliberately not offering, the disabled person employment.

The Disability Code of Practice that relates to employment and occupation explains what this means in practice.

As part of our public consultation on a new disability strategy we have invited consultees to submit their views on the need for further legislation to address the needs of disabled people. Consultation will close on 15 August and the Executive will consider responses after the summer recess.

Consultation Documents and Official Reports: Cost of Producing

Mr Copeland asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what was the cost to their Department of producing (i) consultation documents; and (ii) official reports in the 2010/11 financial year.
(AQW 10537/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The cost to our Department of producing consultation documents and official reports in the 2010/11 financial year was as follows:

Consultation Documents	Official Reports
£19,605	£1,739

Ministerial Subcommittee on Children and Young People

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) how many times, since May 2011, the Ministerial Subcommittee on Children and Young People has met; and (ii) the attendance of each Minister at the meetings.
(AQW 10801/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People (MSC) has met once since May 2011. This was on 11 January 2012. The Junior Ministers chaired the meeting and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Minister of Education attended. The next meeting of the Ministerial Sub-Committee is scheduled for 20 June 2012 and will focus on how the Delivering Social Change framework can achieve improved outcomes for children and young people.

Prior to the MSC meeting, Junior Ministers also held a series of bi-lateral meetings with the Minister of Education, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Minister for Social Development, the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to consider how best to progress work on implementing the Children and Young People's Strategy.

A further series of meetings is currently taking place with Ministers on the identification of actions under the Delivering Social Change framework to tackle child poverty.

Assembly Questions for Written Answer

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 10013/11-15, why the information requested cannot be collated and supplied, given that a function of Assembly Questions is to obtain information which is otherwise not readily available.
(AQW 10833/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: A manual calculation would be required in respect of each of the 500 Assembly Questions tabled since May 2011 and a subsequent analysis of that information to fully answer AQW 10013/11-15.

Our assessment is that this could only be undertaken at disproportionate cost.

Visit to Canada and the USA: Initiatives and Opportunities

Dr McDonnell asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline some of the initiatives and opportunities which they anticipate will result from their recent visit to Canada and the USA.
(AQO 1785/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We undertook an extensive programme of engagements in the United States and Canada in March, visiting Washington, Montreal and Toronto.

With our focus on developing the economy, and with so many important fixtures on the calendar during 2012, we were keen to promote awareness of Northern Ireland across North America.

In Washington, we again represented the Executive at meetings with President Obama in the White House and Secretary of State Clinton. Both meetings were very positive and our message was one of confidence, optimism and the readiness of Northern Ireland to compete internationally as a first rate location for investment, jobs and tourism.

We also hosted our annual flagship Business Breakfast and used the event to promote NI 2012 and the Derry/Londonderry City of Culture 2013. We met with leading politicians on Capitol Hill and attended the annual St Patrick's Days receptions hosted by the Speaker and President Obama.

We also undertook our first official visit to Canada. Canada is a major economic and political powerhouse and it is important that we foster stronger bilateral relations in view of the economic and cultural links that unite our two countries.

We visited the Bombardier Headquarters in Montreal and had discussions with senior management in the company. We then travelled to Toronto and officially launched NI 2012 to a travel trade audience at a business breakfast co-hosted by Tourism Ireland and the NI Bureau.

Later, we were guests of the Ireland Funds of Canada at a business luncheon aimed at promoting the NI business model to potential investors in the city's financial district, supported by InvestNI.

The visit was very successful in securing access to key politicians and business leaders at the highest level in the US and Canada. It would not be appropriate at this stage to discuss the detail of the business meetings or the initiatives we were exploring. However, we are confident that our engagement will bear fruit in the future in creating new jobs and encouraging trade and tourism to Northern Ireland.

Film and Information Technology

Mr Campbell asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether additional opportunities are likely to emerge in the Film and Information Technology sectors in the near future as a result of their recent visit to the USA.

(AQO 1790/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We recognise the importance of the creative industries sector and the role that it can play in our efforts to rebalance the economy, in creating jobs and in contributing to our future economic prosperity.

We visited the West Coast of the United States back in September to promote our capabilities in these sectors. We met with senior executives in the film and TV, video gaming and mobile applications companies, existing investors and promoted our ICT opportunities to other key business interests.

We also met with senior executives from Disney and HBO who were interested in having the UK film tax credit extended to television production here. Without this credit, big-budget TV programmes, such as Game of Thrones, would leave Belfast in search of a better incentive package elsewhere. We held discussions with the Treasury to ensure that the Chancellor would respond to this issue favourably. We were delighted that in March he confirmed his intentions to bring in a tax credit to cover video games, animation, and high-end TV program production.

This decision, on the back of our efforts in Los Angeles, resulted in HBO's decision to shoot series three of Game of Thrones along with the millions of pounds for the local economy that this will generate. This is fantastic news coming on the back of the recent Oscar triumph by Terry George.

As you will appreciate, the impact of our other engagements in the US in terms of investment and jobs may take some time but we are confident that further opportunities will be realised in the near future as a result of our visit.

We have exceptional creative talent here and we have been very successful in attracting major film and television productions. Industry leaders now see us as having some of the best TV and film production talent and facilities in the business and we are determined to build on this in turning the region into a global hub for ideas, innovation, and creativity.

Credit Review Office: Establishment of

Mr Flanagan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on discussions to establish a credit review office.
(AQW 11319/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Junior Ministers have been involved in meetings on this issue.

Given the reserved nature of banking, we would find it difficult to establish an effective Credit Review Office as the local banks would not be required to comply with it.

However, the British Banking Association (BBA) appeals process, which was formally launched on 17 November 2011, creates an appeals mechanism and dispute resolution process which should bring benefits to businesses if they have been denied lending. If a business has been declined lending following a formal application for a business loan, then they have the right to appeal the decision. Each local bank has implemented their own appeals service, so the way in which a business will launch its appeal will

differ depending on their bank. If a business has been declined lending, their bank will write to them providing details on how to go about lodging an appeal.

Child Poverty

Mrs Overend asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how they measure relative low income in relation to child poverty figures.

(AQW 11380/11-15)

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 described the targets against which the success of the Strategy would be measured. This included:

- the relative low income target which is:
 - (1) that less than 10% of children who live in qualifying households live in households that fall within the relevant income group.
 - (2) A household falls within the relevant income group, in relation to a financial year, if its equivalised net income for the financial year is less than 60% of median equivalised net household income for the financial year.

Department for Employment and Learning: Dissolution of

Mr McElduff asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the dissolution of the Department for Employment and Learning.

(AQO 1927/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: In our statement of 17 January, we indicated that we would be seeking the views of key stakeholders and interested parties on how the functions exercised by DEL should be transferred to other departments in the most appropriate manner.

We extended an invitation to comment to some 60 organisations and we have received a range of views. We have been giving careful consideration to these before making final proposals which will be set out in legislation to be brought before the Assembly.

An Assembly debate is also scheduled for 15 May on the report of the Committee for Employment and Learning on its own consultation on this matter. We were very much aware of the extensive work which the Committee was undertaking to seek views on the redistribution of DEL's functions and we will also take note both of its content and of the views expressed by members during the debate.

Victims and Survivors: Development Scheme

Mr Hussey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much money was underspent by groups in receipt of funding from the Victims/Survivors Groups Development Grant Scheme during the 2011/12 financial year.

(AQW 11496/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Community Relations Council has not yet concluded its financial verifications for April 2011 – March 2012. There remains some outstanding information to be provided from funded groups such as invoices and bank statements. Groups had up to 14 May 2012 to provide this information. This will now be verified and the exact underspend figure, if any, can then be quantified.

Victims and Survivors: Development Scheme

Mr Hussey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they can confirm that grants from the Victims/Survivors Groups Development Grant Scheme will be awarded before the end of May 2012, as opposed to the end of September as happened in 2011.

(AQW 11498/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Victims/Survivors Groups Development Grant Scheme opened for applications on 25 January 2012 for the 2012/2013 financial year. Some groups have already received awards for the 2012-2013 financial year from this Scheme. Groups can submit any number of applications up to and including 14 December 2012.

Supporting Life's Journeys Programme

Mr Moutray asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what role the Supporting Life's Journeys Programme can play in helping people who are disadvantaged, lonely or vulnerable.

(AQW 11561/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We are aware of the work that Supporting Life's Journeys programme undertakes in regard to mentoring and befriending.

Such programmes can play a supporting role with the disadvantaged, lonely or vulnerable when they need help the most.

Hardship and Disadvantage

Mr Moutray asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the establishment of an advisory group to assist their Department in alleviating hardship and tackling disadvantage.

(AQW 11562/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We have established an advisory group to assist Ministers in alleviating hardship including any implications of the UK Government's Welfare Reform Programme. The membership of the Group includes:

- Les Allamby – Director, Law Centre
- Lindsay Conway – Director of Social Service, Presbyterian Church's Presbyterian Church Board for Social Responsibility
- Marie Cavanagh – Director, Gingerbread
- Neil Gibson – Director, Regional Services Division, Oxford Economics
- Prof Donal McKillop – Professor of Financial Services, QUB
- Monica Wilson – Director, Disability Action

Through its terms of reference, we asked the Group to consider the scope for intervention by the Executive to alleviate, mitigate and avoid further financial hardship taking account of: the impact of welfare reform; rising levels of fuel poverty; and the prospects for economic growth and to consider particularly the impact on those in receipt of welfare benefits and those in low paid employment.

The Group met for the first time on 5 April 2012 to scope its task and to consider its approach. It met again on 14 May 2012 to receive presentations from key informants. Two further meetings are scheduled to take place in May and June respectively. We expect to receive a preliminary report from the Group after the June meeting.

Social Investment Fund

Mr Moutray asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when they will bring forward proposals on the Social Investment Fund.
(AQW 11564/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Executive has recently agreed the details on the way forward for the operation of the Social Investment Fund.

Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry

Mr Campbell asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an estimate of the total cost to the public purse of the Historical Institutional Child Abuse Inquiry.

(AQW 11681/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Work is ongoing to scope the estimated costs for the Inquiry and Investigation and secure the necessary financial approvals. Estimated costs are therefore not available at this time.

Rasharkin: Display of Flags

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action they are taking to address the surge in the display of republican flags in Rasharkin, to ease the intimidation of the town's unionist minority.

(AQW 11708/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Ballymoney Borough Council has commissioned Mediation NI to reinstate the Rasharkin Community Forum, which includes MLAs, statutory bodies and community representatives. The Council has also received a two-year funding package through Peace III to employ a Development Worker who will focus on youth and community work in Rasharkin.

We understand that work is ongoing through these channels to engage with members of the Rasharkin community to encourage and facilitate them to work together towards mutually acceptable outcomes to their local issues.

Maze/Long Kesh Site: Peace-building and Conflict Resolution Centre

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 9094/11-15, (i) whether the listed and retained buildings, including H block, the prison hospital, visitors and administration blocks, will be open to the public; and (ii) for what they will be used.

(AQW 11730/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Plans for the listed and retained buildings at Maze/Long Kesh are under consideration.

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy Working Group

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the number of submissions each week to the Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy Working Group to date, broken down by Party.

(AQW 11745/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: At the outset of the process, each party submitted a short position paper outlining a proposal on the vision and scope of the strategy.

In addition, all draft text has been circulated for comment in advance of meetings of the Cross-Party Working Group. All parties provided comments and suggested changes to each section of text that was developed and circulated.

Good Relations Funding

Mr G Kelly asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what Good Relations funding has been given to communities living in interface areas.

(AQO 1937/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We remain committed to building a united and shared society. The finalised Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (CSI) Strategy will be the building block for achieving this vision. Through the Strategy, we will address the division that continues to mar many areas in our community and tackle the segregation.

In recognition of the importance that we already place on tackling these complex issues, the department invested £785,000 in 2011/12 through the North Belfast Strategic Good Relations Programme. Moreover, through the Contested Spaces Programme, jointly funded with Atlantic Philanthropies, the Department has committed £2m over 3 years to support good relations projects in interface areas and areas where there are contested spaces.

Flags Protocol Working Group

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the progress of the Flags Protocol Working Group.

(AQO 1940/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: In December 2011, the Flags Protocol Working Group was reconvened at our request and that of the cross party working group on Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (CSI). The Working Group has now met on three occasions with a further meeting planned for the coming weeks.

A draft discussion paper has been produced to inform the ongoing considerations of the Working Group before recommendations on a revised framework are brought forward.

Following agreement of a revised framework, it is the intention that this document would form one aspect of the monitoring and implementation arrangements of the CSI Strategy.

Capital and Revenue Savings

Mr Gardiner asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the capital and revenue savings their Department has made in each of the last three years.

(AQW 11773/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Over the last three financial years 2009/10, 2010/11 and 2011/12, OFMDFM has delivered revenue savings of £3.87m, £8.72m and £7.36m respectively. Capital savings achieved were £0.91m and £0.45m over the financial years 2009-10 and 2010-11 respectively.

Civil Servants

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many civil servants currently employed in their Department have been re-employed after receiving a redundancy package from the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

(AQW 11806/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: There are no civil servants currently employed in our Department who have been re-employed after receiving a redundancy package from the NI Civil Service.

Sustainable Development Champions' Group

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 11254/11-15, why they did not provide details of the recommendations made by the Sustainable Development Champions.

(AQW 11899/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The recommendations of the Sustainable Development Champions Group remain under active consideration by the Executive and it would not be appropriate to provide further details until the Executive has had an opportunity to take a view.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Capital and Revenue Savings

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the capital and revenue savings her Department has made in each of the last three years.

(AQW 11656/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Savings made for the Financial Years 2009/10 and 2010/11 were within the Budget 2007 period. These are shown on Table 1.

Table 1

Capital and Revenue Savings in 2009/10 and 2010/11		
Description of Saving	2009/10	2010/11
	£m	£m
CAPITAL EXPENDITURE		
Capital Expenditure on Accommodation	0.40	0.40
RESOURCE EXPENDITURE		
Rural Development savings associated with the new NIRDP	1.20	1.20
Review of Processes within Admin Functions	0.00	0.87
Less Favoured Area Compensatory Allowances	2.00	2.00
Excess Forest Service Receipts	1.00	1.00
Northern Ireland Food Strategy	1.50	1.44
AFBI Grant-in-Aid Reductions	1.42	2.11
Genotyping Laboratory Contract	0.20	0.20
Animal Health Responsibility and Cost Sharing	2.66	4.15
TB and Brucellosis Policy	0.83	1.83
TB and Brucellosis Control Programmes	0.73	1.31
Identifications, Registration and Movement of Animals Procedures	0.29	1.56
Total Savings	12.23	18.07

Savings made for the Financial Year 2011/12 are within the Budget 2010 period. These are shown on Table 2.

Table 2

Savings in 2011/12 (All Resource)	
Category	£m
Lower Priority	2.29
Corporate Services	0.68
Redundant Programmes	0.75
Admin/Policy, Funding and Regulations	0.55
Transactions	0.14
Procurement	0.94
Maximising Revenue	0.03
Other	0.63
Total	6.01

Masserene Barracks Site

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether her Department would consider using the Masserene Barracks site for departmental business in the future.

(AQW 11755/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department currently has no plans to utilise the Masserene Barracks site. However any consideration of the future potential use of this or any other site would be determined by need and suitability.

Listed Properties

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the listed properties that are owned by her Department.

(AQW 11789/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The information held by the Department on listed properties which it owns is subject to review. The list includes:

Loughry Campus

- Dean Swift's Cottage (Summer House)
- Loughry House (Lindsay Manor House)

Rivers Agency

- Locks and Mooring Post on Blackwater Navigation, Benburb
- The Cackle House, Crumlin Glen
- Toomebridge Lock-Lower Bann Navigation
- Navigation Lock, The Cutts, Coleraine
- Portna Locks-Lower Bann Navigation
- Lock and bridge, Milltown Road, Ballynavally, Castlereagh

Loughgall

- Manor House
- Manor House Entrance Gates
- Manor House Gate Lodges

Greenmount Campus

- Principal's House, The Lodge, 22 Greenmount Road, Antrim
- Manor House, 22 Greenmount Road, Antrim
- Manor House Extension, 22 Greenmount Road, Antrim
- Gate Lodge, 30 Greenmount Road, Antrim
- Gate Lodge, 31 Greenmount Road, Antrim

Forest Service

- Outbuildings at Hawthorne Hill Tower, Castlearchdale, Mullies
- Gate Lodge, Town Gate, Castlewellan
- The Grange and Outbuildings, Castlewellan
- Gate Screen/Town Gate, Castlewellan
- The Bee House, Gosford, Markethill
- Drum Manor (House), Oaklands
- Entrance Gateway, Gosford Demesne, Markethill
- Barbican Gate, Tullymore
- Tower, Tullymore
- Hermitage, Tullymore
- Clanbrassil Barn, Gateway (and enclosing walls), Tullymore
- Monument/Memorial, Tullymore
- Walled Garden, The Castle, Castlewellan Castlecaldwell, Belleek
- Altavaddy Bridge, Tullymore
- Old Bridge, Tullymore
- Horn Bridge and Garden Bridges, Tullymore
- Ivy Bridge, Tullymore Forest Foley's Bridge, Tullymore

- Parnell's Bridge, Tullymore
- Maria's Bridge, Tullymore
- Fountain, Tullymore
- Walled Garden, Castlewellan Castle
- Donard Bridge, Newcastle
- Arch Brae Bridge & Embankment, Deerpark, Florencecourt
- Juggy's Bridge, Florencecourt

Bovine TB

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail any comparisons that have been carried out between the likelihood of a Temporary Veterinary Officer and a Veterinary Officer Testing classifying herds with a bovine TB breakdown.

(AQW 11805/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: No comparison has been made of the relative likelihood of a Temporary Veterinary Officer (TVO) classifying a herd as a TB breakdown compared with a Veterinary Officer Testing (VOT).

At this time there is no business or disease control reason for DARD to compare detection rates between the two groups of DARD staff. However their individual quality of testing is audited and their test statistics are provided to their managers twice per year for monitoring purposes.

Civil Servants

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many civil servants currently employed in her Department have been re-employed after receiving a redundancy package from the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

(AQW 11807/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: There are no civil servants currently employed within DARD who have been re-employed after receiving a redundancy package from the NICS.

Redundancies: DARD Staff

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) how many departmental staff have been made redundant on a compulsory or voluntary basis, in each of the last three years; (ii) how many of these posts have not been filled; and (iii) what savings have been made as a result, broken down by each unit within her Department.

(AQW 11836/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: One DARD officer was made redundant on a compulsory basis in the 2009/10 financial year. No other redundancies have taken place since. This post was not filled and savings of £35,700 have been made.

Single Farm Payments: Backlog

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the backlog of Single Farm Payments that have yet to be made; and what is the value of those payments, broken down by district council area.

(AQW 11837/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: As at 24 May 2012 my Department had completed 95.5% of all claims and paid out over £254million. This leaves 1,707 claims left to process with around £12.3 million still to be paid for the 2011 Single Farm Payment (SFP) scheme year. These claims are outstanding for a number of reasons including the need to apply inspection findings, because probate is not yet completed or because the farmer has not provided bank account details to allow payment to be credited to their bank account. Not all the remaining claims may be due a payment because of ineligibility or the application of penalties under scheme rules. The European Council legislation which governs the administration of the SFP schemes requires 95.24% of the budget for the 2011 scheme year to be paid out by 30 June 2012 in order for the Department to avoid late payment penalties being imposed by the European Commission. At 24 May 2012, 95.2% of the budget had been paid out.

The Department does not hold Single Farm Payment details on a district council basis. The data is currently held by postcode and county where known. A list of the total number of 2011 applications to Single Farm Payment yet to be paid and their potential maximum total net value as at 24 May 2012, for each postcode area in table below.

2011 – Single Farm Payment

Outstanding Payments @ 24/5/2012

Postcode	Max Nett Amount Due £	Number of Cases
BT1	7206.52	4
BT2	5444.90	2

Postcode	Max Nett Amount Due £	Number of Cases
BT4	106.81	1
BT5	4525.07	2
BT6	14338.87	2
BT7	788.87	2
BT8	52718.95	3
BT9	474.43	1
BT11	234.13	1
BT14	11281.44	1
BT15	3543.41	2
BT18	39349.68	3
BT19	376.21	1
BT20	1132.34	2
BT22	99938.83	10
BT23	125126.10	17
BT24	394550.20	39
BT25	150037.70	20
BT26	124676.40	10
BT27	23883.89	8
BT28	166431.50	28
BT29	65939.70	16
BT30	215564.90	36
BT31	203928.50	30
BT32	109794.90	24
BT33	30235.14	6
BT34	463178.90	91
BT35	708337.50	98
BT36	12496.51	7
BT38	43576.10	8
BT39	171171.10	28
BT40	90963.36	18
BT41	190593.80	21
BT42	367020.60	46
BT43	369537.70	21
BT44	385371.40	55
BT45	548347.10	71
BT46	260060.40	44
BT47	517106.10	46
BT48	11649.57	5

Postcode	Max Nett Amount Due £	Number of Cases
BT49	65527.88	11
BT51	249195.90	30
BT52	16003.33	5
BT53	54133.53	18
BT54	121971.30	12
BT57	93456.09	6
BT60	394587.80	64
BT61	56870.86	21
BT62	91247.29	22
BT63	38316.55	8
BT66	40190.30	10
BT67	103611.60	14
BT68	54463.39	4
BT69	60284.84	7
BT70	532205.50	69
BT71	130302.40	26
BT74	195166.00	37
BT75	134341.10	11
BT76	183716.30	11
BT77	156569.40	8
BT78	727104.30	98
BT79	534273.00	61
BT80	233328.20	50
BT81	320860.40	34
BT82	184883.2	24
BT92	466515.60	78
BT93	575630.20	59
BT94	331688.50	46
Other	159757.30	33
Total	12,297,241	1,707

Dog Tail Docking

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether her Department has been contacted by any vets who are refusing to implement dog tail docking because they have to designate the dog's breed initially.

(AQW 11859/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Since 1993 under current legislation only a veterinary surgeon can dock a pup's tail. As the provision on docking of dogs' tails in the Welfare of Animals Act 2011 has not yet been commenced, there is currently no requirement for a veterinary surgeon to designate the dog's breed. However, I can advise that my Department has not received any representations from veterinary surgeons indicating that they will refuse to implement the tail docking exemption for certified working dogs because they have to designate the dog's breed.

The proposals in the draft Docking of Working Dogs' Tails (Certification and Identification) Regulations 2012, which will introduce the exemption from the tail docking ban for certified working dogs, were subject to a 12 week public consultation late last year. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) stated in their response to the consultation that they were opposed to the docking of puppies' tails and consider that the docking of all breeds of dogs should be banned, other than for veterinary medical reasons. However, they also stated that they understood that some of their members may choose to dock dogs' tails within the proposed legal framework. Whilst the veterinary profession may be opposed to tail docking in itself, they have worked with my Department to ensure that a robust exemption for certified working dogs can be put in place.

During the consultation my officials met with representatives from the veterinary profession in the north to discuss the proposals including the certification process for a potential future working dog. At that meeting there was no indication that the veterinary profession had specific concerns regarding designating a dog's breed. VetNI subsequently replied to the consultation on behalf of NIVA, the BVA and the AVSPNI indicating their broad support for the proposals in the Regulations and suggesting some additional requirements to better protect the welfare of puppies here.

It is important to remember that under both the current legislation and the proposed Regulations which will permit tail docking of future working dogs of certain breeds, there is no legal obligation requiring any veterinary surgeon to dock a pup's tail. This will, as at present, be an "ethical" decision for the individual veterinary surgeon.

Arm's-length Bodies: Invoices

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what percentage of invoices, received by each of her Department's arm's-length bodies in the last twelve months, were paid within 30 days of receipt.

(AQW 11869/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The percentage of invoices received by each of this Department's arm's-lengths bodies, in the period April 2011 to March 2012, which were paid within 30 days of receipt was as follows:

Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority	Livestock and Meat Commission	Agri-Food & Biosciences Institute	Loughs Agency
95%	96%	90% *	96%

* **This percentage is based on an estimate; however the final figure will be audited and published in the AFBI Annual Report and Accounts.**

Bovine TB in Wild Deer

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what research and tests have been carried out on Bovine TB in wild deer in the last five years; and to list the areas where the tests were carried out and the number of deer involved.

(AQW 12012/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I can confirm that a surveillance exercise to detect the prevalence of bovine TB in wild deer was carried out by my Department during 2008/2009.

In that exercise 6 wild deer populations were sampled in which evidence of, or suspicion of, TB had been reported previously. Of the 6 sites surveyed, which were distributed across the north of Ireland, 3 were private estates and 3 were Forest Service sites. A total of 146 deer were sampled.

The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) carried out a range of laboratory tests on samples taken from these deer carcasses.

The prevalence of TB among wild deer in this survey was 2.0%. This was lower than findings from a larger survey in 1995 when 276 wild fallow and sika deer were sampled, giving a TB prevalence of TB of 4.7%.

Homeopathic and Herbal Medicines to Treat Animals

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 10737/11-15, what research departmental scientists have conducted into the potential benefits to animal health through the promotion of homeopathic and herbal medicines as an alternative to antibiotics; and to list any funding that her Department has provided for the research of these treatments in each of the last three years.

(AQW 12018/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department has not commissioned or funded research into the potential benefits to animal health of homeopathic and herbal medicines as alternatives to antibiotics and has no plans to do so at this time.

The Veterinary Medicines Regulations which apply here and in Britain allow homeopathic remedies to be placed on the market, provided certain criteria are met.

A simplified registration scheme has been implemented by the Veterinary Medicines Directorate for homeopathic remedies which are placed on the market without medicinal claims and where there is sufficient dilution to guarantee the safety of the product.

All new homeopathic veterinary remedies to be placed on the market must either be registered under the scheme or have a full Marketing Authorisation. A Marketing Authorisation for a homeopathic product that was on the market prior to 1 January 1994 is optional, provided no medicinal claims are made.

Anaerobic Digestion Plants

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many anaerobic digestion plants there are and how much land these plants take up across Northern Ireland.

(AQW 12024/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The official Biogas Plant Map is maintained by the National Non-Food Crops Centre (NNFCC) and is available at <http://www.biogas-info.co.uk/index.php/ad-map.html>. It states that there are 3 Anaerobic Digesters currently operating here. This number is expected to increase over the coming year as Anaerobic Digesters supported by my department's Biomass Processing Challenge Fund become operational. My department does not keep records regarding the physical size of such plants however officials estimate that the site required to physically host an Anaerobic Digester is generally up to 5000 square metres in size.

Anaerobic Digestion: Grants

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what grants are available for anaerobic digestion; and how much funding has been allocated to farmers in each of the last three years.

(AQW 12025/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Biomass Processing Challenge Fund (BPCF) offered by my department provides grant aid to on-farm renewable energy technologies which utilise biomass for the production of heat and / or electricity. A range of technologies are supported, including Anaerobic Digesters. The BPCF opened to applications for a two month period in June 2010. Construction of Anaerobic Digesters supported by the BPCF continues, with £842,671 of EU and National match funding currently committed in Letters of Offer to farmers installing Anaerobic Digestion technologies.

Countryside Management Scheme

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 11486/11-15, what plans are in place should the Countryside Management Scheme fail to spend the budget allocated to it; and how will the funding be redistributed.

(AQW 12137/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Any budget pressures or underspend for agri-environment schemes are managed through DARD's internal monitoring rounds which take place throughout the year. If an underspend is identified it will be considered for reallocation to other budget lines within DARD.

Processing and Marketing Grant Scheme

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 10723/11-15, to list the 50 projects assisted under the Processing and Marketing Grant Scheme; and how much funding each project received.

(AQW 12147/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The following table lists the projects approved together with the Processing & Marketing Grant (PMG) awarded by the PMG Selection Panel under the current Rural Development Programme 2007-2013.

Project Promoter	Processing & Marketing Grant (PMG) awarded by PMG Selection Panel	Selection Panel
Emerald Lawns	£136,468	2008
Sparky Pac Ltd	£500,000	2008
Greenmount Farm Butchery	£120,206	2008
Cloughbane Farm Foods	£115,750	2008
Doherty & Gray Ltd	£500,000	2008
Dailybake Ltd	£481,468	2008
Ready Egg Products Ltd	£500,000	2008
Versatile Manufacturing Foods Ltd	£152,190	2008
Kettle Irish Foods Limited	£164,990	2008
Kilmore Farm Produce Ltd	£131,014	2009

Project Promoter	Processing & Marketing Grant (PMG) awarded by PMG Selection Panel	Selection Panel
Joseph Mackle	£127,406	2009
Chipmaster	£186,290	2009
Empire Meats Ltd	£500,000	2009
Lynn's1. Country Foods	£303,182	2009
Willowbrook Foods Limited	£500,000	2009
Willowbrook Foods Limited	£446,856	2009
Wilson's Country Limited	£500,000	2009
Cloughbane Farm Foods	£155,856	2009
Orchard Organics (NI) Ltd	£38,379	2010
P McCann & Sons	£500,000	2010
Skea Egg Farms Limited	£500,000	2010
Avondale Foods (Craigavon) Ltd	£421,592	2010
Loughshore Veg Ltd	£419,254	2010
K. Hughes & Co Ltd	£279,346	2010
Chapman Foods	£197,406	2010
Topping Meats	£458,176	2010
Tullynaskeagh Farms Ltd	£47,928	2010
Chapmans Farm Fresh Fruit & Veg	£47,246	2011
Cloughbane Farm Foods	£50,000	2011
Fivemiletown Creamery	£50,000	2011
Fernhill Nurseries	£13,730	2011
Glenview Foods	£48,307	2011
Mount Mills (NI) Ltd	£49,178	2011
D & S Donnelly Mushrooms	£50,000	2011
Crosskeys Fast Food Ltd	£57,665	2011
Roy Lyttle Limited	£66,096	2011
R. Thompson & Son (Armagh) Ltd	£500,000	2011
Red Heifer Ltd	£166,020	2011
Ballygarvey Eggs Ltd	£42,000	2011
Daily Bake Ltd	£384,768	2011
Gilfresh Produce	£500,000	2011
Western Brand Poultry Products (NI) Ltd	£500,000	2011
Ballyeamon Eggs	£12,656	2011
Hannan Meats	£79,160	2011
Mash Direct Ltd	£500,000	2011
Orchard County Foods Ltd	£500,000	2012

Project Promoter	Processing & Marketing Grant (PMG) awarded by PMG Selection Panel	Selection Panel
Bradmount Ltd	£165,694	2012
Annaghmore Marketing Ltd	£285,776	2012
Kearney Cheese Company	£34,218	2012
Ballymena Farm Shop	£39,048	2012
Total Grant Awarded	£12,525,319	

Measuring Wheels

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 11484/11-15, to clarify whether any of the measuring wheels were found to be outside the 1 percent tolerance level on either the (i) hard; or (ii) prepared grass surface test. **(AQW 12158/11-15)**

Mrs O'Neill: None of the measuring wheels were found to be outside the 1 percent tolerance level on either the (i) hard; or (ii) prepared grass surface test.

Arm's-length Bodies and Quangos

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the current number of arm's-length bodies and quangos that are attached to her Department; and how this figure compares with the number in (i) 2008; (ii) 2009; (iii) 2010; and (iv) 2011. **(AQW 12180/11-15)**

Mrs O'Neill: My Department has 5 Non Departmental Public Bodies at present.

In 2008 there were 6 Non Departmental Public Bodies and in the years 2009, 2010 and 2011 there were 5 Non Departmental Public Bodies.

Sickness Absence

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the percentage of sickness absence in her Department in each of the last three years; and the agreed target rate of sickness as set out in any memoranda of understanding between her Department and the trade unions. **(AQW 12219/11-15)**

Mrs O'Neill: The percentage of sickness absence in the last 3 years is set out in Table 1 below. There are no agreed sickness absence targets between the Department and the trade unions; however a Ministerial target is set against the average number of working days lost per employee. The targets and results in the last 3 years are set out in Table 2 below.

Table 1: Percentage of Sickness Absence

Year	2011/12	2010/11	2009/10
Percentage of Working Days Lost	3.6%	3.9%	3.9%

Table 2: Average Working Days Lost

Year	Ministerial Target	Achievement Against Target
2011/12	8.5 days	8.0 days
2010/11	8.9 days	8.5 days
2009/10	9.3 days	8.6 days

Bee Population

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, given the increasing concern about the decline in bee numbers, what research her Department has carried out on the bee population.

(AQW 12326/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Contrary to claims there is no evidence of any overall decline in the bee population here and there is no evidence that average bee losses here last year were outside of the normal over-wintering ranges.

However, a three year pilot surveillance study into honey bee losses is currently being undertaken at member state level, part funded by the EU. A sum of approximately €3.29 million has been indicated by the European Commission, with Britain and the north of Ireland being allocated €265,561. Whilst DARD is not contributing directly to the pilot exercise, outcomes from the study will have relevance to beekeepers here and will be made available in due course.

My Department also sponsors two research studentships on bees.

In addition, through the implementation of the Strategy for the Sustainability of the Honey Bee, beekeepers and officials are considering research and development needs to protect and improve the health of honey bees.

Planning Application M/2010/0697/F

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, with reference to her letter to Pat Doherty MP MLA, dated 6 April 2012, which was on departmental headed paper and supported planning application M/2010/0697/F for an eating disorders clinic 150 metres north of the Tullyallen Road in Dungannon, in what capacity the letter was issued, as it now forms part of the file relating to the application.

(AQW 12366/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: As Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development I am committed to encouraging and supporting sustainable and vibrant rural communities throughout the north. In welcoming this initiative I am supporting in principle a much needed service for vulnerable people as well as the potential it has to provide high quality jobs in a rural area.

Bees

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in relation to the Strategy Implementation Group which was established to implement the Strategy for the Sustainability of the Honey Bee, (i) to list the dates of the meetings that have been held between her departmental officials and bee keepers since the Strategy was published in February 2011; (ii) what were the outcomes of these meetings; and (iii) to outline any action plans which have been (a) agreed; and (b) implemented through the Strategy Implementation Group.

(AQW 12396/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: DARD officials and beekeepers are currently working in partnership to deliver the aims and outcomes of the Strategy for the Sustainability of the Honey Bee by way of an Implementation Group and four Sub-groups.

- (i) Since the Strategy was published in February 2011, the Implementation Group met on 9 March, 18 May, 3 August and 9 November 2011 and a further meeting is planned for June 2012.

The Communications and Relationships Sub-group met on 22 July, 20 September and 24 October 2011.

The Risks from Pests, Diseases and Undesirable Species Sub-group met on 23 June, 27 July, 11 October 2011, and 4 April and 8 May 2012.

The Competency Development Sub-group met on 1 July, 7 September and 5 October 2011.

The Bee Science Sub-group met on 6 July, 1 August, 30 September and 5 December 2011.

- (ii) The Implementation Group and each of the Sub-groups have agreed Terms of Reference and priority action areas. The next steps for the Sub-groups are the preparation of actions plans and timelines for consideration and agreement by the Implementation Group.
- (iii) An action plan and timelines have been submitted by the Competency Development Sub-group, and this is being considered by the Implementation Group. Action plans and timelines are awaited from the other Sub-Groups.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Community Arts Organisations, North Belfast: Funding

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much funding her Department, and each of its arm's-length bodies, awarded to community arts organisations in North Belfast in each of the last three years.

(AQW 11151/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): The Arts Council of NI has awarded just under £3m to community arts organisations in North Belfast over the last three years. Details are below. This does not include the outreach and community work undertaken by a number of major clients in the area for example The MAC and Young at Art.

2011-12	2010-11	2009-10
£1,073,467	£879,786	£974,667

Ministerial Advisory Group on Architecture and the Built Environment

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (i) to list the membership of the Ministerial Advisory Group on Architecture and the Built Environment; (ii) which organisations the members represent; and (ii) to detail their attendance at meetings over the last three years.

(AQW 11408/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Ministerial Advisory Group on Architecture and the Built Environment (MAG) has a Chair and 8 members. Their names and occupations are listed at Annex A. The MAG advises the Minister and Department on the implementation and development of the Architecture and the Built Environment policy published in 2006.

Attendance at formal MAG meetings is noted at Annex B.

Annex A

Chair : Arthur Acheson (Appointed Sept 2007 as a Member of the MAG and appointed as Chair of MAG in Sept 2010)

Arthur is an architect and city planner and is Partner and Chair of the Belfast based Boyd Partnership Chartered Architects.

Members:

Mrs Diana Fitzsimons (Appointed Sept 2010)

Diana is a member of the Royal Town Planning Institute and a Fellow of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors. She is employed as Office Director of Turley Associates, Belfast.

James Donnelly (Appointed Sept 2010)

James is a qualified architect. He is a Director of Donnelly O'Neill Architects, Belfast.

Andrew Gault (Appointed Sept 2007 and re-appointed Sept 2010)

Andrew is a qualified architect and works as Project Manager with Northern Ireland Public Private Partnership Education Service.

Ian McKnight (Appointed Sept 2007 and re-appointed Sept 2010)

Ian is a qualified architect and partner of the Belfast-based practice, Hall McKnight Architects.

Marcus Patton OBE (Appointed Sept 2007 and re-appointed Sept 2010)

Marcus is a qualified architect and artist. He is Director of HEARTH Housing Association.

Emily Smyth (Appointed Sept 2007 and re-appointed Sept 2010)

Emily is a qualified landscape architect and is a lecturer in architecture at the University of Ulster, School of Architecture and Design.

Alan Strong (Appointed Sept 2007 and re-appointed Sept 2010)

Alan is a qualified civil engineer and chartered environmentalist. He is a senior lecturer in environmental engineering at the University of Ulster, School of the Built Environment and is leader of the University's Sustainable Development Group.

Tom Woolley (Appointed Sept 2007 and re-appointed Sept 2010)

Tom is an architect and environmental researcher. He is an associate with Rachel Bevan Architects, Downpatrick and is Chairman of the UK Hemp Lime Construction Products Association.

Annex B**Attendance at formal MAG Meetings over the last 3 years**

	Arthur Acheson	James Donnelly*	Diana Fitzsimons*	Andrew Gault	Emily Smyth nee Hadden	Ian McKnight	Marcus Patton	W Alan Strong	Tom Wolley
09 May 2012	√	√	√		√	√	√	√	
21 March 2012	√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√
24 Jan 2012	√	√	√	√	√	√		√	√
15 Nov 2011	√	√	√	√	√	√		√	√
6 Sept 2011	√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√
8 June 2011	√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√
12 April 2011	√	√	√	√	√		√	√	
16 Feb 2011	√	√			√	√	√	√	√
19 Oct 2010	√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√
24 Aug 2010	√			√	√		√	√	
18 May 2010	√				√		√	√	√
16 March 2010	√			√	√	√	√	√	√
19 Jan 2010	√			√		√	√	√	√
24 Nov 2009				√	√	√	√	√	
1 Sept 2009	√			√	√	√	√	√	√
3 June 2009	√			√	√			√	√
23 March 2009	√			√	√		√	√	√

* James Donnelly and Diana Fitzsimons appointed as MAG members in September 2010

Ministerial Advisory Group on Architecture and the Built Environment

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what subjects and issues have been raised by the Ministerial Advisory Group on Architecture and the Built Environment over the last three years.

(AQW 11409/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Two reports published by the MAG describe the work of the MAG and areas of interest relating to architecture and the built environment:

- 1 Mid term report 'Raising Expectations' June 2009 can be accessed at:

http://www.dcalni.gov.uk/dc1_10_37901__mag_mid_term_report__raising_expectations.pdf

End of Term report 'The First three Years' January 2011 can be accessed at: http://www.dcalni.gov.uk/mag_first_3_year_published_pdf.pdf

- 2 //www.dcalni.gov.uk/mag_first_3_year_published_pdf.pdf

Key areas of interest to the MAG are:

- Design quality in public sector procurement;
- Planning policies and reform;
- Conservation and heritage; and
- Sustainable development

Work undertaken in 2011/12 is detailed at Annex A attached.

To operate effectively in all sectors of the built environment the MAG must be able to challenge accepted guidance, policy and standards which are failing to deliver good design, planning and stewardship.

However, while the MAG offers advice to Planning NI, other Departments and bodies I may reserve opinion pending responses to such advice.

Annex A

Work Undertaken in 2011-2012

- 1 Formal advice to Planning NI concerning the following:
 - The DoE Chaired Strategic Design Group working on the draft Urban Stewardship and Design Manual
- 2 Engaged with public, private and voluntary bodies including:
 - Academy of Urbanism National Congress, Derry, May 2012 and the Place Partnering Visit, April 2012;
 - DSD Housing in relation to Housing Standards;
 - Ilex In relation to the 'One Plan' for Derry-Londonderry;
 - SIB in relation to the MAZE/Long Kesh development;
 - Sport NI in relation to the proposed new Sports Stadia;
 - NIEA, Planning NI. NI Environment Link in relation to the European Landscape convention; and
 - MAG continues to promote and use collegiate working to share knowledge
 - 3Written responses were made to the following public consultations:
 - Belfast City Council consultation on the Investment Programme, April 2012;
 - DoE consultation on Demolition and Development, April 2012;
 - DRD Consultation, Active Travel Future for Northern Ireland, March 2012;
 - OFMDFM Consultation, The Social Investment Fund, December 2011;
 - DRD Consultation, Route Options for Belfast Rapid Transit, December 2011;
 - DoE consultation, Draft supplementary planning guidance to PPS21 July 2011;
 - DRD consultation, The Review of the Regional Transportation Strategy, June 2011;
 - DoE consultation, (Draft) PPS24 Economic Considerations, May 2011;
 - DoE consultation, (Draft) PPS23 Enabling Development and Best Practice Guidance Assessing Enabling Development, May 2011
- 4 Conducted design reviews of significant infrastructure projects.
- 5 Hosted the following public events:
 - Public meeting to discuss DRD Roads Service proposals for York Street Interchange
- 6 Participated in events organised by others:
 - DoE Winterschool, the Belfast Cultural Corridor, April 2012
- 7 Prepared position papers offering advice to the DCAL Minister on the following:
 - The Belfast cultural corridor.

Work in progress includes the following:

- Meanwhile uses
- A digital 3D model for considering development proposals
- Landscape NI
- Design Quality in Public Sector Procurement
- Suburbia

Arts Council: Annual Funding Programme

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for a breakdown, by district council area, of the distribution of the Arts Council's Annual Funding Programme in each of the last four years; and which years indices of multiple deprivation are being used in the Arts Council's criteria for funding under the Programme.

(AQW 11441/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The breakdown of Annual Funding Programme (previously known as ASOP) figures is shown in the table below:

	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	*2012/13
Antrim	0	56,510	0	0

	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	*2012/13
Armagh	85,000	85,000	85,000	60,000
Belfast	7,814,176	8,556,283	8,942,994	10,581,680
Castlereagh	19,000	0	0	0
Coleraine	105,000	105,000	105,000	136,682
Craigavon	76,000	65,000	65,000	40,000
Derry	1,229,420	1,185,417	1,185,417	1,635,555
Down	130,000	90,000	90,000	55,000
Lisburn	265,160	34,650	88,650	74,000
Newry	105,487	105,487	105,487	164,487
North Down	110,550	150,550	150,550	215,578
Omagh	0	0	0	28,850
	9,939,793	10,433,897	10,818,098	12,991,832

* Figures for Annual Funding Programme. The previous years relate to Annual Support for Organisations Programme
The Arts Council use the most deprived super output areas based on the 2010 Multiple deprivation measures.

Military Museums

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (i) how many military museums are operational and; (ii) what financial support they receive from her Department.

(AQW 11551/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: There are currently four operational military museums in the north of Ireland;

- The Royal Irish Fusiliers Regimental Museum, Armagh
- The North Irish Horse Regimental Collection, Belfast
- The Royal Ulster Rifles Museum, Belfast; and
- The Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers Regimental Museum, Enniskillen

There is also a Royal Irish Regiment museum which is currently in storage at Thiepval barracks, Lisburn, since the closure of the Regimental depot in Ballymena.

None of these Military Museums receive funding from my Department.

Museums Dedicated to the Royal Navy

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many operational museums are dedicated to the Royal Navy; and what plans she has to expand such a project.

(AQW 11553/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: There are no operational museums dedicated to the Royal Navy in the north of Ireland.

My Department is not aware of any specific proposals to create a museum dedicated to the Royal Navy.

Listed Properties

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail listed properties that are owned by her Department.

(AQW 11557/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: No listed properties are owned by my Department.

Library Usage

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what strategy her Department has in place to facilitate the engagement and involvement of local communities in their public library, given that Northern Ireland has the lowest levels of library usage in the UK.

(AQW 11576/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Library use in the north of Ireland has been consistently lower than elsewhere in Ireland, England, Wales or Scotland for many years. To address this, my Department has undertaken a number of actions including setting up Libraries NI in April 2009. This was to provide a single dedicated and focused organisation for the management of the public library service.

DCAL has provided funding to Libraries NI to help reduce its administration costs and to protect front line services. Recently an additional £2.4m was made available to Libraries NI to lessen the effect of the need to reduce opening hours. Funding was also made available to increase outreach, partnership and targeting of services programmes. A major programme of capital investment in library buildings and IT infrastructure is also underway.

At the operational level Libraries NI engages with community and voluntary organisations in local areas and often work in partnership in the provision of services. Libraries NI also engages with other statutory organisations, including government departments, to promote libraries as shared spaces where information and advice on a range of services can be made available to the public, particularly in towns and villages where there are no other public buildings.

As a result of these actions, the library usage figures, as measured in the NI Continuous Household Survey (CHS), for the last four years shows a gradual increase as per the following table:

Year	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Percentage of Use	27%	26%	29%	32%

These CHS figures use a different methodology from the Carnegie Report, and cannot be directly compared to the usage figures recently reported in the media.

Both Libraries NI and my Department will continue to encourage the increased usage of this important resource by our communities.

Regional Stadium Development Programme

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure why the Chief Executive of SportNI was removed as Senior Responsible Owner of the Regional Stadium Development Programme.

(AQW 11596/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sport NI was appointed Delivery Agent for the Stadium Programme, with the Chief Executive of Sport NI as Senior Responsible Owner. Sport NI initially worked with the Governing Bodies of the three sports in taking forward the Programme and I am on record as having welcomed the work carried out by Sport NI in this regard.

This is a major capital programme and a PfG commitment for the Executive. It is therefore crucial to get the delivery of the next phase right, especially when construction programmes of this scale and complexity bring with them many challenges, from design, planning and procurement through to demolition and construction.

Accordingly, I considered various delivery options, informed by independent advice through the Strategic Investment Board. I also discussed this with the Governing Bodies of the sports and Sport NI. Having done so, I concluded that the responsibility for the delivery of the Stadium Programme should be placed directly within my Department. The Board of Sport NI and the Governing Bodies have accepted this decision.

Regional Stadium Development Programme

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what additional cost the appointment of a Programme Director will incur to the Regional Stadium Development Programme; and from where within the budget will these costs be assigned.

(AQW 11598/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The appointment of a Programme Director has not incurred additional costs to the Regional Stadium Development Programme. Provision was already made within the Sport NI budget for this purpose. As my Department now has responsibility for the delivery of the Stadium Programme this budget will be transferred from Sport NI.

Regional Stadium Development Programme

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the number and grade; and (ii) the salary cost of departmental staff appointed to the team supporting the Programme Director of the Regional Stadium Development Programme; and to detail the recruitment or appointment process.

(AQW 11600/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: There is currently no departmental staff appointed to the team supporting the Programme Director of the Regional Stadium Development Programme.

Regional Stadium Development Programme

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure which of the concerns expressed in the Gateway Review led to her decision to appoint a Programme Director to the Regional Stadium Development Project.

(AQW 11603/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In line with accepted practice for capital investments on the scale of the Regional Stadium Development Programme my Department commissioned a Gateway Review (Level 0) aimed at ensuring that the programme and its constituent projects achieve the desired outcomes.

The completion of the Gateway Review resulted in a number of recommendations being made to assist my Department in its consideration of appropriate delivery structures and skills and support required to ensure successful delivery of the programme.

A key recommendation was the appointment of a Programme Director experienced in the delivery of challenging construction programmes. This recommendation was accepted and Noel Molloy has since been appointed as Programme Director.

Ulster-Scots Agency

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much funding has been allocated to the Ulster Scots Agency in the (i) North Antrim; and (ii) East Antrim constituencies in each of the last six years, broken down by council area.

(AQW 11611/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Ulster-Scots Agency is funded by the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure and the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.

The Departments do not allocate funding based on individual constituencies.

However the Ulster-Scots Agency provides funding for Ulster-Scots projects through its Financial Assistance Scheme; supports festivals; music tuition and summer schools and has supplied details of the funding it has awarded in the North and West Antrim constituencies in the last 6 years.

This is shown in the table below.

Year	North Antrim	East Antrim
2005/06	£60.00	£0.00
2006/07	£3,570.00	£34,641.72
2007/08	£12,013.24	£18,438.10
2008/09	£19,526.88	£32,179.89
2009/10	£94,564.61	£59,137.82
2010/11	£91,200.87	£51,274.70
2011/12	£73,468.48	£65,626.21
2012/13 (to date)	£46,347.78	£ 6,790.98
Total	£340,751.85	£268,089.41

Enforcement Action

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she plans to follow the lead of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in publishing, on the NI Direct website, the names of people who have been subject to an enforcement action by her Department or its arm's-length bodies, and the fines they received.

(AQW 11705/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I understand that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has issued press releases containing the details of prosecutions it has taken and these have been placed on the Northern Ireland Executive website.

I can confirm that information on enforcement action taken by my Department under Fisheries legislation is already in the public domain through court records. Details may also be reported in the local press.

The Department publishes a summary of prosecution information on fisheries offences on the NI Direct website.

I will consider the publication of more detailed prosecution information brought to me by officials on a case by case basis, for example, where offences are considered by the Department to be of a particularly serious nature, such as the use of illegal nets.

Cinema Access Programme

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much funding was given to the named venues in the Cinema Access Programme; and what auditing was carried out to ensure that the equipment provided was used on the night the Programme was launched.

(AQW 11729/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Cinema Access Programme was delivered in 2005 by NI Screen. DCAL provided £30k towards the overall cost of the scheme which was £51k.

Details of funding allocated to the eight venues through the Cinema Access Programme are listed in the table below:

Cinema	Amount
Village Cinema's, Odyssey Complex	£4,500.00
QFT,Belfast	£2,819.59
Newry Omniplex	£7,237.50
Lisburn Omniplex	£7,237.50
Iveagh Movie Studios, Banbridge	£7,237.50
IMC, Ballymena	£7,237.50
Enniskillen Omniplex	£7,237.50
Carrickfergus Omniplex	£7,237.50
Total	£50,744.59

Staff from NI Screen attended each of the launch night events and were present when the equipment was in use.

Civil Servants

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many civil servants currently employed in her Department have been re-employed after receiving a redundancy package from the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

(AQW 11808/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: None of the Civil Servants currently employed in my Department have been re-employed after receiving a redundancy package from the NICS.

Arm's-length Bodies: Invoices

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what percentage of invoices received by each of her Department's arm's-length bodies, in the last twelve months, were paid within 30 days of receipt.

(AQW 11831/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A table is attached which reports performance for the last full financial year, 2011-2012.

	Arts Council NI	NI Screen	Armagh Observatory & Planetarium	NI Museums Council	National Museums NI	Libraries NI	Sport NI
April	100%	100%	100%	100%	88%	96%	100%
May	100%	100%	100%	100%	98%	83%	98%
June	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	94%	95%
July	100%	100%	100%	100%	95%	98%	100%
August	100%	100%	100%	100%	99%	97%	100%
September	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	96%	99%
October	100%	100%	100%	100%	99%	99%	100%

	Arts Council NI	NI Screen	Armagh Observatory & Planetarium	NI Museums Council	National Museums NI	Libraries NI	Sport NI
November	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	99%	99%
December	100%	98%	100%	100%	100%	98%	95%
January	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	97%	99%
February	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	99%	100%
March	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	98%	100%

Golf Development

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in light of the success of Northern Ireland golfers, what steps she is taking to develop golfing talent and skills among young people.

(AQW 11900/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Responsibility for developing the talent and skills of young people who play golf in the north of Ireland rests, in the first instance, with the governing bodies for the sport, the Golfing Union of Ireland, Ulster Branch and the Northern District Irish Ladies Golf Union, NI Region.

In the last three financial years Sport NI, however, which is responsible for the distribution of funding for sport in the north, has provided £475,750 exchequer and lottery funding to golf to assist the development of the sport.

Furthermore, the Irish Open, which is taking place in Portrush at the end of June this year, will provide a significant opportunity to promote the sport locally. My Department is part of the Irish Open Steering Group which is chaired by DETI.

Public Bodies: Board Members

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many former civil and public servants are employed as (i) paid; and (ii) unpaid board members of public bodies which are sponsored by her Department; and what this figure is as a proportion of the total number of board members.

(AQW 11917/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

- i) There are 18 former civil and public servants employed as paid board members of public bodies which are sponsored by DCAL.
- ii) There are 40 former civil and public servants employed as unpaid board members of public bodies which are sponsored by DCAL.

In total there are 137 members currently appointed to the boards of public bodies which are sponsored by DCAL. The proportion of board members who are civil or public servants is therefore 42.3%.

Review of Public Administration

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what powers or functions she plans to devolve to local councils under the Review of Public Administration; and whether this represents a change to her previous commitments.

(AQW 11920/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is not devolving any powers to local councils as part of the Review of Public Administration.

The functions which my Department plan to transfer are;

Armagh County Museum

Armagh County Museum will transfer to the Armagh/ Banbridge/ Craigavon Council.

Northern Ireland Museums Council (NIMC)

The NIMC provides a support service to local and private museums and could transfer provided that a suitable arrangement can be agreed with local government.

Water Recreation Sites

Twenty one water recreation sites are to be transferred to local councils. These are small sites which complement other leisure facilities owned by councils.

Local Arts Funding

My Department is committed to transferring the funding for local arts to local government in line with the guiding principles set out for RPA.

The Department has not identified any further functions which may be devolved to local councils at a future date. However, my Department has commenced a review of its Arms Length Bodies and this may identify some further functions which could transfer to local councils.

These plans do not represent a change to my previous commitments.

Projects or Organisations: Funding

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what checks are carried out to ensure that projects or organisations that are funded by her Department are non-sectarian and meet standards of equality and inclusivity.

(AQW 11958/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The statutory duties placed on public authorities under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (Section 75) ensures my Department and its Arms Length Bodies (ALBs) are required to promote the need for equality of opportunity and the desirability of good relations when discharging all Departmental functions. These obligations cover all functions including budgetary and funding processes.

Any organisation in receipt of public funding through my department or its ALBs must comply with the Equality and Good Relations policies of the relevant funding organisations.

From an accountability perspective DCAL seek written assurance, on a quarterly basis, from ALB senior management, endorsed by the organisation's Board that these requirements are being adhered to.

Intercultural Arts Strategy

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions her officials have had with the All Party Group for Ethnic Minority Communities in relation to the Intercultural Arts Strategy.

(AQW 11970/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My officials have not had discussions with the All Party Group for Ethnic Minority Communities in relation to the Arts Council's recently launched Intercultural Arts Strategy.

A representative of the All Party Group for Ethnic Minority Communities has been asked to join the reference group for the Strategy.

Digital Literacy

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline her Department's strategy for improving digital literacy amongst older people.

(AQW 11972/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Older People Strategy document, "Ageing in an Inclusive Society" sets out Government's approach to promote and support the inclusion of older people in the north of Ireland.

The Strategy takes cognisance of research which showed that older people are less likely to own a computer or access the Internet than the rest of the population. The Strategy recognises that ICT and the Internet open up a range of communicative opportunities for people who are often physically isolated or immobile. It also notes the potential role of ICT in the development of skills that can be used to access services, training and jobs or simply new opportunities for self-expression and learning.

My Department through its Arms Length Bodies makes a valuable contribution to the delivery of "Ageing in an Inclusive Society". In respect of digital literacy Libraries NI aims to increase uptake of IT by older people for leisure and lifelong learning by providing access to over 1,300 computers and the internet. Libraries NI recognises that older people in particular may lack the skills and / or the confidence to use the available technology so provides a range of courses as well as one to one support, specifically aimed at older people. The courses and support are free of charge.

This important work will be further supported by a major programme of capital investment in library buildings and IT infrastructure.

Digital Literacy

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what library-run courses are available to improve older peoples' computer and internet skills; and how much funding her Department has provided to improve digital literacy amongst older people, over the last five years.

(AQW 11974/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Libraries NI recognise that older people in particular may lack the skills and/ or the confidence to use the technology available within its Libraries. As a result it provides a range of courses as well as one to one support, specifically aimed at older people. The available courses are outlined at Annex A.

The courses and support are free of charge for the participants and are funded out of the Budget that my Department provides to Libraries NI. Funding has also been made available to allow the replacement of Libraries NI's IT System. The replacement system will provide enhanced online library services and public access IT systems for older people as well as general library users.

Arts Council: Grants

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to list the grants awarded by the Arts Council, under the Small Grants Programme, to fund projects in East Belfast, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 12004/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A list of the grants awarded in the last 3 years by the Arts Council in East Belfast, under the Small Grants Programme, is set out in the tables below:

2009/10

Organisation	Project	Amount
Bright Lights	Hands-on Dance	£5,000
The Junction Club	Junction Art Players	£4,950
Clarawood Community Association	Young Girls & Image Project	£1,500
Headway Belfast	Arts in Your Hands	£6,762

2010/11

Organisation	Project	Amount
Bright Lights	Hands-On Dance	£5,000
Headway Belfast	Arts In Your Hands	£6,760

2011/12

Organisation	Project	Amount
Bright Lights	Hands on Dance	£8,000
The Junction Club	Sounds of Gamelan	£4,135
Headway Belfast	Arts in Your Hands	£7,560
Headway Belfast	Arts in Your Hands	£9,250

UK City of Culture

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what criteria will be used to make an assessment, towards the close of 2013, of the success of Londonderry as the first ever UK City of Culture.

(AQW 12020/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A business case for DCAL support to the Derry~Londonderry City of Culture 2013 has been approved by DFP based on an assessment of need which confirmed that the City of Culture would deliver benefits in line with my Department's high level priorities and objectives. On 5 April 2012, the Executive agreed to make £12.6m available to DCAL to support the Cultural Programme of events planned in the run up to and during 2013.

Specific, measurable targets have been set to measure impact and outcomes of the City of Culture 2013. Key objectives set by DCMS in awarding the title are to deliver a high quality cultural programme, deliver lasting social regeneration, demonstrate economic impact and maximise legacy from being City of Culture. To accurately measure the impact of 2013, targets have been set up to 2020. Milestones have been developed for 2013 and 2014 for monitoring progress and to undertake post project evaluation.

Targets are concerned with increasing wages and profits in the City; increasing employment, particularly in those from the bottom half of the most deprived wards; improving community relations, perceptions of the City and equality and social cohesion; increasing visitors to the City and visitor spend; increasing the number of people who attend cultural events, particularly those living in the most deprived areas; increasing satisfaction with living in the City and raising the City's Urban Benchmark Rank.

Measurement of progress during 2013 will be undertaken by the NI Research and Statistics Agency.

Civil Servants

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many former senior civil servants, from deputy secretary grade to permanent secretary grade, serve on the boards of her Department's arm's length bodies in a (i) paid; and (ii) unpaid capacity. **(AQW 12072/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín:

- i) There is one former Civil Servant of Deputy Secretary/ Permanent Secretary Grade who currently serves on a Board of a DCAL arm's length body in a paid capacity.
- ii) There is one former Civil Servant of Deputy Secretary/ Permanent Secretary Grade who currently serves on a Board of a DCAL arm's length body in an unpaid capacity.

Creative Industries Innovation Fund

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure why the Creative Industries Innovation Fund has been reduced from £4 million to £2.4 million; and on which services the £1.6 million saved will be spent. **(AQW 12093/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: As detailed in the Executive's Economic Strategy, my Department will invest £4m via the Creative Industries Innovation Fund (CIIF) and wider sectoral initiatives to stimulate innovation, R&D and creativity. CIIF is a key component of this investment focusing on the development of commercially viable products and services capable of competing in global markets.

The allocation to the Arts Council to deliver CIIF is determined on an annual basis and reflects industry demand and the quantity of applications meeting Fund criteria and being recommended for support. It is right that support through CIIF is directed to high quality innovation projects capable of stimulating long-term economic growth.

The Arts Council was allocated £625,000 in 2011-12. It received 87 applications in total and awarded grants to 42 businesses. The Arts Council therefore returned approximately £151,000 to the Department and this was reinvested in a range of sectoral initiatives supporting innovation, R&D and creativity. This included visual effects training courses; development of cultural tourism apps; support to Digital Circle; and a diverse range of activities advancing the STEM agenda. Further information on these wider sectoral initiatives is being compiled and will be sent to Members of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee.

The Arts Council has received 100 eligible applications for the 2012-13 funding round. Final assessment decisions will be made in June. Corresponding CIIF allocation to the Arts Council will be finalised based on the number of applications being recommended for support and this approach will guide allocation in subsequent years. It is therefore not possible to determine the exact allocation to CIIF over this period but the Programme for Government Target is to support 200 projects by 2015.

Moving forward, wider sectoral initiatives will include funding, in partnership with Invest NI, to a new Music Business Support Programme. Such investment demonstrates DCAL's proactive government leadership role for the creative industries and the need to support region wide activity, in addition to CIIF, that establishes a creative industries pipeline from which creative people, creative ideas and creative entrepreneurs emerge and flourish.

Irish Language: Funding

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when the outcome of the consultation on the core funded Irish language groups by Foras na Gaeilge will be published. **(AQO 2055/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: The current project plan agreed with sponsor Departments indicates that the analysis of the submissions received during the consultation period should be available by the end of June 2012.

The plan requires Foras na Gaeilge to have the consultation findings and together with any necessary adjustments to the draft scheme completed and presented to the Foras na Gaeilge Board for decision at its June 2012 meeting.

Depending upon the outcome of the consultation and the extent of the revision of the draft schemes consideration of other suitable alternatives the existing project plan may need to be modified.

Olympic Games 2012: Legacy

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether her Department will support any Olympic games legacy projects in West Tyrone.

(AQO 2047/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The London 2012 Inspire programme is a participation initiative spanning England, Scotland, Wales and the North of Ireland. It formally recognises exceptional non-commercial projects which have been inspired by the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

A number of these projects are working right across the North, including West Tyrone, and three of them have specifically targeted areas in West Tyrone – Fighting Irishmen from the Ulster American Folk Park, the North West Peace Building through Sport Programme from Omagh District Council, and Rhythms of the Year from National Museums NI.

The projects are leaving a legacy in a number of areas – increasing participation in sporting and cultural activities, improving access in sports and the arts for people with disabilities, encouraging healthy lifestyles, facilitating skills development, promoting volunteering, and creating good relations and community cohesion.

Rugby: Participation

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the increase in the number of people participating in rugby.

(AQO 2057/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Statistics from the Continuous Household Survey (CHS) indicate that the proportion of adults playing rugby league or union in the north of Ireland was unchanged from 2006/07 to 2010/11 at 1%.

Overall however, the CHS figures indicate that participation rates in sport generally have been increasing in recent years. I believe that much of this trend is attributable to the work currently being carried out on the implementation of the Department's 10 year strategy for sport, Sport Matters. I would hope that the trend will continue and in due course lead to an increase in the number of people participating in all sports, including rugby.

Furthermore, I trust that the recent achievement of Ulster Rugby reaching the final of the Heinekin Cup will similarly have a positive impact on the number of people playing rugby specifically.

Cinema Access Programme

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether the ten cinemas which received £30,000 from her Department, as part of the Cinema Access Programme, will be required to use the funded equipment for the screening of all films or only those films screened on the Programme launch night.

(AQO 2058/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Cinema Access Programme was delivered in 2005 by NI Screen. DCAL provided £30k towards the overall cost of the scheme. A total of £51k was awarded to the eight cinemas who participated in the project.

My Department has asked NI Screen officials to contact the Royal National Institute for the Blind regarding this issue and to engage with each of the cinemas involved in the project to determine the current usage of the equipment and to explore options for maximising future usage.

I am keen to ensure that our arts venues are as accessible as possible. Which is why I am pleased that, as part of my Department's recent programme of investment in arts infrastructure across the north of Ireland, projects like The MAC, the Lyric Theatre and the Crescent Arts Centre worked in conjunction with Adapt NI and can boast the highest levels of quality audio visual facilities. This will improve opportunities for people with sight or hearing difficulties to enjoy the artistic offer at these venues.

Libraries

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action she is taking to ensure that library usage is maximised within local communities.

(AQO 2059/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department has taken a number of steps to help maximise library usage in communities. This included:

- Setting up Libraries NI in 2009 to provide a single dedicated organisation to deliver a public library service.
- Provided funding to protect front line services including £2.4m to lessen the effect of reduced opening hours and increase outreach, partnership and targeting of services programmes.
- A major programme of capital investment in library buildings and IT infrastructure.

Libraries NI also works with community organisations and others to promote libraries as shared spaces where information and advice on a range of services accessed.

The NI Continuous Household Survey (CHS), for the last four years shows a gradual increase in library usage from 27% in 2007/2008 to 32% in 2010/2011.

Regional Stadium Development Programme

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how her Department will meet its obligations as a public authority under section 75(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 in implementing its stadia development programme.

(AQO 2060/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department has been meeting its Section 75 obligations in terms of the Regional Stadium Development Programme in a number of ways.

The Outline Business Case for Stadium Development included examining a range of Non-Monetary Costs and Benefits of the options considered. This included recognising and scoring the proposals against Section 75 policies with the key aim of ensuring that access to the redeveloped facilities for all was maximised.

In addition the development of major stadiums is one of the targets in the Department's strategy for sport "Sport Matters". The strategy, including those elements relating to stadia development, was subject to Section 75 screening and integrated impact assessments, including considerable consultation with the public and stakeholders on what is planned up to 2019. This did not reveal any negative impacts.

Furthermore, as part of the Budget 2010 process, my Department's capital programme was subject to a high-level impact assessment. This included regional stadium development and the conclusion reached was that there were no negative Section 75 impacts associated with progressing the funding of stadiums.

The Regional Stadium Development Programme has as a key outcome the provision of fit-for-purpose stadiums. This can only enhance compliance with disability requirements, make the spectator experience more inviting and promote interest in the respective sports regardless of gender, race and other Section 75 categories.

Department of Education

"Grannyng"

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the extent and cost of 'grannyng' as a means of circumventing the legislative protection that requires schools to give priority to pupils who are resident in Northern Ireland, and what steps are being taken to deal with this problem.

(AQW 11410/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Schools have a duty to verify information that may qualify applicants for admission to the school where there exists a "general knowledge or belief" of a problem with false information.

Primary 1 Places

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education, for each of the last five years, to detail (i) the number of children who applied for a P1 place; and (ii) the level of over-subscription for P1 places at (a) Ballymagee Primary School; (b) Kilmaine Primary School; (c) Ballyholme Primary School; (d) Towerview Primary School; (e) Bloomfield Road Primary School; and (f) Central Integrated Primary School in Bangor.

(AQW 11424/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The number of children who applied for a P1 place, the admissions number and the level of oversubscription for each of the schools named for the last 5 years is as follows:-

	2012/13	2011/12	2010/11	2009/10	2008/09
Ballymagee PS					
Admissions No (a)	58	58	58	58	58
Applications (b)	76	80	58	63	62
Admissions	60	60	58	58	60
Over-subscription	16	20	0	5	2
Kilmaine PS					
Admissions No (a)	87	87	87	87	87
Applications (b)	116	121	93	89	96
Admissions	90	87	88	89	90
Over-subscription	26	34	5	0	6

	2012/13	2011/12	2010/11	2009/10	2008/09
Ballyholme PS					
Admissions No (a)	90	90	90	90	90
Applications (b)	107	127	84	78	94
Admissions	90	90	84	78	90
Over-subscription	17	37	0	0	0
Towerview PS					
Admissions No (a)	46	46	46	46	58
Applications (b)	79	78	50	41	42
Admissions	51	49	50	41	42
Over-subscription	28	29	0	0	0
Bloomfield PS					
Admissions No (a)	58	58	58	58	58
Applications (b)	77	64	44	41	30
Admissions	60	60	44	41	30
Over-subscription	17	4	0	0	0
Bangor Central IPS					
Admissions No (a)	87	87	87	79	79
Applications (b)	117	99	91	83	91
Admissions	87	87	87	83	80
Over-subscription	30	12	4	0	11

Notes:-

- 1) The applications and admissions figures were provided by the South-Eastern Education and Library Board and reflect the position as at the conclusion of the annual admissions procedure.
- 2) Figures exclude any children who are in receipt of a statement of special educational needs or who were admitted as a result of a decision of an Appeals Tribunal. These pupils are supernumerary and are over and above the schools' approved admissions number.
- 3) The "cap on P1 intake" has been taken to mean the schools' approved (published) admissions number (a). Schools can exceed their admissions number within prescribed limits in any one year without requiring the Department's approval, provided this would not cause them to exceed their overall school enrolment limit.
- 4) The applications figures (b) represent all applications considered by the school and can include first preference, and any second and further preference applicants who were unsuccessful in gaining a place at their higher preference school(s). Second and further preference applicants may have applied to one or more of the other listed schools and could, therefore, be reflected in the "Applications" totals for more than one school.
- 5) As the applications figures include all applications to each school this figure should not be taken to represent popularity of any particular school as parents may have listed that school as their third, fourth or even fifth preference. Further, the total levels of oversubscription do not in any way reflect the total number of pupils who remain unplaced. By the end of the process the vast majority of pupils are placed either in the schools listed or the other controlled primary schools in Bangor and North Down.
- 6) The over-subscription figures are arrived at by deducting the actual "Admissions" from the "Applications".

Primary 1 Places

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education, for each of the last five years, to detail the cap on P1 intake at (a) Ballymagee Primary School; (b) Kilmaine Primary School; (c) Ballyholme Primary School; (d) Towerview Primary School; (e) Bloomfield Road Primary School; and (f) Central Integrated Primary School in Bangor.

(AQW 11427/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The number of children who applied for a P1 place, the admissions number and the level of oversubscription for each of the schools named for the last 5 years is as follows:-

	2012/13	2011/12	2010/11	2009/10	2008/09
Ballymagee PS					
Admissions No (a)	58	58	58	58	58
Applications (b)	76	80	58	63	62
Admissions	60	60	58	58	60
Over-subscription	16	20	0	5	2
Kilmaine PS					
Admissions No (a)	87	87	87	87	87
Applications (b)	116	121	93	89	96
Admissions	90	87	88	89	90
Over-subscription	26	34	5	0	6
Ballyholme PS					
Admissions No (a)	90	90	90	90	90
Applications (b)	107	127	84	78	94
Admissions	90	90	84	78	90
Over-subscription	17	37	0	0	0
Towerview PS					
Admissions No (a)	46	46	46	46	58
Applications (b)	79	78	50	41	42
Admissions	51	49	50	41	42
Over-subscription	28	29	0	0	0
Bloomfield PS					
Admissions No (a)	58	58	58	58	58
Applications (b)	77	64	44	41	30
Admissions	60	60	44	41	30
Over-subscription	17	4	0	0	0
Bangor Central IPS					
Admissions No (a)	87	87	87	79	79
Applications (b)	117	99	91	83	91
Admissions	87	87	87	83	80
Over-subscription	30	12	4	0	11

Notes:-

- 7) The applications and admissions figures were provided by the South-Eastern Education and Library Board and reflect the position as at the conclusion of the annual admissions procedure.
- 8) Figures exclude any children who are in receipt of a statement of special educational needs or who were admitted as a result of a decision of an Appeals Tribunal. These pupils are supernumerary and are over and above the schools' approved admissions number.
- 9) The "cap on P1 intake" has been taken to mean the schools' approved (published) admissions number (a). Schools can exceed their admissions number within prescribed limits in any one year without requiring the Department's approval, provided this would not cause them to exceed their overall school enrolment limit.

- 10) The applications figures (b) represent all applications considered by the school and can include first preference, and any second and further preference applicants who were unsuccessful in gaining a place at their higher preference school(s). Second and further preference applicants may have applied to one or more of the other listed schools and could, therefore, be reflected in the "Applications" totals for more than one school.
- 11) As the applications figures include all applications to each school this figure should not be taken to represent popularity of any particular school as parents may have listed that school as their third, fourth or even fifth preference. Further, the total levels of oversubscription do not in any way reflect the total number of pupils who remain unplaced. By the end of the process the vast majority of pupils are placed either in the schools listed or the other controlled primary schools in Bangor and North Down.
- 12) The over-subscription figures are arrived at by deducting the actual "Admissions" from the "Applications".

Homophobic Bullying

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education why the three yearly report 'Nature and Extent of Bullying in Schools in Northern Ireland' lists, by category, the various forms of bullying which occur, but makes no reference to, or attempts to quantify, the extent or existence of homophobic bullying.

(AQW 11623/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department carries out research into the nature and extent of bullying in schools every five years. The research findings summarise the responses of pupils from Year 6 and Year 9 in a representative sample of 60 primary and 60 post-primary schools. The findings are a statistically valid representation of the pattern of bullying in schools.

Pupils complete the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire which is the most

widely used and internationally validated instrument to measure bullying. The use of this instrument means that findings can be compared over time and with studies in other countries. The approach used in the Questionnaire is to describe types of behaviour rather than use a specific labels such as 'homophobic bullying'.

The research "The Nature and Extent of Pupil Bullying in Schools in the North of Ireland", published in October 2011, shows that bullying with mean names, comments or rude gestures with a sexual meaning was the sixth most common form of bullying, experienced by around 14% of Year 9 pupils who took part in the survey. This was also the fifth most common type of bullying perpetrated by 6% of Year 9 pupils.

The Appendices to the Report includes findings of other research reports, including two which consider the issue of homophobic bullying in schools.

I understand that the local Anti-Bullying Forum is considering the findings of the Report and is also developing a suite of guidance for schools, around the prevention of, and response to, various types of prejudice based bullying, including homophobic bullying. The Forum is in the process of consulting with a wide range of children and young people who have been invited to share not only their experiences of homophobic bullying, but their ideas on how it can be tackled in our schools and communities.

Capital and Revenue Savings

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education to detail the capital and revenue savings his Department has made in each of the last three years.

(AQW 11658/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: As a result of the cuts imposed upon the Block Grant by the British Government in agreeing Budget 2008-11 allocations, the Executive agreed that all Departments were to deliver 3% cumulative efficiency savings over the 3 year period 2008-09 to 2010-11. The table below shows those efficiency savings delivered by my Department in 2009-10 and 2010-11.

	2009-10 £m	2010-11 £m
Revenue	97.2	138.6
Capital	27.3	39.9
Total	124.5	178.5

Following the outcome of Budget 2011-15, revenue savings of £101.5m were to be delivered in 2011-12 to ensure that the Department remained within budget. Work is currently on-going to determine the full extent of savings delivered last year. I am therefore unable to provide any further detail at this stage. The capital budget for 2011-12 was reduced compared to previous years and the Department was required to live within this revised baseline.

Irish-medium Schools

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 10781/11-15, to detail (i) the level of funding allocated to schools from (a) the Accommodation Fund; and (b) other departmental resources to address serious accommodation deficiencies within the Irish-medium sector; and (ii) the nature of the deficiencies at each site.

(AQW 11686/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: As advised in AQW 10781/11-15, my Department provided Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta with £2m of funding to set up an Accommodation Fund. Four schools from within the Irish-Medium sector were prioritised for new modular portable buildings, each to receive an equal share of the fund. To date, the fund has provided new modular portable buildings for 2 of these schools.

Until an Irish-Medium school proves viability, it is not eligible to receive capital funding and it is therefore the responsibility of InaG to address serious accommodation deficiencies in the first instance. When a school proves viability and is vested in the schools estate, it is eligible for capital funding and can make an application to my Department's Estate Operations Team to have necessary capital works carried out. These applications are prioritised and compete for available funding from the Department's capital budget, and all potential projects in any area will be critically assessed as part of the area based planning process to determine how they will contribute to the overall infrastructure needed.

Teachers' Negotiating Committee

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 10782/11-15, to confirm whether (i) the Joint Working Party met on the 8 May 2012; (ii) all outstanding issues within the Teachers' Side are resolved; and (iii) the Teachers' Negotiating Committee and, all its sub-committees, are fully operational.

(AQW 11689/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd:

- (i) The Joint Working Party (JWP) met as scheduled on 8 May 2012.
- (ii) I understand that the outstanding issues within Teachers' Side have not been resolved and that the NI Teachers' Council (NITC) passed a motion on 30 April 2012 nominating four of its five constituent unions to represent the Council at JWP and any associated meetings in the meantime.
- (iii) A meeting of the Teachers' Negotiating Committee is due to take place shortly. The next meeting of the JWP will take place on 12 June 2012 and meetings of the various sub-groups are scheduled in the coming weeks.

Sunnylands Primary School, Carrickfergus: Windows

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Education when the single-pane windows in Sunnylands Primary School, Carrickfergus, will be replaced.

(AQW 11699/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The replacement of single pane windows is a matter for the Education & Library Board who has responsibility for planning maintenance programmes throughout the schools estate. The windows are listed for replacement as a maintenance backlog item at an estimated cost of £124k out of a total window backlog of £9.5m.

There are many schools throughout the Board's estate with windows in a poor condition and the Board addresses window replacement schemes on a priority basis within the available resources.

I am therefore unable to give a definitive time frame for replacement single pane windows at Sunnylands Primary School, Carrickfergus.

Occupational Therapy Provision for Children and Young People

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what discussions he has had with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in relation to improving occupational therapy provision for children and young people up to 19 years of age.

(AQW 11726/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Although occupational therapy provision is the responsibility of the Department of Health and Social Services and Public Safety, I am very aware of the impact provision of such therapies has for children within the education system.

While I have not had discussions with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety specifically regarding occupational therapy provision, I met with the Minister on 4 July 2011 and on 17 April 2012 to discuss issues of mutual interest including allied health services for children. These services have also been the subject of discussion between officials from both departments in the broader special educational needs context and this will continue to be the case, as appropriate.

Special Educational Needs and Inclusion: Review

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to ensure that professional bodies, such as the College of Occupational Therapists, are closely involved in the development and design of any new arrangements resulting from the Review of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion.

(AQW 11727/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Review of Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Inclusion has been widely consulted on and officials are continuing to engage with a number of organisations including health professionals to progress the SEN and inclusion policy proposals.

Departmental officials and colleagues in the Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) are meeting regularly and the DHSSPS has facilitated meetings with the Health Boards and allied health professionals to discuss areas of joint collaboration and cooperation and will continue to meet.

A number of reference groups and liaison groups have also been established with representatives from both the statutory and voluntary sectors in attendance.

NEETs Strategy

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 11130/11-15, to detail (i) when the new scheme for youth service funding will be implemented, following the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority; (ii) when the scheme will be open for applications, given that Youth Council NI's current funding cycle ends in April 2013; (iii) when Youth Council NI's review of the Bytes Project will be completed, given that its interim funding stream ends in June 2012; and (iv) what provision will be made in the new funding structures to ensure that the Bytes Project receives adequate funding, given its non-standard format. **(AQW 11732/11-15)**

Mr O'Dowd: The Youth Council has advised that it intends to carry out an initial review of the "Young People Focused" funding scheme, in cooperation with Education and Library Boards and taking into account DE policy and structural changes within the youth sector. Following this review, the Council will develop proposals for a new funding scheme for consideration by the Department of Education. It is not yet possible to confirm the timescale within which the Education and Skills Authority may approve a new funding scheme, or when a new scheme will be open for applications. However, the intention is that organisations currently in receipt of Council funding will continue to be funded under the current arrangements until a new scheme is implemented. Voluntary youth organisations such as the Bytes Project will be free to apply to the Youth Council under the new funding scheme; however no guarantee of funding can be given to any organisation.

The Youth Council has also advised that its review of Bytes is currently in progress and a report on this process, along with a recommendation for the full level of funding for 2012/13, will be presented to the Council at its meeting on 25 June for a decision. The Bytes Project will be advised on 26 June of the outcome of this report and its full 2012/13 grant allocation.

Preschool Places

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 9423/11-15, (i) whether there are funded pre-school places currently reserved at Steeple Nursery School, Antrim; (ii) whether the reserved places are affecting the request by Tannaghmore Community Playgroup, Antrim, to join the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme; and (iii) what steps he will take to ensure that the places are filled in order to assess effectively the demand for funded pre-school places at Tannaghmore Community Playgroup. **(AQW 11756/11-15)**

Mr O'Dowd: At the end of Stage 1 of the 2012/13 Pre-School Admissions process Steeple Nursery School was under subscribed with applications from children in their final pre-school year and places remained available.

As part of Stage 2 of the process these places were on the list of settings to which parents of children unplaced at Stage 1 could apply. Stage 2 of the process is ongoing and parents will be advised by letter on 1 June of the outcome of their application.

The NEELB Pre-School Education Advisory Group (PEAG) is actively considering a request from Tannaghmore Community Playgroup to join the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme. A decision will be made at the end of Stage 2 and will depend on the need for additional provision to cater for unplaced children in the area.

Nursery School Provision

Mr Kinahan asked Minister of Education which electoral wards currently have no nursery school provision available due to (i) over-subscription; and (ii) geographical location. **(AQW 11766/11-15)**

Mr O'Dowd: The information sought relates to the admissions process for places in pre-school education for the 2012/13 academic year. This is a two stage process which is currently ongoing. Statistics will not be available until after the process is completed on 1 June 2012.

It should be noted that when the Admissions Process concludes parents who may not have applied for a place during the process or those who have not secured a place will be given a list of settings by the ELB where places may still be available. Parents then make application directly to these settings. This can result in a significant number of additional children being placed before the start of the new school term in September.

Information on the exact number of children in funded pre-school places is collected as part of the Annual School Census in October.

As you are aware in recent years there has been significant additional investment in pre-school places both through the creation of new statutory nursery units and allocation of funding to support additional places in the voluntary/private sector. I will be keeping this under review in light of the work on the Programme for Government commitment and if further investment is necessary I will consider it.

Portadown College: Refurbishment and Repairs

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 10581/11-15, to detail his role in ensuring the long term cost-effectiveness of how his departmental budget is spent.

(AQW 11796/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The total gross capital budget for the Department in 2012/13 is £104.1m, and is required to cover investment in transport, ICT, youth, early years, minor works and committed major works, as well a number of other capital requirements.

The significant reduction in the capital allocation to Education has created challenges when dealing with such a large and diverse capital estate, and I am seeking a more strategic approach to capital investment through Area Based Planning.

While the work on area planning will in due course identify priorities for capital investment, in the short-term there is a need to ensure capital funding is utilised to improve the schools estate. Therefore an interim process is being developed to identify major school projects which are consistent with and supportive of the Area Planning work and in which capital investment can be made in the coming period.

It is important however that the integrity of existing school buildings is maintained and I will continue to invest in minor works and maintenance programmes to address statutory requirements including health and safety and in meeting disability needs.

Civil Servants

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Education how many civil servants currently employed in his Department have been re-employed after receiving a redundancy package from the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

(AQW 11809/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: No staff currently employed in the Department of Education have been re-employed after receiving a redundancy package from the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Integrated Services for West Belfast and Greater Shankill

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of Education to outline his Department's position in relation to the continued financial support of integrated services for West Belfast and Greater Shankill, post September 2012.

(AQW 11843/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: West Belfast and Greater Shankill are areas where I have serious concerns regarding educational underachievement. I have announced my intention to make £0.5m available each year for the next three years in tackling underachievement and plan to table a prospectus with interested parties in the near future.

In the interim, my Department, in conjunction with DSD and DHSSPS have made funding available to the current Integrated Services for Children and Young People programme.

Arm's-length Bodies: Invoices

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what percentage of invoices, received by each of his Department's arm's-length bodies in the last twelve months, were paid within 30 days of receipt.

(AQW 11868/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Details of the percentages of invoices received by each Arm's-Length Body (ALB) in the period April 2011 to March 2012, paid within 30 days of receipt are shown in the table below:

ALB	% paid in 30 days
Belfast Education & Library Board	81
North Eastern Education & Library Board	83
South Eastern Education & Library Board	90
Southern Education & Library Board	89
Western Education & Library Board	85
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools	100
Council for the Curriculum, Examination & Assessment	85
Staff Commission for Education & Library Boards	100
Youth Council	100
General Teaching Council	100

ALB	% paid in 30 days
Comhairle na Gaelscoilaíochta	88
Council for Integrated Education	100
Middletown Centre for Autism	96

South Eastern Education and Library Board: Post of Chief Executive

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education how the position of Chief Executive of the South Eastern Education and Library Board was advertised.

(AQW 11881/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The post of Chief Executive (Temporary) of the South Eastern Education and Library Board was advertised in accordance with Stage 2 of the Policy for the Control of Vacancies in the Education Sector under the Review of Public Administration.

Bullying

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Education to detail the procedures and guidelines recommended by his Department for schools to follow when bullying is reported or suspected.

(AQW 11884/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Bullying, in whatever form and for whatever reason, has no place in schools and the Department is committed to tackling the issue.

All grant-aided schools are required by law to have an anti-bullying policy which includes measures to prevent all forms of bullying among pupils. Each school can determine, in consultation with pupils and parents, the detail of their policy.

The Department has produced guidance for schools in developing effective anti-bullying policies which includes practical initiatives and case studies to support schools to tackle bullying. The guidance "Pastoral Care in Schools: Promoting Positive Behaviour" is available on the Department's website at <http://www.deni.gov.uk/ppbehaviour-4.pdf>. The effectiveness of a school's anti-bullying measures is monitored through the regular cycle of school inspections.

The Department recognises that it cannot solve the issue of bullying alone, and continues to work in close partnership with statutory and voluntary organisations through its membership and funding of the local Anti-Bullying Forum (NIABF). The Forum enables members to share models of best practice, to disseminate information, to develop and coordinate joint initiatives and to ensure that schools and organisations working with children and young people are able to develop appropriate strategies to prevent and deal with bullying behaviours.

The Forum's website (www.niabf.org.uk) provides a wealth of resources for pupils, parents and professionals in dealing with bullying incidents and preventing bullying in schools by developing whole school anti-bullying cultures.

Representatives from the Education and Library Boards who are members of the NIABF have also established an Inter-Board Group to develop a common approach to tackle bullying in schools. In October 2010, the Inter-Board group launched a CD-ROM entitled "Let's Stop Bullying". This interactive resource was developed for all primary and special schools and has been made available through the C2K system. My Department provided the funding to produce the localised version of this resource.

In addition, the NIABF is currently developing a resource to support schools in the management of alleged bullying incidents. "Effective Responses to Bullying" takes schools on a staged journey to resolving a concern, offering levelled interventions for both the recipient of bullying and the pupils displaying bullying behaviour. This resource will be distributed to all schools early in next school year.

Bullying

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of reported instances of bullying at (i) primary; and (ii) post-primary schools in each of the last five academic years.

(AQW 11885/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department does not hold the information requested.

Schools are not required to record incidences of bullying.

The Department published a research report on "The Nature and Extent of Pupil Bullying in Schools in the North of Ireland" in October. The findings show little change in the level of bullying behaviour reported by pupils compared to earlier studies completed in 2002 and 2007.

Bullying

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Education what support his Department provides to victims of bullying and the school involved. (AQW 11886/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department is committed to tackling bullying in schools and examining ways to improve the emotional health and wellbeing of all our pupils.

Schools are supported in dealing with bullying through legislation, advice and guidance developed by the Department and by the local Anti-Bullying Forum (NIABF), which the Department funds.

Nominated teachers are provided with enhanced training to recognise and support young people in crisis, including those who have been subject to bullying. In-service teacher training is provided by five Education and Library Boards (ELBs). Each Board has a designated officer who works with schools to tackle bullying through assisting in the development of whole school policies and supporting individual pupils who have been victims of bullying.

Training is supplemented with school-based advice from ELB staff, on-going telephone guidance, support in relation to specific anti-bullying issues and advice on the content of a school's anti-bullying policy. Advice on preventative strategies including Positive Behaviour Management, Circle Time, training of ancillary staff and awareness raising sessions for parents is also available to schools.

The Department provides funding to Childline, to assist in the continuation of the free, 24/7 helpline for children and young people. The Independent Counselling Service for Schools (ICSS) is accessible to all pupils in grant aided post-primary schools, including special schools. This allows pupils to speak to a trained counsellor about their concerns or fears around bullying.

Over the last five years, work has been ongoing to develop a Pupils' Emotional Health and Well-Being Programme in partnership with key statutory, voluntary and community sector stakeholders. The Programme aims to address how a pupil's emotional health and wellbeing is promoted by the school, what support systems are available to support a pupil under stress and what support is available to a school in the event of a crisis.

Swimming Lessons: School

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Education how many schools (i) provide; and (ii) do not provide swimming lessons for their pupils, broken down by sector. (AQW 11889/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department does not hold this information.

Swimming is a statutory area of Physical Education (PE) at Key Stages 2 and 3. Delivery of the curriculum in terms of meeting the minimum content is a matter for the school and the relevant Board of governors.

The Department does not specify the frequency or duration of swimming activities. . The Department recommends that schools provide opportunities for pupils to take part in at least 2 hours of PE per week; however, it is a matter for schools to decide how this is delivered, including how many swimming sessions to provide.

Review of Public Administration

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) what powers or functions he plans to devolve to local councils under the Review of Public Administration; and (ii) whether this represents a change to his previous commitments. (AQW 11913/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My position is unchanged.

I do not plan to devolve any powers or functions to local councils.

Swimming

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education for his Department's estimate of the percentage of pupils who have learnt to swim by the time they leave primary school. (AQW 11915/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department does not hold this information and is therefore not able to provide an estimation.

Swimming is a statutory area of Physical education (PE) at Key Stage 2. Under Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) the minimum content states, that in relation to swimming, pupils should be enabled to:

- Develop basic swimming and personal survival skills
- Understand the importance of personal hygiene in relation to pool use
- Progress from using a swimming aid to developing their confidence and competence in being able to swim without the use of any aids using recognised swimming strokes.

However, it is a matter for schools to determine how they deliver swimming, including how many swimming lessons to provide.

Primary Schools in North Down

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education, for each of the last three years, to detail (i) which primary schools in North Down received Extended Schools funding; (ii) how much each school received; and (iii) what criteria is applied to decide which schools receive the funding.

(AQW 11931/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The primary schools in the North Down constituency that received Extended Schools (ES) funding in each of the 2009/10, 2010/11 and 2011/12 financial years, and the total amount of funding which each school received, are outlined in the table below.

Primary Schools in the North Down Constituency in receipt of ES funding	2009/10 ES Allocation	2010/11 ES Allocation	2011/12 ES Allocation
Kilcooley PS, Bangor	£17,710	£17,710	£18,745
Millisle PS	£17,451	£17,840	£21,160
Bloomfield PS, Bangor	£6,381*	Did not qualify	£29,498
Clandeboyne PS, Bangor	Did not qualify	Did not qualify	£17,710
Redburn PS, Holywood (note that this school is due for closure 31st August 2012)	Did not qualify	Did not qualify	£10,600
St Malachy's PS, Bangor	Did not qualify	Did not qualify	£29,440

* Bloomfield PS failed to meet the eligibility criteria in 2009/10 and a partial exiting allocation was made to cover the period April – June 2009.

To qualify for ES funding schools must meet the following criteria that apply equally across all schools:

- 51% or more of pupils drawn from a Neighbourhood Renewal Area or the 30% most disadvantaged wards/Super Output Areas (SOAs); and/or
- 37% or more of pupils with a Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME) or in the case of Nursery Schools, parents in receipt of Income Based Job Seekers Allowance at or above 37%.

Primary Schools in North Down

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education which primary schools in North Down offer (i) breakfast clubs; (ii) 2-3pm clubs; (iii) after-school clubs; and (iv) holiday schemes.

(AQW 11932/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Information on the clubs requested is not routinely collected from schools. The Department's Extended Schools (ES) programme provides additional funding for those schools serving the most disadvantaged areas to provide for a wide range of services and activities outside of the traditional school day and, where assessed as needed by schools, this may include breakfast clubs, after school clubs (including 2-3pm clubs) and holiday schemes.

In the 2011/12 financial year, Extended Schools funding has been allocated in respect of 6 primary schools in the North Down constituency. The Chief Executive of the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) has confirmed that 4 of these schools ran a breakfast club, 5 schools provided after school clubs and 1 school operated a summer scheme using funding provided through the ES programme. The SEELB is also aware of 4 primary schools outside of the ES programme that run breakfast clubs. Details are outlined in the table below.

Extended Schools	Breakfast Clubs	After School Clubs, including 2-3pm clubs	Summer Scheme
Clandeboyne PS	✓	✓	
Millisle PS	✓	✓	
Kilcooley PS	✓	✓	
Bloomfield PS	✓	✓	
Redburn PS		✓	
St Malachy's PS			✓
Non- Extended Schools			
Towerview PS	✓		

Extended Schools	Breakfast Clubs	After School Clubs, including 2-3pm clubs	Summer Scheme
Ballymagee PS	✓		
Glencraig Integrated PS	✓		
Glenlola Collegiate Prep.	✓		

Childcare Provision: Guidance on Registering

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education what guidance his Department provides to schools on registering childcare provision. (AQW 11964/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Registration and regulation of childcare provision is the responsibility of the Health and Social Care Trusts under part XI of the Children (NI) Order 1995. DE does not therefore issue guidance on this matter.

Reading Recovery Programmes

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education whether his Department intends to reinvest in the Reading Recovery programmes which provide literacy support to school children. (AQW 11987/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department provided substantial financial support for the Reading Recovery programme from 1998/99 to 2007/08 when over 600 teachers were trained in Reading Recovery. When funding ended in 2008 a number of schools continued to provide Reading Recovery from within their delegated budget, utilising teachers previously trained in Reading Recovery techniques. The Education and Library Boards also provided funding from within their budget to retain a tutor in each Board area to support and sustain Reading Recovery.

I now have in place a coherent set of policies designed to improve educational outcomes for young people and to address the root causes when pupils are not achieving to their full potential. Central to this is the implementation of "Count, read: succeed – A Strategy to Improve Outcomes in Literacy and Numeracy" which recognises the importance of the early identification of pupils who, for whatever reason, require additional support to develop their literacy and numeracy skills.

The strategy makes it clear that teachers have the central role in raising standards in literacy and numeracy including identifying and addressing underachievement at the earliest stage and in a systematic way. It is a matter for teachers, drawing on their professional expertise, to determine what specific form of intervention is required to address underachievement. Where necessary, teachers can draw on advice and support from other staff within the school, for example, the literacy co-ordinator, or, in a situation of continuing underachievement, external support, such as that provided by the Education and Library Boards or health professionals.

Evidence suggests that effective teaching of literacy should involve a range of approaches. Reading Recovery is one of a number of teaching methods that might be utilised by a teacher to secure improvement in a child's literacy skills.

The challenge now is to ensure the continuing and effective implementation of these policies by schools to raise educational standards overall and close the gap in achievement, particularly between those that are from disadvantaged backgrounds and those that are not.

School Attendance

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Education to detail what procedures are followed by (i) schools; (ii) Education and Library Boards; and (iii) his Department when a child fails to reach a minimum of 85 percent attendance at school. (AQW 11989/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Procedures taken by schools; Education and Library Boards; and my Department when a child fails to reach a minimum of 85 percent are as follows:

(i) Schools

Schools have a responsibility to promote and encourage good attendance, however it is the parent or carer of a child who has legal responsibility for ensuring that the child receives full time education.

If a child's attendance falls below 85% (approximately 28 days absence) then a referral can be made to the Education Welfare Service (EWS). Referral is not automatic but at the discretion of the school e.g. a child may be absent if they are receiving long term medical treatment.

(ii) Education and Library Boards

If a school makes a referral to EWS an Education Welfare Officer (EWO) will conduct a home visit and agree an action plan to address attendance with the pupil, parents, school and other agencies, if required.

For older pupils referral to a suitable alternative education programme may be required e.g. EOTAS (Education Other Than At School).

Education and Library Boards (ELBs), through EWS, have an obligation to ensure that parents and carers meet their legal responsibility in ensuring their child attends full time education.

If a parent fails to ensure regular attendance at school the respective ELB may serve a School Attendance Order. If the parent or guardian fails to comply with the School Attendance Order the ELB can apply to the courts to issue fines to parents of children who are not attending school. In the Magistrates Court the maximum fine that can be imposed is £1000 in respect of each child who is missing school.

The ELB can also apply to the Family Proceedings Courts to make an Education Supervision Order which places a child under the supervision of the ELB.

(iii) My Department

Statutory responsibility for ensuring that parents fulfil their statutory duty to cause their child to receive efficient full time education, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise lies with the Education and Library Boards. My Department does not have a locus to intervene in individual cases.

A research study to identify strategies which have been successful in improving attendance in schools has just been completed and was published on my Department's website earlier this month. Officials will be working with the EWS and schools to take forward the recommendations highlighted in this report and develop guidance for schools on effective practice.

School Attendance

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Education what support his Department offers schools when the low attendance of a pupil is identified as a problem; and at what stage his Department offers this intervention.

(AQW 11990/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department recognises that regular attendance at school is crucial if a pupil is to engage fully with the educational curriculum and obtain the best outcomes from their period in compulsory education.

Ultimately parents and carers have a statutory duty to ensure that each child of compulsory school age receives full time education.

Schools are supported by the Education and Library Boards through their Education Welfare Service (EWS) who have a legal responsibility to ensure that parents and carers meet their own responsibility towards their children's education.

The EWS can provide advice and support to schools and parents at any time if concerns around attendance arise. If a pupil's attendance drops below 85% (i.e. approx 28 school days absent) a referral can be made by the school to EWS at the respective Board who will investigate further to identify the cause of poor attendance and determine measures for improvement. The EWS will agree an action plan, with the pupil, the parents and the school and other agencies, as required.

If no progress can be made and a parent continues to fail to ensure their child's regular attendance, the ELBs may ultimately apply to the courts to issue fines to parents of children who are not attending school regularly.

My Department recognises the problems associated in dealing with poor school attendance and is looking at methods to improve this. A research study to identify strategies which have been successful in improving attendance in schools has just been completed and was published on my Department's website earlier this month. My Department will be working with EWS and schools to take forward the recommendations highlighted in this report.

Special Educational Needs: Dispute Avoidance and Resolution Service

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of the Disputes and Resolution Service for Special Educational Needs pupils in each of the last five years, broken down by Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 11999/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education and Library Boards have advised that the cost of the Dispute Avoidance and Resolution Service in each of the last five financial years is as follows:-

	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
BELB	24k	23k	28k	29k	23k
NEELB	29k	41k	28k	29k	34k
SEELB	49k	37k	39k	40k	43k
SELB	53k	62k	38k	76k	84k
WELB	68k	70k	72k	75k	78k

Special Educational Needs: Dispute Avoidance and Resolution Service

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education how many cases the Dispute Avoidance and Resolution Service has dealt with in each of the last five years, broken down by Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 12000/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education and Library Boards have advised that the number of cases the Dispute Avoidance and Resolution Service has dealt with in each of the last five financial years is as follows:-

	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
BELB	3	3	8	6	10
NEELB	24	25	26	10	23
SEELB	18	24	38	39	43
SELB	20	34	38	18	18
WELB	15	27	11	16	18

Preschool Education Advisory Group

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education how many funded places were initially allocated to each Pre-School Advisory Group in each of the last five years.

(AQW 12001/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The table below details the initial allocation of places to each education and library board's Pre-School Education Advisory Group (PEAG) for each of the last 5 years.

	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
BELB	531	590	590	552	582
WELB	1212	1264	1260	1280	1247
NEELB	1636	1666	1726	1780	1799
SEELB	1391	1445	1445	1450	1570
SELB	1693	1965	1905	2093	1940
TOTAL	6463	6930	6926	7155	7138

School Visits

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education how many times he has visited (i) controlled; (ii) maintained; (iii) integrated; and (iv) Irish-medium schools in (a) West Tyrone; and (b) Northern Ireland, since May 2011.

(AQW 12065/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I endeavour to respond positively to as many invitations as possible and do not take into account school sectors when deciding as to whether I accept an invite. Diary commitments, Assembly business and the purpose of the visit are the deciding factors when making my decision to visit schools.

	(i) Controlled	(ii) Maintained	(iii) Integrated	(iv) Irish – Medium
(a) West Tyrone	1	2		1
(b) North of Ireland	19	34	2	4

School Governor Appointments

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education why he has yet to approve the appointment of any new school governors, or second-term governors, since he assumed office in May 2011.

(AQW 12069/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have in fact approved 96 school governor appointments since May 2011. It is incorrect therefore to imply that I have not approved the appointments of new school governors, or the reappointment of serving DE governors, since coming into office. I have previously made clear that, 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 and have given a commitment to making appointments for each post for which I do have a choice of candidates. Appointments have been, and continue to be, made by my

Department on a regular basis in line with that commitment. At the same time, work continues to encourage more people to put themselves forward as school governors because I remain concerned that the pool of potential candidates is currently not fully reflective of the population.

Arm's-length Bodies: Board Members

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education how many former senior civil servants, from deputy secretary grade to permanent secretary grade, serve on the boards of his Department's arm's length bodies in a (i) paid; and (ii) unpaid capacity.
(AQW 12073/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There are two former senior civil servants, in the deputy secretary to permanent secretary grade range, currently serving on the boards of my Department's arms length bodies, one in a paid capacity and one in an unpaid capacity.

Commercial Enterprise/School Partnership in Dungannon

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education why his Department is delaying the partnership between a school and a commercial enterprise in Dungannon, under which the company will voluntarily heat the school with the excess energy it produces.
(AQW 12080/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department was originally made aware of this proposal in December 2011. It was evident that the potential environmental and financial benefits associated with the proposal merited serious consideration. Departmental officials subsequently wrote to the company in January 2012, followed by a site meeting in February 2012 to further explore the feasibility of the project. Officials then arranged for the technical viability of the project to be assessed (and subsequently confirmed) by a qualified mechanical and electrical engineer in March 2012.

A funding options paper for this project was forwarded to the School in March 2012 recommending that the School should explore the potential for establishing a direct contractual arrangement with the company, funding the project via anticipated revenue savings on heating oil. The School explored this option and then wrote to me (14 May 2012) seeking financial support for the project.

I have advised the School that I will urgently consider the funding of this initiative, prioritised against other demands on the Department's minor works budget.

I trust this makes it clear that my Department has not delayed the development of this project in any way.

Relationships and Sexuality Education Policy

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to list the schools which have a Relationships and Sexuality Education policy that teaches about heterosexuality but not homosexuality.
(AQW 12081/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department does not hold this information.

All schools should have a Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) policy, setting out how the school will address RSE. They should consult on the content of the policy with pupils and parents and it should be endorsed by their Board of Governors. Whole school planning is vital to ensure RSE is taught appropriately within a meaningful context.

Homophobic Bullying

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the impact of teaching lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) students that homosexuality is wrong or not normal; and whether this reinforces homophobic bullying and increases the risk of LGB students taking their own life.
(AQW 12082/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: All schools should have a Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) policy, setting out how the school will address RSE. They should consult on the content of the policy with pupils and parents and it should be endorsed by their Board of Governors. This means that whole school planning is vital to ensure RSE is taught appropriately within a meaningful context.

Schools teach within that framework and the Department has made them aware of guidance produced by the Equality Commission on Eliminating Sexual Orientation Discrimination. All students/pupils have the right to learn in a safe environment, to be treated with respect and dignity and not be treated any less favourably on grounds of their actual or perceived sexual orientation. This guidance relates to the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (NI) 2006, therefore in developing or reviewing their RSE policy, schools should take account of the Equality Commission's Guidance.

Bullying, in whatever form and for whatever reason, has no place in schools. My Department alone cannot resolve this issue and it is for this reason that it funds and is a member of the local AntiBullying Forum. The Forum is developing a suite of guidance for schools, in consultation with children and young people, around the prevention of, and response to, various types of prejudice based bullying, including homophobic bullying.

It is vital that Departments work collaboratively and with the wider community and voluntary sector to achieve a co-ordinated regional approach to suicide prevention. The focus for my Department's contribution is promoting the positive emotional health

and wellbeing of pupils and the broader school community. This focus recognises the significant role that schools can play in raising awareness of emotional health, developing the confidence and coping skills of pupils, encouraging help-seeking behaviour and in offering early intervention when pupils are experiencing stress.

Relationships and Sexuality Education Policy

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to detail the implications for school teachers if (i) they teach children that homosexuality is wrong; or (ii) they teach children about heterosexual relationships and not homosexual relationships.
(AQW 12083/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: All schools should have a Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) policy, setting out how the school will address RSE. They should consult on the content of the policy with pupils and parents and it should be endorsed by their Board of Governors. This means that whole school planning is vital to ensure RSE is taught appropriately within a meaningful context.

Schools teach within that framework and the Department has made them aware of guidance produced by the Equality Commission on Eliminating Sexual Orientation Discrimination. All students/pupils have the right to learn in a safe environment, to be treated with respect and dignity and not be treated any less favourably on grounds of their actual or perceived sexual orientation. This guidance relates to the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (NI) 2006, therefore in developing or reviewing their RSE policy, schools should take account of the Equality Commission's Guidance.

Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Students

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education what steps he has taken, since coming into office, to ensure that lesbian, gay and bisexual students are treated equally at school.
(AQW 12084/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have recently agreed the Department's Equality Scheme and Audit of Inequalities/Action Plan.

The Action Plan features action points on Pupil Bullying and Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) including how best to support teaching on sexual orientation.

In January 2012 I also launched a guidance document intended to supplement the Community Relations, Equality & Diversity (CRED) Policy. The intended outcomes of the CRED Policy are to develop learners who understand and respect the rights, equality and diversity of all Section 75 groups (including sexual orientation) and develop the skills, attitudes and behaviours that enable them to value and respect difference and engage positively with it.

Circular Number 2010/01 reminded schools of guidance produced by the Equality Commission on the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (NI) 2006.

All students/pupils have the right to be treated with respect and dignity and not be treated any less favourably on grounds of their actual, or perceived, sexual orientation.

Health and Education: Data-sharing

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 11197/11-15, what meetings his departmental officials have had with other bodies in relation to improving data sharing between health and education; and to outline the details of each meeting.
(AQW 12106/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Departmental officials have held no meetings specifically in relation to improving data sharing between health and education. Officials liaise with Information officers within the Health and Social Care Board to obtain statistical data to inform policy development as needs arise. Officials may also utilise statistics drawn from NISRA in relation to live births.

Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics: Funding

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 11356/11-15, why he has chosen to reduce financial support for STEM subjects in 2011/12 before he has any indication that the action plan is bringing about increased uptake of STEM subjects at GCSE and A level.
(AQW 12107/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The higher level of funding to support STEM subjects for the period 2008/09 - 2010/11 was the £10.7million my Department acquired from the Innovation Fund. This was in addition to the funding already provided directly to schools, via the Common Funding Formula, for the implementation of the revised curriculum, including Science, Technology and Maths.

My Department continues to provide a significant level of support to promote STEM subjects by investing £1million per annum for various STEM related activities.

The member will be interested to note that statistics show an increase in GCSE and A-Level STEM examination entries as a percentage of all examination entries. The following table illustrates the increase.

	2004/05	2010/11
GCSE STEM entries as a percentage of all examination entries	33.9%	37%
A-Level STEM entries as a percentage of all examination entries	37%	40.4%

Teachers: Redundancy

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 11602/11-15, whether he will consider introducing a package for teachers, aged over 60, who would like to retire but are unable to opt for redundancy at the school in which they are employed. (AQW 12113/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The employing authorities offer significant financial incentives to secure volunteers for redundancy among older teachers. A transferred redundancy scheme is operated annually 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.

I have made funding available to allow schools and employing authorities to manage teacher redundancies at August 2012. While I am hopeful that the enhanced redundancy compensation being offered will encourage older teachers to volunteer, thus protecting the jobs of younger teachers, the funding is intended to facilitate a reduction in the long term cost base of the education sector, not to allow schools to employ a replacement for every teacher who wishes to leave the profession.

Teachers who are aged 60 or over are entitled to retire on age grounds at a time of their choosing and immediately receive unreduced pension benefits.

North Eastern Education and Library Board: Post-primary Schools

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 10990/11-15, to list the schools that sought (i) temporary variation; and (ii) temporary accommodation. (AQW 12140/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The following post primary schools have applied for an increase in their approved enrolment over the past five years in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area:

- Cross and Passion, Ballycastle
- Dalriada School, Ballymoney
- Larne Grammar School
- Magherafelt High School
- St Colms High School, Draperstown.

Over the past three years the following eight post primary schools have sought temporary accommodation:

- Cross and Passion, Ballycastle
- Dalriada School, Ballymoney
- Larne Grammar School
- Magherafelt High School
- St Colms High School, Draperstown.
- St Lillians College, Carnlough
- St Louis' Grammar School, Ballymena
- St Mary's College, Portglenone

Diamond Jubilee

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education whether he plans to issue guidance to schools on the display of Diamond Jubilee material during the forthcoming celebrations. (AQW 12205/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have no plans to issue such guidance. It is a matter for each individual school to consider this issue.

Arm's-length Bodies and Quangos

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education to detail the current number of arm's-length bodies and quangos that are attached to his Department; and how this figure compares with the number in (i) 2008; (ii) 2009; (iii) 2010; and (iv) 2011. (AQW 12228/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The number of arm's-length bodies that are attached to my Department since 2008 are as follows:

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
9	9	10 (wef 1 June 2010)	11 (wef 31 January 2011)	14 (wef 1 April 2012)

School Transport: Distances

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 2228/11 -15, in relation to the home to school transport, to detail whether the shortest distance is determined (i) by the shortest route; (ii) as the crow flies; or (iii) by the route followed by the bus. (AQW 12239/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The distance between a pupil's home and school used to establish eligibility for home to school transport assistance, is determined using the shortest public route capable of being walked. Such routes may include roads, paths and walkways.

Ministerial Cars

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education whether his official ministerial car was used on 24 May 2012 to escort a prisoner on release to attend a funeral. (AQW 12242/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My ministerial car was not used to escort a prisoner on release to attend a funeral.

School Transport: Budget

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 6565/11-15, how he intends to make savings of £5 million in the home to school transport budget for 2012/13, and further savings of £5 million in subsequent years. (AQW 12243/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The £5m savings requirement from the home to school transport budget was a single reduction in 2011/12 which reduced the budget for that and subsequent years by £5m. Accordingly, Education & Library Boards who are responsible for the operational aspects of the home to school transport scheme, are not required to make a further savings of £5m in each subsequent year.

Savings in the home to school transport budget will be achieved through efficiency measures taken by the Education and Library Boards across all its operations. The measures will ultimately include those set out in the second report on school transport by the Department of Finance and Personnel's Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit (PEDU), once an appropriate action plan has been agreed and published.

Department for Employment and Learning

Capital and Revenue Savings

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the capital and revenue savings his Department has made in each of the last three years. (AQW 11659/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): The Department for Employment and Learning has achieved the following capital and revenue savings in each of the last three years:

	2009-10 Target (£m)	2009-10 Achieved (£m)	2010-11 Target (£m)	2010-11 Achieved (£m)	2011-12 Target (£m)	2011-12 Achieved (£m)
Capital	5.16	5.16	6.91	6.91	-	-
Revenue	34.93	34.93	52.32	52.32	66.50	66.50
Total	40.09	40.09	59.23	59.23	66.50	66.50

Work Placements

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what consideration has been given to retaining work placement services within Executive Departments; and what scope exists to vary the conditions relating to work placements from those currently operating in Great Britain. (AQW 11754/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department is currently developing a work placement programme under the Youth Employment Offer.

Unlike in GB where obtaining these placements is contracted out to third party providers, my work placement programme will rely on the Employment Service's Employer Engagement Team to secure local opportunities. Personal Advisers based in JobCentres and Jobs & Benefits offices will then match unemployed young people to these placements and monitor their progress.

Listed Properties

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the listed properties that are owned by his Department. (AQW 11788/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department does not own any listed buildings.

Gender Imbalance at Senior Management Levels

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how his Department plans to address the gender imbalance at senior management levels. (AQW 11816/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland is the statutory authority tasked with engaging employers on equality issues, and providing them with information, guidance and support in this respect.

In respect of the Department for Employment and Learning, the gender profile at Senior Civil Service grade is equally balanced, with five females and five males in post.

European Social Fund

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether his Department has any plans to use unallocated or undercommitted funds from the European Social Fund to address unemployment in areas of deprivation, such as the Kilcooley Estate in Bangor, or to support organisations which work with long-term unemployed people, such as the Kilcooley Community Forum and the Kilcooley Women's Centre. (AQW 11817/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department does not anticipate that unallocated funds will become available over the duration of the 2nd 'call' for funding from the Northern Ireland European Social Fund Programme, 2007-2013. On this basis it is not the ESF Managing Authority's intention to issue any additional letters of offer at this stage but the situation will be kept under review as part of the programme's ongoing financial management.

Furthermore, during a Ministerial visit to the European Commission on the 16th February 2012, I personally raised the issue of whether any additional ESF Funding may become available as a result of potential under spends elsewhere in the Community EU with Commissioner Andor. He advised that no additional ESF funding would be made available to any region during the current ESF Programme funding period.

Since then I have conveyed this information to any training organisations that I have met seeking additional ESF funding.

Law Lectureship

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether it is possible to hold a law lectureship, or be appointed a Law Professor, at (i) Queen's University, Belfast; or (ii) the Ulster of University, without having a primary degree in law. (AQW 11880/11-15)

Dr Farry: Both Queen's University and the University of Ulster have confirmed that an individual may hold a law lectureship, or be appointed a Law Professor, without having a primary degree in law.

Lecturers

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what research his Department has carried out on the amount of time lecturers spend with their students through seminars, lectures and tutorials, to ensure that students are receiving a value for money service. (AQW 11968/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Department for Employment and Learning has carried out no research into the amount of time lecturers spend with their students through seminars, lectures and tutorials.

The Department continues to be committed to ensuring that students have a high quality learning experience. From the start of the academic year 2012-13, all higher education institutions (HEIs) in Northern Ireland will be required to produce a Key Information Set (KIS) for each of their courses. This will include information on the proportion of time students spend on various learning and teaching activities, and the range of assessment methods used.

The KIS will contain areas of information that students have identified as useful. These areas include student satisfaction; course information; employment and salary data; accommodation costs; financial information, such as fees; and student union information. The KIS will be reviewed regularly to ensure that it continues to fulfil students' needs, in terms of both content and delivery.

In August 2011, the QAA, an organisation supported by the Department, published 'Contact hours: a guide for students'. The QAA believes that a good quality experience for students is one where they are given the best opportunities to succeed in their studies. It refers to these factors as 'learning opportunities' and discusses institutional performance in this regard in its reports.

The QAA also state that quality is linked to a wide range of factors, including teaching, support services, access to learning spaces and resources, and assessment and feedback processes. There is no evidence to suggest, therefore, that quality can be measured solely by contact hours.

The Department will continue to ensure that students are provided with the best quality learning experience when studying at a higher education institution in Northern Ireland by continuing to support the work of the QAA and through the implementation of 'Graduating to Success', the Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland.

Students: Funding

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what funding is available for students who wish to undertake a Masters degree.

(AQW 12005/11-15)

Dr Farry: Support for postgraduate students, many of whom have already had the benefit of my Department's student support for their primary degree, has always been discretionary and subject to change to reflect wider government priorities.

Each year my Department, through its Postgraduate Awards scheme, makes available student support funding to Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster for research and certain approved courses of full-time study leading to higher degrees (Masters and PhDs). The universities are responsible for administering the Postgraduate Awards scheme and select, by competition, the students to fill these awards within the limits of funding available.

For the forthcoming academic year 2012/13, eligible students who are successful in securing a postgraduate award for a taught masters course will receive a minimum grant for personal maintenance of £6,795 (provided they satisfy the residency requirements of the scheme) and they will have their tuition fees paid.

Other sources of funding that postgraduate students may be able to avail of include a Professional and Career Development Loan, an interest subsidised bank loan which is designed to help people pay for work-related learning to help gain experience, training and qualifications to improve job skills or launch a new career. For more information on Professional and Career Development Loans, students should call 0800 100 900 or visit <http://www.direct.gov.uk/pcdl> or e-mail pcdlinfo@ypla.gov.uk or <http://www.direct.gov.uk/pcdl>.

Alternatively, students may be able to source a grant through the Educational Grants Advisory Service. For more information, students should log on to www.family-action.org.uk/educationalgrantssearch or call the information line on 020 7254 6251 (available 2pm-4pm on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday only).

Postgraduate students who are in financial hardship or are contemplating leaving their course because of financial problems may be able to seek assistance from their university's Support Funds.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

NI 2012: Promotion

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much has been spent, to date, on promoting NI 2012 in the rest of the UK.

(AQW 11616/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Tourism Ireland spends £12.6 million on marketing in the Great Britain market and ensures that Northern Ireland is featured in a third of its activity.

It also received an additional £4.7million to boost its ni2012-specific promotional activity, particularly during the early part of the year. Of the additional £4.7million, the majority of this money, £3.4 million, has been invested in Great Britain, which is our most important market.

A significant amount of this additional investment has been spent on co-operative marketing campaigns with air and sea carriers. Other activity to promote ni2012 includes TV advertising on British terrestrial and satellite channels, a major promotional roadshow series in key access gateways such as London, Manchester and Glasgow and participation in trade and consumer travel shows in France, Spain and Germany.

Capital and Revenue Savings

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the capital and revenue savings her Department has made in each of the last three years.

(AQW 11660/11-15)

Mrs Foster: DETI delivered £15.2million Resource savings in 2009/10, £23.7million Resource savings in 2010/11, and further savings of £1.1million Resource in 2011/12.

Aviation Strategy

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions her Department has had with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills on the possibility of developing a UK-wide aviation strategy to improve the export potential of businesses.

(AQW 11671/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Department for Transport has been leading on the development of a sustainable United Kingdom policy framework for aviation. My Department has been contributing to this process to ensure that Northern Ireland's unique position and heavy reliance on air connectivity to access global business and inward tourism markets is fully reflected in the emerging UK policy.

Invest NI: Posts

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many posts at each grade within InvestNI have been filled by internal trawl, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 11704/11-15)

Mrs Foster:

Year June 2011 – May 2012	Number of Internal Trawls	Number of Posts Filled
Executive Officer 2	1	2
Staff Officer	1	1
Deputy Principal	3	6
Grade 7	2	2

Year June 2010 – May 2011	Number of Internal Trawls	Number of Posts Filled
Executive Officer 2	2	13
Staff Officer	2	2
Deputy Principal	3	2
Grade 7	3	3
Director	2	2

Year June 2009 - May 2010	Number of Internal Trawls	Number of Posts Filled
Deputy Principal	1	1

Ballyhornan, County Down

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the extent to which local tourism and business is affected by the on-going pumping of raw sewage into the sea at Ballyhornan, Co Down.

(AQW 11819/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) is not aware of the specifics around the pumping of raw sewage into the sea at Ballyhornan, however there is a direct link between water quality and tourism.

Compromised water quality in the lough has the potential to translate into reduced visitor numbers with resulting impacts on the viability of tourism related businesses in the area.

NI 2012: Events

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many events have been planned as part of the NI2012 initiative in the Upper Bann constituency; and what budget has been allocated for the events.

(AQW 11835/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board has published this information on their Corporate Website www.nitb.com/events.

The Tourism Events Funding Programme 2012/13 has offered funding to 51 events. This information is filterable by Town, County, District Council Area and Constituency for your convenience.

Civil Servants

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many civil servants currently employed in her Department have been re-employed after receiving a redundancy package from the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

(AQW 11846/11-15)

Mrs Foster: DETI has not re-employed any staff who received a redundancy package from the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Arm's-length Bodies: Invoices

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what percentage of invoices, received by each of her Department's arm's-length bodies in the last twelve months, were paid within 30 days of receipt.

(AQW 11865/11-15)

Mrs Foster: During the 2011-12 Financial Year, the last 12 month period for which figures are available, the percentage of invoices received by the Department's arm's-length bodies and paid within 30 days of receipt were as follows:

- Invest Northern Ireland – 97%
- Northern Ireland Tourist Board – 94%
- Consumer Council for Northern Ireland – 99%
- Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland – 100%

Northern Ireland Football Team: Business and Tourism

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps have been taken to promote business and tourism at the same time when the Northern Ireland Football Team is playing in cities.

(AQW 11879/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI has met with the Irish Football Association and discussed the possibility of joint programmes when they go overseas. Such programmes will be carefully targeted to take into account Invest NI's key markets for both inward investment and exports to maximise potential benefits.

Tourism Ireland will maximise the tourism marketing opportunities around Northern Ireland matches which take place in, or involve teams from, key markets for inbound tourism to Northern Ireland. This would include activity such as promoting media attendance and coverage of the Northern Ireland leg of the matches, as well as inviting sports, lifestyle and travel media to enjoy wider familiarisation tours of Northern Ireland on the back of the fixtures.

NITB is currently working in conjunction with the Irish Football Association (IFA) in planning activity for Northern Ireland home matches and is keen on developing a good working relationship, to encourage the team to act as ambassadors for Northern Ireland when playing away from home.

Equality Commission's Report 'Trends in Community Proportions of Applications and Appointments to the Private and Public Sectors'

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what response her Department will be making to the Equality Commission's publication, 'Trends in Community Proportions of Applications and Appointments to the Private and Public Sectors' (March 2012), particularly in so far as it shows a lower success rate for Protestant applicants for jobs in the private sector throughout the last decade.

(AQW 11937/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 relates specifically to religious community background and labour market outcomes and it would be for OFMDFM, as the Department responsible for both the legislation and for the Equality Commission, to provide comment.

Gas Reprocessing Facility

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline any consideration her Department has given to the need for a gas reprocessing facility.

(AQW 11941/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I have assumed that the question is referring to a gas processing facility. In which case, my Department has, to date, not given consideration to the need for such a facility.

European Entrepreneurial Region Award 2014

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether they will seek the European Entrepreneurial Region Award 2014 for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 11943/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Details on the 2014 award process are not currently available. However, in line with its commitments within the Barroso Taskforce Action Plan, Invest NI will consider taking forward an application, including a focus on its Local Economic Development work with Councils, once the required information is available.

Hydraulic Fracturing

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether her Department has made any assessment of the impact that hydraulic fracturing would have on property prices.

(AQW 11944/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department has not made any such assessment.

Irish Open: Funding

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the level of funding allocated for the Irish Open Golf Tournament at Portrush in 2012, whether through sponsorship or concessions.

(AQW 11965/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Northern Ireland Executive has allocated £2million in sponsorship through the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. The European Tour is responsible for other sponsorship and concessions and, as these are commercial decisions, The Northern Ireland Executive is not aware of the details.

UK City of Culture

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what co-ordination will take place between her Department and the organisers of the Londonderry first ever UK City of Culture events, to ensure that the region gets maximum publicity for tourism related events and that they leave a lasting legacy.

(AQW 11967/11-15)

Mrs Foster: There are regular meetings taking place with the Culture Company 2013, Ilex Urban Regeneration Company, Derry City Council, and DCAL at both DETI and NITB levels. Discussions cover areas such as infrastructure, investment and development, events programming, funding and marketing. In addition, a draft Memorandum of Understanding has been produced identifying roles and responsibilities of various organisations including DETI, NITB, DCAL, Derry City Council and the 2013 Culture Company.

NITB has committed £700,000 in event funding towards UK City of Culture 2013 to cover programming and marketing. In addition NITB will be launching its 2013 events funding programme in September 2012 which will have a particular focus on the 2013 UK City of Culture.

NITB and Tourism Ireland will continue to feature heavily Londonderry's City of Culture year in 2013 in all of its promotion and marketing activity throughout the remainder of 2012 and into 2013.

Furthermore NITB has contributed £14million to the Built Heritage programme and Lighting Strategy as part of the Walled City Signature Project which will enhance the visitor experience in the city in 2013 and will leave a lasting legacy for years to come.

The UK City of Culture 2013 is seen as a stepping stone towards achieving our tourism potential of £1billion tourism spend by 2020 ; 4.5 million visitors; over 50,000 jobs sustained.

Energy: Whitty Report

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of paragraph 4.38 of Lord Whitty's report 'Energising Northern Ireland' which states that it is not clear that consumers in Northern Ireland are receiving as great a benefit as those in the Republic of Ireland from the island of Ireland electricity wholesale market; and what steps she intends to take to redress this imbalance.

(AQW 11977/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The common wholesale electricity market ensures suppliers in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland pay the same price for the electricity they buy from the market, with electricity prices reflecting underlying international wholesale gas costs. Each supplier will then set their own customer tariffs.

Ongoing developments such as a second North-South interconnector and the new East-West interconnector will enhance efficient functioning of the market, along with a programme to align the market with the Great Britain market under the European target model for 2014/16. This will bring further benefits to consumers, with a long term downwards competitive pressure on wholesale prices and greater security of supply.

Power NI

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the monopoly which PowerNI has, in relation to solar photovoltaic installation, as a result of the grant money it receives from the Regulator, and of the impact this might have on the future of independent companies.

(AQW 11994/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I understand that the independent Utility Regulator's Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme (NISEP) is open to any pre-registered organisation which meets the eligibility criteria; these organisations can propose schemes to be considered for NISEP support. A temporary suspension of customer applications for several renewables schemes, including solar photovoltaic (PV), has been agreed with Power NI to allow the Utility Regulator an opportunity to consider the concerns raised.

The main source of financial support for renewable electricity installations is provided by the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO). Accreditation of microgeneration solar PV panels under the NIRO is subject to installation by companies accredited under the Microgeneration Certification Scheme.

Review of Public Administration

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what powers or functions she plans to devolve to local councils under the Review of Public Administration; and whether this represents a change to her previous commitments.

(AQW 12061/11-15)

Mrs Foster: In 2008 it was agreed that the following functions would be transferred when the new councils are established on foot of the Review of Local Administration (RPA):-

- Start a Business Programme and Enterprise Shows;
- Youth Entrepreneurship (such as Princes Trust and Shell Livewire);
- Social Entrepreneurship;
- Investing For Women;
- Neighbourhood Renewal funding relating to enterprise initiatives;
- Small scale tourism accommodation development;
- Local tourism marketing;
- Local Tourism product development;
- Visitor servicing;
- Providing business support including business start up advice along with training and delivery of customer care schemes;
- Providing advice to developers on tourism policies and related issues.

There has been no change in the principles underlying the types of activity to be transferred; but I am discussing with the Environment Minister the extent to which this precise list of functions needs to be revisited in light of developments since 2008.

Feed-in Tariff with Contracts for Difference

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, if the impact of the introduction of Feed-in Tariff with Contracts for Difference is to reduce consumer prices, whether there is sufficient east-west interconnection for customers in Northern Ireland to benefit; and to outline her Department's policy on enhancing east-west interconnection.

(AQW 12102/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The introduction of a Feed-in Tariff with Contracts for Difference (FIT CfD) is a system of low-carbon generation revenue support that will provide more certainty of revenues for low-carbon generation and make investment in clean energy more attractive. A FIT CfD is expected to lead to lower consumer bills compared to what they would have been otherwise with the Renewable Obligation continuing to support new renewable generating capacity. Electricity bills are estimated to be, on average, 4% lower over the next two decades than they would otherwise have been.

Adequate electricity interconnection between Northern Ireland and Great Britain is currently provided by the Moyle Interconnector. While there are no current plans to enhance this interconnection capacity, a second east-west electricity interconnector between the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain has recently been completed, and along with the Moyle, will improve regional electricity market integration, and help deliver more competitive electricity prices within a larger market.

Bed and Breakfast Businesses: Support

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what support is available from her Department and its arm's-length bodies for (i) newly established; and (ii) existing Bed and Breakfast businesses, to extend or modernise their premises.
(AQW 12117/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Whilst Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) does not offer any financial incentives for potential B&B accommodation providers, there is a range of advisory and support services available. These include guidance on the legal requirements involved when opening a B&B, operational matters, signage and advice on other statutory bodies' legislative requirements i.e. Environmental Health and Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service.

B&B providers can also avail of free marketing via NITB's consumer website www.discovernorthernireland.com and can apply to participate in the quality grading scheme offering the opportunity to be star graded.

They will have access to NITB's Next Level Programme of Events which includes road shows, master classes, business insights and conferences. In addition, a range of ICT business support and customer service initiatives are also available to certified B&B providers.

NITB also works closely with the Accommodation Associations, including the Northern Ireland Bed & Breakfast Partnership, who can provide further guidance to potential B&B operators.

Sickness Absence

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the percentage of sickness absence in her Department in each of the last three years; and the agreed target rate of sickness as set out in any memoranda of understanding between her Department and the trade unions.
(AQW 12224/11-15)

Mrs Foster: There is no memorandum of understanding between DETI and trade unions in relation to sickness absence targets. However, detailed below are the Ministerial targets and the actual rate achieved by DETI for each of the last three years:

Year	Ministerial Target	Actual
2009/10	8.5	8.3
2010/11	8.1	8.1
2011/12	7.9	7.3 (Estimate)

Hydraulic Fracturing

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) to detail the insurance requirements for a company for hydraulic fracturing; (ii) whether her Department has received copies of the commercial liability insurance, and all the supporting documents from any company wishing to undertake hydraulic fracturing; (iii) to list the names of the companies providing this insurance and the policy number; and (iv) for her assessment of the approximate minimum level of insurance cover which would be required for Tamboran Resources to commence hydraulic fracturing.
(AQW 12271/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department has not issued a licence for hydraulic fracturing nor is it in receipt of any application for hydraulic fracturing.

Should a company apply for consent to drill and test for oil or gas using hydraulic fracturing; my Department will make an assessment, in respect of appropriate insurance requirements, based on advice from relevant professionals. Such insurance requirements will then be stipulated as an obligation which companies must meet prior to such consent being granted.

My Department is in receipt of the relevant commercial liability insurance for each of the four Petroleum Licences which have been awarded. Insurance specific to hydraulic fracturing is not required as no formal application has yet been made by any of the licensees.

The terms of any insurance policy between an insurance company and the organisation which is being insured is a commercial matter and not one which it would be appropriate for me to report on.

My Department has not made any such assessment, at this time.

Broadband: Cost

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the cost of broadband to a household of each of the services that are supported by her Department; and how this cost compares to private companies in the market.
(AQW 12294/11-15)

Mrs Foster: DETI only has one contract that provides broadband services for households. This is with Onwave under the Remote Broadband Services contract

The current prices, as published on the company's website, indicates that for the basic service of 6 Mbps the installation is £109.95 and £39.95 per month thereafter. The costs for this product, compared to similar products available in the market, indicate that the charges are attractive.

The telecommunications market is fully competitive and regulated nationally by OFCOM across a wide range of market segments. It is proper in a competitive market that companies are free to set prices for these services as appropriate. The market is very dynamic and changes regularly and it is for consumers to compare costs and decide which products are suitable for their needs. If competition is not effective then it is a matter for OFCOM to consider and investigate if required.

Lisnahunshin Road: Broadband Access

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what broadband services are available to rural customers on the Lisnahunshin Road, between Rasharkin and Portglenone, who do not have access to the higher speed broadband to which other customers in this area have access.

(AQW 12295/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Broadband services in Northern Ireland are delivered via a mix of technologies including fixed-line, satellite, radio (wireless) and mobile. This is not unique and is not dissimilar to many regions globally where there are geographic and topographic challenges to network development.

My Department has and continues to support a number of initiatives aimed at providing broadband services in rural areas where, due to long line lengths, it is difficult to access a service using telephone lines. Without specific details it is difficult to be precise but, generally speaking, customers on the Lisnahunshin Road should be able to access the satellite broadband services available under the Department's contract with Onwave Ltd.

Onwave offers services with download speeds of 6, 8 and 10 Megabits per second details of which can be found on their website at www.onwave.co.uk/ni or by contacting the company directly on 0845 43 43 500.

Alternatively, customers might wish to avail of the fixed-wireless broadband services available from North West Electronics, which can offer products with download speeds of between 10Mbps and 100Mbps. To pursue this option, customers should visit the company website at www.nwewn.com or contact them directly on 028 7135 1999.

Department of the Environment

Milford House Museum

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of the Environment (i) for his assessment of the current condition of Milford House, Armagh, as a Grade B1 listed building; and (ii) to detail any discussions his Department has had on the future use of the building.

(AQW 11904/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): NIEA's Historic Buildings Unit (HBU) is reviewing all listed buildings on the BHARNI Register of Buildings at Risk, and has recently assessed this building as being a Category 'A' Building at Risk - which is:

"Immediate risk of further rapid deterioration or loss of fabric; no solution agreed".

HBU has been aware of the very poor condition of this listed building for a number of years. In August 2011, following representation from Armagh City and District Council, the Director of Built Heritage met with the Chief Executive of Armagh City & District Council, to discuss the condition of the building and assistance for listed buildings at risk, including an Architectural Heritage Fund (AHF) options appraisal grant.

In September 2011, the Director of Built Heritage and his Area Conservation Architect met representatives of Milford Buildings Preservation Trust (MBPT), to discuss the potential for the Trust to take over the building.

Further to that meeting, HBU has been in discussions with the AHF as a potential funding source for the Trust to develop its ideas, and provide funding for an options appraisal grant. AHF contacted the HBU Area Architect on 18 April 2012, advising that AHF would require a commitment from NIEA that they would be prepared to acquire the listed building - by compulsory acquisition - though the issue of a Repairs Notice, and pass the building on to MBPT in a back-to-back agreement (similar to the arrangement at Sion Mills with HEARTH).

On 31 July 2009, the Department received an application for outline planning permission for a retirement village (comprising 110 residential units) and nursing home on land within the grounds of Manor House, Milford. This application is being treated as 'enabling development' and remains under consideration.

The Department considers it inappropriate that it should use its statutory powers to acquire the building, while a planning application is being considered not least because the planning application includes the re-use, and therefore, regeneration and protection, of Milford House.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Children and Families Bill

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he will take into consideration the Children and Families Care Bill for England and Wales, during his intended consultation on family law.

(AQW 11544/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): We will assess the relevance of the proposed Bill when the full detail of its content is known.

Migrant Workers

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for a breakdown of the number of migrant workers by sector.

(AQW 11670/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The closest approximation to the information requested comes from the October - December 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 56,000 of these were born outside both the UK and the Republic of Ireland. See table overleaf.

Migrant workers by industry sector

Industry sector in main job	Born outside the UK	Born outside the UK and RoI
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	*	*
Energy and water	*	*
Manufacturing	19,000	17,000
Construction	*	*
Distribution, hotels and restaurants	15,000	13,000
Transport and communication	*	*
Banking and finance	11,000	10,000
Public admin, education and health	17,000	12,000
Other services	*	*
Total	71,000	56,000

Source: Labour Force Survey, October – December 2011

1 Since the LFS is a sample survey, these estimates are subject to sampling variation.

* It is the nature of sampling variability that the smaller the group whose size is being estimated, the (proportionately) less precise that estimate is. As a result, grossed LFS estimates under 8,000 are not published as they are likely to be unreliable.

Belfast International Airport: Illegal Car Parks

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action Land and Property Services is taking to address the loss of rates revenue resulting from the presence of illegal car parks in the vicinity of Belfast International Airport.

(AQW 11770/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Land & Property Services (LPS), in co-operation with both Antrim District Council and Belfast International Airport, carried out a special exercise in 2010 to review those properties in the vicinity of the airport which are operating as car parks, to ensure that an up to date entry in the valuation list was in place. At present there are eight properties valued that include an element related to car parking. These are shown in the valuation list, which can be viewed at: -

http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/lps/index/property_valuation/valuation-of-property/valuation-lists.htm

There are practical difficulties in this particular area, given that car park businesses may begin operating without the normal formal approvals. Information, therefore, is not always made available to LPS. However, LPS continues to regularly monitor the situation on the ground and is confident that currently the properties referred to have been valued. Where information relevant to such properties becomes available, it should be forwarded to the District Valuer (Lisburn) in LPS.

Building Control Fees for Loft Insulations

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he would consider carrying out an urgent review of the necessity to charge building control fees for loft insulations.

(AQW 11783/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Building Regulations have just been revised and the new regulations come into operation on 31st October 2012. Consultation on proposals for the new regulations took place in two phases during 2010 and 2011. There were no challenges to the continued inclusion of loft insulation as work for which Building Control approval would be required. The new Regulations will not therefore exempt loft insulation from the requirement to seek approval from and pay a fee to Building Control.

Inspection by Building Control is necessary to ensure correct installation of loft insulation, to avoid serious problems such as condensation, mould growth and potentially structural failure, which can occur with incorrect installation. Building Control has a statutory obligation under building

regulations to ensure such measures are undertaken properly. If the fee was to be waived the resulting shortfall in income would have to become rate-borne.

Arm's-length Bodies: Invoices

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what percentage of invoices, received by each of his Department's arm's-length bodies in the last twelve months, were paid within 30 days of receipt.

(AQW 11866/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Department has 5 small arm's length bodies.

Details on the number of invoices received by 2 of these bodies in the 2011-12 financial are as follows:

Arm's length body	Number of invoices received 2011-12	Number paid within 30 days of receipt	Percentage paid within 30 days of receipt
Lay Observer	15	15	100
Public Service Commission	20	16	80

For the remaining 3 arm's length bodies – Statistics Advisory Committee, NI Building Regulations Committee and Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (NI) Governance Group – expenditure cannot be separately disaggregated from the departmental accounting system and it is not therefore possible to provide the information. However, combined expenditure for these bodies is less than £10k, the number of payments generated is small and the impact on prompt payment performance is therefore minimal.

Civil Partnerships and Marriages

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many (i) Civil Partnerships; and (ii) marriages have taken place since 2005.

(AQW 11871/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The number of marriages and civil partnerships registered each year since 2005 is given in the table below.

Table 1: Number of civil partnerships and marriages registered, 2005 to 2011P

Registration Year	Number of civil partnerships registered	Number of marriages registered
2005 ¹	12	8,140
2006	116	8,259
2007	111	8,687
2008	86	8,510
2009	96	7,931
2010	116	8,156
2011 ^P	89	8,364

1 Civil partnerships were introduced in December 2005

P Provisional data.

Equality Commission's Report 'Trends in Community Proportions of Applications and Appointments to the Private and Public Sectors'

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what response his Department will be making to the Equality Commission's publication, 'Trends in Community Proportions of Applications and Appointments to the Private and Public Sectors' (March 2012), particularly in so far as it shows a lower success rate for Protestant applicants for jobs in the private sector throughout the last decade.

(AQW 11938/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Officials in my Department have seen and noted the policy and research paper "Trends in Community Proportions of Applications and Appointments to the Private and Public Sectors" published by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland in March 2012. My Department carries out statutory monitoring and reporting on the community background of the NICS workforce and where appropriate, it will continue to use lawful outreach measures or positive action advertising welcoming job applications from under-represented groups. Appointments to the NICS are made on merit, on the basis of fair and open competition.

Public Bodies: Board Members

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many former civil and public servants are employed as (i) paid; and (ii) unpaid board members of public bodies which are sponsored by his Department; and what this figure is as a proportion of the total number of board members.

(AQW 11951/11-15)

Mr Wilson: There are no paid board members in any of the public bodies which are sponsored by my Department.

There are currently five former civil or public servants serving on an unpaid basis on the committees of the public bodies which are sponsored by my Department. This represents 19% of all unpaid members.

Barnett Consequentials

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what were the Barnett consequentials following the Chancellor's 2012 Budget. **(AQW 11961/11-15)**

Mr Wilson: As a result of the Chancellor's Budget 2012 some £7.2 million of Resource DEL Barnett consequentials were allocated to Northern Ireland over the next three years. The profile of these Barnett additions is £3.3 million in 2012-13, £2.3 million in 2013-14 and £1.6 million in 2014-15.

Northern Ireland also received Barnett consequentials of £4.5 million in respect of Capital DEL over the next three years. The profile of the capital DEL consequentials is £3.1 million in 2012-13, £1.9 million in 2013-14 and -£0.5 million in 2014-15. However, these capital consequentials relate to financial transactions and can only be used to fund loans or equity investment. In addition, 60% of this funding must be repaid to the Exchequer by 2019-20.

PEACE III Funding

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 11227/11-15, to identify the group which benefited from the award of £460,124; and whether this award was included in the figure of £10,319,882 provided in the response. **(AQW 11992/11-15)**

Mr Wilson: The project in question is Expac Ltd's Conflicts of Interest. This award was included in the figure of £10,319,882 provided in my earlier response.

Green New Deal

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) what will happen to the £4m set aside for the Green New Deal if it is not spent; and (ii) what flexibility exists to spend the money on other projects. **(AQW 11993/11-15)**

Mr Wilson: On 18 May 2012, DFP Supply approved a business case submitted by DSD to consider 'Options for Increasing Domestic Energy & Thermal Efficiency in Northern Ireland'.

This case was the outworking of the cross-departmental group created to consider the Green New Deal Coalition's (GNDC) business model and the GND proposal was one of two shortlisted options. Although innovative, the GND business model was not sufficiently advanced and retained a prohibitive level of risk in relation to both financial and non-monetary aspects of the model.

The preferred option, which will avail of the funding allocated for a 'Green New Deal' solution is a Northern Ireland Housing Executive led boiler replacement programme that will generate some £27million in terms of wider economic benefits over the next three years.

This response covers both parts (i) and (ii) of the question.

Vacant Business Premises

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many business premises in the (i) Ballymena; (ii) Ballymoney; and (iii) Moyle district councils areas were vacant on 31 March 2012, or such later date as is available.

(AQW 12002/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Information on business premises is not available. The number of vacant non-domestic properties in the (i) Ballymena; (ii) Ballymoney; and (iii) Moyle District Council areas as at 20th May 2012 (the latest date for which information is available) is (i) 483; (ii) 203; and (iii) 116 respectively.

Ballylumford Power Station: Rates

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) whether Ballylumford Power Station has requested a reduction in rates from Larne Council, due to its decrease in out-put; (ii) the level of reduction requested; and (iii) the level of rates rebate that will be paid.

(AQW 12196/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The rateable value of Ballylumford Power Station is based on the Declared Net Capacity (DNC) of its generating plant as prescribed in rates legislation. As a result of a major failure of one of its generators on 7 December 2011 AES, who operate the power station, sought a revision of the assessed value due to the reduction in generating capacity. No specified reduction was sought; however, on considering the circumstances the Commissioner of Valuation revised the assessment from £7,485,980 NAV to £5,644,830 NAV in line with the statutory formula.

This reduction resulted in a refund of regional and district rates to the operator of some £322,000 for the period from 7 December 2011 to 31 March 2012. While the full extent of the refund will not be known until the repairs are completed and the original assessment is reinstated, it is understood that a refund for April and May 2012 would amount to £176,000. It is understood that full generating capacity will be restored very shortly and full liability will resume from that date.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Accident and Emergency Departments: Capacity

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the operating capacity of each Accident and Emergency department; (ii) the number of people attending at each department in 2011/12; and (iii) what plans there are to increase the operating capacity of each department.

(AQW 11663/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): In relation to Parts (i) and (iii) above, operating capacity within hospital services changes over time to meet demand. Capacity in an A&E Department cannot be seen in isolation to the general capacity provision of the acute hospital. Key drivers on capacity within a hospital setting include (a) the physical environment eg A&E Unit; (b) staffing complement both professional and administrative staff and skill mix (c) access to diagnostics, interventions including acute surgery, critical care, ambulatory care, day case procedures and (d) inpatient ward capacity and access to urgent outpatient appointments.

It is acknowledged that there is evidence of an increasing demand on A&E services, with people presenting with increasing acuity, as a result of changing demographics, more complex needs of the population and the impact of life style choices.

To meet this demand the model of service provision and staffing complement including skill mix continues to change. In addition changes in the physical environment of A&E departments and/or related wards include: an increase in observation beds, use of ambulatory chairs, and the introduction of medical assessment units and short stay wards.

In relation to Part (ii) the tables below show the number of new and unplanned review attendances in 11/12

New and Unplanned Review Attendances by Emergency Care Department, 2011/12P

Emergency Care Department	Attendances (New & Unplanned Review)
Belfast City ¹	24,726
Mater	42,743
Royal Victoria	81,812
RBHSC	32,738
Antrim Area	71,175
Whiteabbey	8,624
Mid Ulster	6,133

Emergency Care Department	Attendances (New & Unplanned Review)
Causeway	43,081
Ulster	77,757
Ards MIU	9,078
Bangor MIU	12,244
Lagan Valley ²	27,443
Downe ³	20,124
Craigavon Area	71,667
Daisy Hill	38,023
South Tyrone	18,759
Armagh & Mullinure	7,802
Altnagelvin Area	53,045
Erne	27,662
Tyrone County	15,256
Total	689,892

Source: EC1 Departmental Return

Notes: Attendance figures detailed above relate to all new attendances and all unplanned review attendances at emergency care departments. They do not include planned review attendances. Information on all attendances including planned review attendances at emergency care departments will be published on 28th June 2012.

P It should be noted that these figures are marked provisional and may be subject to change.

- 1 On 1st November 2011, the Belfast HSC Trust closed the emergency care department at the Belfast City hospital due to a shortage of senior staff.
- 2 On 1st August 2011, the South Eastern HSC Trust introduced new temporary arrangements for the provision of emergency care services at the Lagan Valley hospital resulting in the closure of the emergency care department from 8pm to 9am daily.
- 3 On 4th April 2011, the South Eastern HSC Trust introduced new arrangements for the provision of emergency care services at the Downe Hospital resulting in the reduction of consultant-led emergency care services, from a 24 hours based service to 8am to 10pm daily, with services provided from 10pm to 8am by an enhanced GP Out of Hours (GPOOH) service. The GPOOH's provides the urgent care response supported by an appropriate handover period and the appropriate services within the hospital. After 10pm all 999 ambulances go directly to the Ulster hospital or nearest appropriate emergency care department.

Kingsbridge Private Hospital, Belfast: Referrals

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many Health Service patients have been referred to Kingsbridge Private Hospital, Belfast, and paid for by the public purse, since 1 September 2011.
(AQW 11791/11-15)

Mr Poots: Patients that are transferred by Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland for treatment in the Independent Sector are transferred to a specific Independent Sector provider. The transferring Trust does not specify nor request information on the specific facility used by the provider to treat the patient. In this case, patients were transferred to the 3ivetwo Healthcare group but information on the number of Health Service patients that were treated specifically in the Kingsbridge Private Hospital, Belfast, and paid for by the public purse, since 1 September 2011, is not available.

Kingsbridge Private Hospital, Belfast: Operations

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many operations on Health Service patients have been carried out at Kingsbridge Private Hospital, Belfast, since 1 September 2011, broken down by the type of operation.
(AQW 11794/11-15)

Mr Poots: Patients that are transferred by Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland for operations in the Independent Sector are transferred to a specific Independent Sector provider. The transferring Trust does not specify nor request information on the specific facility used by the provider to treat the patient. In this case, patients were transferred to the 3ivetwo Healthcare group but information on the number of Health Service patients that had operations specifically carried out in the Kingsbridge Private Hospital, Belfast, broken down by the type of operation, since 1 September 2011, is not available.

Kingsbridge Private Hospital, Belfast: Treatment

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money the Health Service has spent in procuring treatments from the Kingsbridge Private Hospital, Belfast, in each month since 1 September 2011.

(AQW 11797/11-15)

Mr Poots: Patients that are transferred by Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland for treatment in the Independent Sector are transferred to a specific Independent Sector provider. The transferring Trust does not specify nor request information on the specific facility used by the provider to treat the patient. In this case, patients were transferred to the 3five2wo Healthcare group but information on how much money the Health Service has spent in procuring treatments from the Kingsbridge Private Hospital Belfast in each month, since 1 September 2011, is not available.

Altnagelvin Area Hospital: Accident and Emergency Department

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average length of time, in the last 12 months, patients waited to be (i) triaged; and (ii) seen by a doctor after admission by ambulance at the Accident and Emergency Department at Altnagelvin Hospital, Londonderry.

(AQW 11861/11-15)

Mr Poots: This information is not available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Surgery: Cost

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) for an estimate of the cost of (a) hip replacement; (b) knee replacement; (c) coronary artery by-pass; (d) heart valve surgery; (e) abdominal hernia; (f) varicose vein removal; (g) cataract surgery, including phacoemulsification and more expensive procedures; (h) obesity surgery, including gastric band and gastric bypass surgery; (i) hernia surgery; (j) major breast surgery; and (k) tonsillectomy (ii) in each Health and Social Care Trust area; and (iii) on average across all Trusts.

(AQW 11890/11-15)

Mr Poots: Estimated unit costs for each trust and the average for all trusts for 2010/11 (latest information available) are shown in the table below:

		Belfast Trust £	Northern Trust £	South Eastern Trust £	Southern Trust £	Western Trust £	NI Weighted Average Cost £
a	Hip Replacement (Inpatient FCE) ¹	7,419	N/A	5,239	8,548	7,671	7,422
b	Knee Replacement (Inpatient FCE)	6,444	N/A	2,172	9,266	8,514	7,036
c	Coronary Artery Bypass (Inpatient FCE)	10,952	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	10,952
d	Heart Valve Surgery (Inpatient FCE)	12,260	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	12,260
e	Abdominal Hernia (Day-case)	1,342	1,342	996	1,280	1,050	1,164
	Abdominal Hernia (Inpatient FCE)	3,404	2,758	2,803	3,436	3,042	3,152
f	Varicose Vein removal (Daycase)	810	1,656	1,368	750	1,069	1,054
	Varicose Vein removal (Inpatient FCE)	2,637	1,470	1,723	2,487	1,750	2,160
g	Cataract Surgery (Daycase)	642	N/A	754	690	807	697
	Cataract Surgery (Inpatient FCE)	1,960	N/A	1,147	N/A	1,196	1,860
h	Obesity Surgery (Inpatient FCE)	7,211	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	7,211

		Belfast Trust £	Northern Trust £	South Eastern Trust £	Southern Trust £	Western Trust £	NI Weighted Average Cost £
i	Hernia Surgery (Daycase)	1,399	1,372	928	1,214	1,065	1,129
	Hernia Surgery (Inpatient FCE)	2,815	2,331	2,153	3,110	2,614	2,677
j	Major Breast Surgery (Daycase)	1,250	1,362	1,317	1,179	937	1,241
	Major Breast Surgery (Inpatient FCE)	3,758	2,919	2,919	4,620	2,739	3,397
k	Tonsillectomy (Daycase)	1,072	996	1,239	1,093	N/A	1,078
	Tonsillectomy (Inpatient FCE)	1,639	1,201	1,560	1,270	1,350	1,404

Source: HSC Trusts: Healthcare Resource Group (HRG) Reference Cost Information (includes direct costs, indirect costs, overheads and capital charges).

1 An FCE is a finished consultant episode, i.e. completed period of care of a patient under one consultant.

Accident and Emergency Departments: Costs

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average cost, per patient, of (i) an overnight hospital stay; and (ii) treatment at an Accident and Emergency Departments in each Health and Social Care Trust area. **(AQW 11891/11-15)**

Mr Poots:

- (i) The cost of an overnight stay in hospital differs significantly between patients and is subject to a range of variables including the diagnosis, procedures performed and the complexity of the case. In this context, it is not possible to provide a single average comparative cost per patient for an overnight hospital stay.
- (ii) The average cost, per attendance, for treatment at an Accident and Emergency Department in each Health and Social Care Trust for 2010/11 (latest information available), is provided in the table below:

HSC Trust	Average cost of an attendance at an Accident and Emergency Department £
Northern	127
Belfast	123
Western	129
Southern	100
South Eastern	122

Source: Trust Financial Returns 2010-11

Aspirin Tablets and Artovastatin Tablets

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost of the Health Service providing (i) 32 aspirin tablets; and (ii) 28 artovastatin tablets. **(AQW 11892/11-15)**

Mr Poots: There is a range of different dosages available for both the above drugs and the question is not specific in this regard. The actual drug costs which would currently be reimbursed to a community pharmacist based on a selection of the most frequently prescribed available dosages are as follows:

Item	Quantity	Cost	Dispensing Fee
Aspirin (Dt) Gastro-Resistant Tablet 75mg	32	£1.10	£1.03
Atorvastatin 20mg Tablet	28	£24.64	£1.03

Item	Quantity	Cost	Dispensing Fee
Atorvastatin 40mg Tablet	28	£24.64	£1.03

Source: NI Drug Tariff May 2012

Note: The Drug Tariff price for Aspirin 75mg GR Tablets is 0.96 pence for a pack of 28 tablets. The figure above has been extrapolated to give a figure for 32 aspirin tablets.

The total costs of prescribing these drugs on the Health Service from January 2011 to December 2011 are set out in the table below as follows:

Item	Total Number of Prescriptions	Gross Ingredient Cost	Total Dispensing Fees
Aspirin (Dt) Gastro-Resistant Tablet 75mg	623,468	£902,435	£659,469
Atorvastatin 20mg Tablet*	159,390	£6,601,429	£164,172
Atorvastatin 40mg Tablet*	215,242	£8,524,424	£221,699

Note: Net Ingredient Cost is not known but the NI average rate of Discount for 2011 was 9.61%.

Source: BSO Prescription Cost Analysis: Northern Ireland 2011

* these data include figures for prescriptions written as 'atorvastatin' (generic title) and 'Lipitor' (brand name for atorvastatin)

Surgery and Operations: Cancellations

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether any operations or surgical procedures have been cancelled or postponed by the Health and Social Care Trusts in the last 12 months to save money.

(AQW 11893/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Health and Social Care Trusts have advised me that no operations or surgical procedures have been cancelled in the last 12 months to save money.

Patients' Medical Notes

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why patients' medical notes are released to private healthcare companies, without notifying the patients, and prior to a patient being informed that they are to be offered in-patient treatment at a private clinic, in order to reduce waiting list times.

(AQW 11906/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) is responsible for commissioning services and for negotiating contracts with the independent sector. The HSCB has advised that Trusts do not seek consent from patients for the transfer of medical notes to independent sector providers on the grounds that the referral is a continuation of the health and social care for the patient, and the independent sector provider is acting on behalf of the Trust.

The Board has produced detailed guidance on governance arrangements for contracts with the independent sector. This guidance provides that an outline service specification be prepared for all potential contracts, the purpose of which is to set out the specific details of the services to be provided under contract. This specification includes aspects such as arrangements for the storage and transfer of patient records. It also deals with Data Protection and patient confidentiality requirements.

Private Health Care Companies: Treatment

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the treatment provided by private health care companies that are used to reduce Health Service waiting lists, is subject to the same level of scrutiny as the treatment that is provided by the Health Service.

(AQW 11908/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Health and Social Care Board negotiates, commissions and manages contracts with the Independent Sector on behalf of the five Trusts in Northern Ireland.

Contracts, which provide for pre-contract quality assurance checks and post-contract performance review, require providers to deliver minimum quality outcomes.

Counselling Services: Accreditation Scheme

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to introduce an accreditation system for counselling.

(AQW 11981/11-15)

Mr Poots: I have no specific plans at present for the introduction of an accreditation system for counselling.

The Departmental Strategy for the Development of Psychological Therapy Services recommends a proper training regime to ensure provision of safe and effective counselling services. A regional group taking forward implementation is currently addressing training issues to enhance current provision, including potential introduction of accreditation.

Suicide Rates

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why his Department has not achieved the suicide rate reduction targets of 10 percent by 2008, and a further 5 percent by 2011, as set out in the Protect Life Strategy; and to detail the change in suicide rates during this period.

(AQW 11982/11-15)

Mr Poots: The "Protect Life" Strategy was launched in 2006 at a time which, as it later emerged, coincided with an unprecedented increase in the Northern Ireland suicide rate. The baseline for the reduction targets was based partly on much lower suicide rates experienced prior to 2005. The 2005/06 increase therefore had an almost immediate negative impact on the potential for achieving the reduction targets.

The increase in recorded deaths, starting in 2005 and sustained since then, is likely to be partly attributed to a more open and robust approach to the reporting and recording of a death as suicide. It is also likely that ongoing work to reduce stigma around suicide and to encourage more openness on the issue has had an influence on increasing the number of families who are prepared to acknowledge suicide as the cause of death of a family member.

Suicide is a complex societal issue and many wider social factors, beyond the remit of the "Protect Life" Strategy, influence suicide levels in our communities. The Northern Ireland Audit Office has noted that the suicide rate alone is an unreliable indicator of health patterns and has acknowledged the difficulty of assessing the impact of "Protect Life" on suicide levels. In view of this, new objectives and measures are being developed which will allow for more balanced assessment of the impact of "Protect Life" whilst retaining the overall goal of a reduction in suicide.

Suicide prevalence over the period 2003 to 2011 is outlined below:

Northern Ireland 3-yearly crude suicide rate per 100,000 population

Year	2003-05	2004-06	2005-07	2006-08	2007-09	2008-10	2009-11(p)
Rate	9.8	12.6	14.3	15.5	14.7	15.9	16.0

(P) As the 2011 Mid Year Estimate population figures are not yet published, the 2009-11 rate is using the previous year's population figures. The rate is therefore subject to change when the 2011 population figures have published. The figure will remain provisional until the publication of the 2011 Annual Report of the Registrar General (due to be released in November 2012).

Mental Health: Service Delivery

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how he intends to achieve a more co-ordinated, preventative and partnership approach to mental health service delivery between the statutory, community and voluntary sectors.

(AQW 11983/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Bamford Review considered the integration of services as central to the effectiveness of a person-centred holistic approach and recommended that all statutory and independent providers must be fully engaged and involved in service delivery.

Integrated Care Partnerships, which will be established across NI during 2012/13, will join together the full range of health and social care services in each area in a partnership approach to service delivery, including GPs, community health, including community mental health services and the mental health crisis response service, social care providers, hospital specialists and representatives from the independent and voluntary sector.

Occupational Therapists: Sickness Absence

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, for each of the last two years, to detail how many occupational therapists have been on sick leave for a period of more than a week in (i) Co Fermanagh; and (ii) the rest of Northern Ireland.

(AQW 12035/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information on sick leave among Occupational Therapists within Northern Ireland Health and Social Care is not available at county level, but by Health and Social Care Trust.

The number of occupational therapists who have been on sick leave for a period of more than a week was provided by the HSC Trusts and is set out below:

Trust Name	April 2010-March 2011	April 2011- March 2012
Belfast	64	73
South Eastern	25	27
Southern	39	45
Northern	44	59
Western	30	32

Occupational Therapist: Waiting Times

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the average waiting time in Co Fermanagh for a referral to an occupational therapist.

(AQW 12037/11-15)

Mr Poots: Table 1 below details the number of people waiting from referral to treatment by an occupational therapist, by aggregate time band, in each HSC Trust at 30 April 2012.

Table 1

HSC Trust	Waiting time from referral to treatment for Occupational Therapy (by weeks waiting) ¹					Total
	0-3	>3 to 6	>6 to 9	> 9 to 13	> 13	
Belfast	561	528	470	242	19	1,820
Northern	695	494	286	46	0	1,521
South Eastern	381	312	194	102	19	1,008
Southern	319	320	192	101	68	1,000
Western	268	332	212	44	0	856
Northern Ireland	2,224	1,986	1,354	535	106	6,205

1 Figures detailed in reply to this question were provided on request by the HSC Board and have not been validated by the DHSSPS.

The median waiting time from referral to treatment in each HSC Trust was ">3 to 6" weeks.

The information collected cannot be disaggregated by geographical areas smaller than HSC Trust.

Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast: Accident and Emergency Department Vacancies

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current vacancies in the Accident and Emergency Department at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast, broken down by post.

(AQW 12047/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information requested is provided in the table overleaf.

Staff Vacancies in the Accident and Emergency Unit at Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast by Grade at May 2012

Grade	Royal Victoria Hospital	
	HC	WTE
Consultant	1	1.00
Specialty Doctor	1	1.00
Specialist Registrar	1	1.00
Band 4 Admin & Clerical	3	3.00

Source: Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

Notes:

1 HC = Headcount; WTE = Whole-time Equivalent.

Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast: Employment

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are currently employed in the Accident and Emergency Department at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast, broken down by post.

(AQW 12048/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information requested is provided in the table below.

Staff Employed in the Accident and Emergency Unit at Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast by Grade at May 2012

Grade	Royal Victoria Hospital	
	HC	WTE
Consultant	12	11.00
Staff Grade / Associate Specialist / Specialty Doctor	4	4.00
Specialist Registrar	6	6.00
Foundation House Officer	9	9.00
Band 7 Nurse	11	10.47
Band 6 Nurse	15	14.04
Band 5 Nurse	52	46.90
Nurse Support staff	14	12.29
Band 4/5 Admin / Medical Secretary	7	5.96
Band 2/3 Admin	29	25.59
Total	159	145.25

Source: Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

Notes:

2 HC = Headcount; WTE = Whole-time Equivalent.

Altnagelvin Area Hospital: Accident and Emergency Department: Complaints

Ms Boyle asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of complaints received by the Western Health and Social Care Trust in relation to the Accident and Emergency Department at Altnagelvin Area Hospital, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 12051/11-15)

Mr Poots: The number of complaints received by the Western HSC Trust regarding the Altnagelvin emergency care department during each of the last 5 years is not available.

Information is available on the number of complaints received about waiting times at the three emergency care departments (Altnagelvin, Erne and Tyrone County) within the Western HSC Trust in each of the last 5 years, and is detailed in the table below. It is not possible to break this information down by emergency care department.

Complaints Received by the Western HSC Trust Relating to Emergency Care Waiting Times, during each of the last 3 Years (2007/08 - 2011/12)

	Financial Year				
	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Number of complaints regarding emergency care waiting times	11	6	5	11	10
% of total complaints which related to emergency care waiting times	1.7%	0.9%	1.0%	2.4%	2.1%

Northern Health and Social Care Trust: Recruitment

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) how many recruitment drives for doctors and nurses were carried out by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, in each of the last five years, broken down by (a) grade; and (b) hospital; (ii) how many vacancies were included in each drive; (iii) how many applications were received for each post; and (iv) how many posts were filled as a result of each drive.

(AQW 12053/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

The Department of Health collects information on the number of vacancies within Trusts on a bi-annual basis (as at 31st March and as at 30th September) by means of a survey and this information is published on the Departmental website. The latest available report records vacancies as at 30th September 2011 and can be found at:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/vacancy_survey_september_2011_web_report-2.pdf

Hospital Staff: Length of Shifts

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) what is the maximum length of a shift for each grade of hospital staff; and (ii) how many times staff have worked more than the maximum length of a shift, in each of the last 12 months, at the Antrim Area Hospital.

(AQW 12056/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Northern Health & Social Care Trust advised that it was not possible to provide information on shifts in the last 12 months due to disproportionate costs. All staff are covered by the European Working Time Directive (EWTD) and the Trust stated that they adhere to this with regard to working hours for medical staff and Agenda for Change terms and conditions for other staff. Junior Doctors in training EWTD compliance is measured over a 26 week reference period with a maximum of 13 hours in a single shift within an overall average of 48 hours per week. It should be noted that staff are not required to work extra hours beyond those they are contracted to work. Any extra hours are worked on a voluntary basis.

Antrim Area Hospital: Patient Care

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the findings of the investigations carried out by Mary Hinds and Dr Ian Rutter, what immediate action will be taken in relation to patient care at the Antrim Area Hospital.

(AQW 12057/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Health and Social Care Board will be reporting to the Department on the totality of the work on improving Emergency Department quality and performance and these reports make a helpful and important contribution to this work. As required by the Department, the Board is examining and applying the best available, evidence based, good practice in whole system, not just Emergency Department, management.

Apprenticeship Programmes

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the apprenticeship programmes available within his Department; (ii) the apprenticeship programmes provided by his Department; (iii) the number of people currently enrolled in these programmes; and (iv) the number of places available on the programmes.

(AQW 12088/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department does not currently offer an apprenticeship programme; however, a range of development opportunities is available for staff to help them improve their skills and capabilities, including nationally recognised vocational qualifications.

In addition, DHSSPS is working with the Department for Employment and Learning to offer work placements for participants under that Department's programme-led apprenticeship scheme.

Skin-to-skin Contact for New Born Babies

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 11342/11-15, to detail how each Health and Social Care Trust encourages skin-to-skin contact for new born babies, including how this is communicated to staff in maternity units.

(AQW 12109/11-15)

Mr Poots: The HSC adhere to UNICEF baby friendly policies and NICE guidance on breastfeeding, which encourage skin-to-skin contact where appropriate.

In addition, all HSC Trusts have protocols, such as breast feeding strategies, that encourage skin-to-skin contact. Such protocols are communicated to staff in maternity units upon appointment at their induction training and, when policies are updated, through the normal line management arrangements.

All mothers are encouraged and supported to have skin-to-skin contact with their baby, but this is dependent on the clinical condition of the baby and is ultimately the mother's choice.

Ambulances: Payment of Fuel

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) whether the cards used for the payment of fuel for ambulances are valid in the Irish Republic; and (ii) to list the names of the card suppliers.

(AQW 12123/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service has advised that its fuel cards are valid in the Republic of Ireland and that it uses one fuel card supplier, Allstar Business Solutions.

Social Workers in County Fermanagh

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of social workers, per head of population, in Co Fermanagh; and how this figure compares with other areas.

(AQW 12126/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information on the number of Social Workers is not available at County level. However, information on the number of Social Workers at Trust level per 100,000 population is provided in the table below.

Social Workers employed within Northern Ireland Health and Social Care per 100,000 population by HSC Trust as at March 2012

HSC Trust	Staff in post WTE	WTE per 100,000 Population
Belfast	771.11	229.7
Northern	738.59	161.0
South Eastern	556.82	160.6
Southern	589.48	164.4
Western	602.54	201.2
Overall	3,258.54	181.1

Source: Social Workers – Human Resource Management System

Population – Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

Notes:

- 1 WTE = Whole-time equivalent
- 2 Figures exclude bank staff, staff on career break and staff with a whole-time equivalent of 0.03 or less.
- 3 The latest population figures relate to the mid-year population estimate for 2010.

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service: Pension Scheme

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, if he has made a decision on whether members of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, who have completed 30 years service before their 50th birthday, will be entitled to any form of compensation for over-contributing to their pension schemes.

(AQW 12166/11-15)

Mr Poots: A decision has not yet been taken on this issue.

Sickness Absence

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the percentage of sickness absence in his Department in each of the last three years; and the agreed target rate of sickness as set out in any memoranda of understanding between his Department and the trade unions.

(AQW 12226/11-15)

Mr Poots: A detailed analysis of sickness absence data for all NICS Departments is published annually by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and is available on their website.

My Department's current five-year target absence rates are shown in the table below, along with the actual absence rate for 2010/11 and 2011/12 (the data for 2011/12 is provisional).

My Department's sickness absence rates are not subject to agreement with the Trade Unions.

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Target	9.0	8.6	8.2	7.8	7.5
Absence Rate	8.5	7.1			

Summer Scheme for Disabled Children: Tender

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (i) how many tender applications were received for the Summer Scheme for Disabled Children (Northern Sector) in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area; (ii) the cost of the tender awarded; and (iii) for his assessment of the equality screening of the scheme, given that it prioritises young people by virtue of their disability.

(AQW 12259/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) In line with procurement guidelines, the Western HSC Trust invited tenders from four organisations with whom the Trust have had contractual arrangements, namely the Cedar Foundation, Foyle Parents & Friends Group, Mencap and Positive Futures. Two organisations submitted tenders by the due date, the Cedar Foundation and Positive Futures.
- (ii) The tender was awarded to Cedar Foundation at cost of £11,922.
- (iii) Priority groups were identified based on the following criteria:
 - Evaluations of the scheme as provided in recent years.
 - Inclusion of children not defined as disabled, eg pre-diagnosis/ 'early years' children
 - Siblings (non-disabled groups)
 - Groups of disabled children attending mainstream school, moderate learning disability schools, and severe learning disability schools.

The priority groups were based on previous evaluations and availability of appropriate alternative summer scheme provision, and not on the nature of the disability of the children and young people.

Accident and Emergency Departments: Waiting Time Targets

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what immediate action is being taken to address hospitals not meeting waiting time targets for their Accident and Emergency Departments.

(AQW 12313/11-15)

Mr Poots: I have made it clear on a number of occasions that I want to see a significant improvement in the performance of Emergency Departments across Northern Ireland, and I want a clear assurance that the quality and safety of services is up to acceptable standards.

To address this issue the Health and Social Care Board, working with the Public Health Agency, has established an Emergency Department Improvement Action Group as part of a three month programme to secure a step-change improvement in 12 hour and 4 hour performance and to the patient experience. The Group is working with all Trusts across Northern Ireland to secure improvements.

Whole-time Recruitment Exercise

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) who will be undertaking the independent review of the whole-time recruitment exercise; (ii) whether they will have disciplinary powers; and (iii) whether the review will be published. (AQW 12354/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) I can confirm that the independent review of the whole-time recruitment exercise will be conducted in liaison with Sir Ken Knight, Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser to the UK Government.
- (i) The Review Team will have no disciplinary powers; disciplinary powers are reserved for the NIFRS Board.
- (ii) A report into the findings of the review, which will also include recommendations, will be prepared and published in due course

European Union Meat Classification

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how he plans to challenge the European Commission's decision to reclassify desinewed meat as machine separated meat. (AQO 2083/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Food Standards Agency (FSA), which has policy responsibility in this area, has worked closely with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on behalf of the UK Government in explaining to the European Commission (EC) the full impact of their decision that desinewed meat (DSM) can no longer be produced from ruminant bones and that DSM made from poultry or pork bones should be labelled as mechanically separated meat (MSM). The FSA held urgent discussions with senior EC officials once the EC made its position known, securing an extension to the original 5-day deadline for action. The FSA continues to pursue this matter vigorously with the EC at all levels, making the case for the UK interpretation, including scientific evidence to support that case.

Domiciliary Care

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he will introduce charging for domiciliary care as referred to in 'Transforming Your Care - A Review of Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland'. (AQO 2079/11-15)

Mr Poots: Transforming Your Care does not propose introducing charging for domiciliary care; it does, however, suggest that we initiate a sensible debate about growing income within the spirit of NHS principles. Whilst I am committed to ensuring that all aspects of TYC are implemented, I will need to comprehensively assess the impact of any income generating or charging proposals on patients and clients before I would introduce any such measures.

Respiratory Disease: Portable Oxygen

Mr F McCann asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the availability of portable oxygen for people suffering from Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease and other respiratory diseases. (AQO 2085/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Health and Social Care Board is responsible for commissioning oxygen services. I have been advised by the Board that portable oxygen services are currently available to patients suffering from Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease and other respiratory diseases under current contracting arrangements. There is no waiting list for these services at the present time.

The HSC Board is currently undertaking a review of the existing contracted arrangements for domiciliary oxygen therapy supply via concentrators in Northern Ireland. The Review will consider a range of new and improved treatments and devices for the delivery of Long Term Oxygen Therapy to patients in Northern Ireland including the availability and supply of portable oxygen.

Antrim Area Hospital and Causeway Hospital

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the media reports that Antrim Area Hospital and Causeway Hospital will be closed to make way for a new super facility in Ballymena. (AQO 2084/11-15)

Mr Poots: There is no such plan and it is not helpful for such speculation to precede the proper process that I have approved to ensure that the future configuration of acute hospital care services is safe, sustainable and resilient.

The "Transforming Your Care" (TYC) report has made it clear that significant changes will be required to the HSC. The Report recommended that specific plans should be prepared for the future configuration of services, and these population plans will address the implications for individual hospitals, based on clear and robust criteria which are in preparation. The development of all population plans includes input from a number of professional advisory groups including local consultants, GPs, nurses Allied Health Professional and social services staff.

As the process of identifying and assessing options has not yet been completed, no-one can yet say what will be the full range of options that will be assessed in any part of Northern Ireland. However, there will be proper, open formal consultation on the way ahead that I will propose when I have assessed all the population plans, and no decisions on major service reconfiguration will be made before that process has been completed.

Whistle-blowing Policy

Ms Boyle asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he can confirm that all Health and Social Care bodies and his Department's arm's-length bodies have made their employees aware of the Minister's letter of 22 March 2012 regarding the whistleblowing policy.

(AQO 2086/11-15)

Mr Poots: I can confirm that all HSC bodies have made employees aware of my letter on whistleblowing. The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service has recently reviewed its whistleblowing policy and is now in the process of making their employees aware of the new policy and my letter to all staff.

Chronic Conditions

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the Policy Framework 'Living with Long Term Conditions' in improving the quality of care for people living with chronic conditions.

(AQO 2087/11-15)

Mr Poots: On 26 April I launched my Department's Policy Framework, "Living with Long Term Conditions". The Framework will help drive the modernisation of health and social care services for adults living with long term conditions and their carers, supporting my vision of driving up the quality of care, improving outcomes and enhancing the patient experience.

The Framework sets out clear principles and good practice for commissioners and providers in the statutory, independent, voluntary and community sectors who are responsible for planning and delivering treatment and care to support people living with long term conditions.

Importantly, the Framework reflects the new model of care recommended in "Transforming your Care", which includes long term conditions as one of its key areas.

The Policy Framework is relevant across a wide range of conditions and all care settings. It was developed in conjunction with the Long Term Conditions Alliance Northern Ireland, which is an umbrella body for voluntary and not for profit organisations working with and for people with long term conditions in Northern Ireland.

My officials are working to progress the establishment of a Regional Implementation Steering Group to take forward the implementation of the Long Term Conditions Policy Framework.

Cross-border Healthcare

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the protocols for patients accessing health care across the border.

(AQO 2088/11-15)

Mr Poots: Patients access services on opposite sides of the border via a number of routes. In the main these include: patients accessing free immediately necessary care in the other country during a visit; cross-border workers entitled to the full range of health service treatment; and cross-border referrals for specialist procedures under the S2 route. In some cases, patients may opt to use and pay for services in the other country.

It is vitally important we invest our time and resources carefully to secure delivery of safe and effective services that secure value for money

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he can confirm that a series of audit investigations are currently under way into financial irregularities within the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service.

(AQO 2089/11-15)

Mr Poots: Investigations into a range of allegations made by two Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue staff have been undertaken by my Department.

Tobacco Products: Packaging

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to introduce plain packaging for tobacco products.

(AQO 2090/11-15)

Mr Poots: I recently agreed to the inclusion of Northern Ireland in a UK-wide consultation exercise on standardised or plain packaging for tobacco products. The consultation closes on 10 July 2012 and I look forward to receiving a breakdown of the Northern Ireland responses, in addition to a UK-wide analysis.

When I have fully considered the consultation responses, and any other information which may be available at that time, I will be in a position to determine whether plain packaging for tobacco products should be introduced in Northern Ireland.

Department of Justice

Thomas Ward

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice on what terms or licence was Thomas Ward released from custody after serving his sentence for offences committed in March 2006.

(AQW 11592/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): To provide details would breach Mr Ward's rights under the Data Protection Act 1998.

Prisons: Contingency Accommodation

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice to detail the terms of reference for the selection of the location of contingency prison accommodation.

(AQW 11618/11-15)

Mr Ford: I intend to launch a full public consultation on the Outline Estate Strategy in early June and no decisions will be taken on any of the proposals that are subject to consultation until that exercise has been completed.

Terms of Reference have not been developed, but the Service is committed to conducting an options appraisal and associated site search for contingency accommodation.

Badger Persecution

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Justice, given that it is an offence to kill, injure, disturb, take or sell a badger, and that badgers and their setts have full protection under schedule 5 of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, how many (i) prosecutions; and (ii) convictions have been secured for badger persecution under this Order since its inception.

(AQW 11630/11-15)

Mr Ford: Badgers and other wild animals are protected against killing, injuring, disturbing, taking or selling and damage to their shelter under Articles 10 to 13 of the 1985 Order. Prosecution and conviction data does not distinguish between offences against badgers and other animals under this legislation.

The table below gives the number prosecuted and convicted for the calendar years 1993 (the earliest year for which figures are currently available) to 2006. The data system from which figures for 2007 and 2008 are sourced provides conviction data only.

Number of people prosecuted and convicted of under Articles 10 to 13 of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, 1993-2008.

Year	Number of Persons Prosecuted	Number of Persons Convicted
1993	6	5
1994	6	6
1995	3	3
1996	7	7
1997	4	1
1998	0	0
1999	5	5
2000	0	0
2001	0	0
2002	4	4
2003	2	1
2004	0	0
2005	0	0
2006	3	3
2007	n/a	0

Year	Number of Persons Prosecuted	Number of Persons Convicted
2008	n/a	0
Total	40	35

Since 2008, the Police Service for Northern Ireland has recorded no specific charges for badger baiting though four people have been charged with interfering with a badger sett arising out of incidents in 2012.

Data are collated on the principal offence rule whereby only the most serious offence for which an offender is convicted is included. Data for 1993 - 2006 should not be directly compared with data from 2007 to 2008 as the data sets are sourced from different systems.

Illegal Fuel and Smuggling

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice what action his Department is taking, in conjunction with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the PSNI, to tackle abuses within the transport industry relating to the use of illegal fuel and the smuggling of contraband goods; and with what effect.

(AQW 11638/11-15)

Mr Ford: Organised crime in the areas of fuel fraud and intellectual property crime are among the key threats identified by, and being tackled through the Organised Crime Task Force (OCTF), which I chair.

The areas highlighted are matters on which HMRC is in the lead, but there is a joined up approach across agencies including the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Serious Organised Crime Agency and the United Kingdom Border Agency. The operations are therefore often multi-agency in nature and may include officers from UKBA, HMRC scanning teams, SOCA, PSNI and transport licensing and enforcement. Various overt and covert techniques for detection may be used, including road fuel testing, alcohol and tobacco searches and cash dogs.

I am considering the possibility of adding evasion of duty on fuel to the list of referable offences contained within the Criminal Justice Act 1988 (Reviews of Sentencing) Order (Northern Ireland) 2006. This would enable appropriate cases to be referred to the Court of Appeal by the Director of Public Prosecutions where he believes the sentence to be unduly lenient.

The activities being undertaken by OCTF partners seek to frustrate the efforts of criminals by seizing stock and addressing demand for illegal goods. We are committed to ensuring that assets acquired using proceeds of crime are removed from the criminal ring leaders. This sends a clear signal that crime does not pay and that society is not prepared to accept those who exploit it.

The 2012 Organised Crime Task Force Annual Report and Threat Assessment will be launched on 4 July.

Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether he will order an investigation into why the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission has not yet filed accounts in relation to the payment of legal aid to defence solicitors and counsel; and what action he will take to address this situation and prevent a recurrence.

(AQW 11642/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission (NILSC) assumed responsibility for the administration of legal aid in November 2003. The NILSC was established as a Non Departmental Public Body (NDPB) under the Access to Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2003.

Under the Access to Justice (NI) Order 2003, the NILSC is required to keep accounts and prepare, in respect of each financial year, a statement of accounts.

A backlog of Accounts existed until May 2012, due primarily to problems in estimating legal aid liabilities. This backlog has now been cleared, with the 2010/11 Annual Accounts of the NILSC laid before the NI Assembly on 8 May 2012. The draft Annual Accounts for 2011/12 were submitted to the Department of Justice in May 2012 in line with the departmental timetable.

The Department of Justice acts as sponsor body of the NILSC, and will work closely with the Commission to ensure that its Accounts continue to be prepared in accordance with the timescale.

Legal Aid Budget

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Justice to detail the total amount paid from the legal aid budget to each Queen's Counsel (QC), including the name of the QC, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 11645/11-15)

Mr Ford: The attached table details the total amounts paid in legal aid, to each Queen's Counsel, over the last five years. The figures provided represent gross payments, including VAT. In some cases a proportion of the monies paid will have been subsequently repaid, for example where the initial payment represented an overpayment.

The Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission (NILSC), is required to comply with the provisions of the Data Protection Act (the DPA), when considering whether to publish personal information. As the process required by the DPA could not be completed within the required timeframe for answering Assembly Questions, it is not possible to identify all QCs in the attached table.

The names of QCs set out on the table are those whose names have previously been published in the lists of top 100 earning barristers from legal aid, published annually by the NILSC.

In addition to the payments detailed in the attached table, the NILSC also paid £41m to solicitors during the same period as disbursements for the services of counsel, including QCs, in civil cases. These costs cannot be further disaggregated.

Direct Payments By NI Legal Services Commission to Queen's Counsel by Year						
Financial Years 2006-07 to 2010-11						
QC Name	2006-07 £	2007-08 £	2008-09 £	2009-10 £	2010-11 £	Grand Total £
Mr C D C Adair	263,032	81,515	80,941	96,637	34,207	556,332
Mr W G Berry	531,448	706,099	1,235,222	972,410	362,065	3,807,244
Mr W A Brangam	368,553	6,874	11,132	0	0	386,559
Mr A M Cinnamond	470,420	148,914	433,896	87,806	15,936	1,156,972
Mr A G P Colton	13,899	60,728	128,153	89,447	52,241	344,468
Mr J A Creaney	0	11,677	99,875	0	0	111,552
Mr A E Donaldson	344,034	60,295	59,517	109,325	338	573,509
Mr D P Fee	372,106	80,437	237,991	258,227	362,572	1,311,333
Mr T T Ferris	64,674	14,895	72,633	75,103	63,793	291,098
Mr S A Fowler	17,674	30,911	19,523	392,169	11,690	471,967
Mr J A Gallagher	861,404	252,425	649,647	707,713	704,056	3,175,245
Mr J E Grant	452,531	538,424	511,741	699,700	308,220	2,510,616
Mr A D Harvey	786,919	516,233	410,144	1,196,867	465,675	3,375,838
Mr D J Hopley	245,447	187,186	352,595	237,171	691,912	1,714,311
Mr T M Horner	0	0	0	0	282,000	282,000
Mr A J Kane	43,105	14,620	36,221	147,254	47,221	288,421
Mr B C Kennedy	103,707	16,256	134,963	32,883	66,400	354,209
Mr G W Kerr	0	0	0	166,302	0	166,302
Mr J F Larkin	362,314	0	940	0	3,874	367,128
Mr J P Lavery	50,296	41,016	31,267	0	50,371	172,950
Mr P T Lynch	61,496	0	0	0	0	61,496
Mr P Lyttle	156,043	342,500	133,706	227,801	112,483	972,533
Mr B G McCartney	497,876	295,646	465,439	1,461,399	305,711	3,026,071
Mr L G McCollum	441,216	416,169	27,593	37,256	58,750	980,984
Mr F G McCrory	234,888	123,537	112,913	539,347	163,510	1,174,195

Direct Payments By NI Legal Services Commission to Queen's Counsel by Year						
Financial Years 2006-07 to 2010-11						
QC Name	2006-07 £	2007-08 £	2008-09 £	2009-10 £	2010-11 £	Grand Total £
Mr L P McCrudden	222,133	131,265	834,145	771,930	53,890	2,013,363
Mr J F McCrudden	136,549	315,928	464,479	702,755	85,086	1,704,797
Miss E M McDermott	684,250	331,052	887,633	923,411	897,657	3,724,003
Mr P T McDonald	647,524	196,783	283,473	326,890	186,362	1,641,032
Miss N B P McGreenera	18,849	100,169	20,670	28,585	56,230	224,503
Mr B McGrory	0	35,361	101,907	25,408	90,873	253,549
Mr C A McKay	0	7,784	70,398	40,191	164,991	283,364
Mr K R M McMahon	16,981	35,062	44,238	87,456	45,162	228,899
Mr B Macdonald	565,910	762,101	547,942	386,124	140,866	2,402,943
Mr P Magee	647,559	252,905	431,747	862,709	577,723	2,772,643
Mr T Montague	0	30,170	41,019	363,318	190,324	624,831
Mr P Mooney	491,743	316,733	9,088	42,550	86,744	946,858
Mr F P O'Donoghue	362,500	400,402	141,572	547,647	44,889	1,497,010
Mr J Orr	283,211	764,650	333,176	139,226	399,697	1,919,960
Miss J Orr	73,643	97,223	272,159	550,895	7,986	1,001,906
Mr Orlando Pownall	0	440,625	281,265	391,949	47,000	1,160,839
Mr P E Ramsey	219,639	178,570	365,415	665,438	209,886	1,638,948
Mr C A Simpson	74,879	22,558	0	2,185	0	99,622
Mr G E J Simpson	67,454	0	158,691	0	68	226,213
Mr P Thomas	0	0	0	147,331	0	147,331
Mr Michael Topolski	0	0	0	92,000	0	92,000
Mr J Treacy	582,143	842,387	382,259	36,800	117,500	1,961,089
Mr R K Weir	47,944	0	0	503,420	3,960	555,324
Number 42	5,405	23,853	50,639	70,626	48,244	198,767
Number 46	13,504	0	35,278	16,800	48,008	113,590
Number 50	0	0	0	74,750	0	74,750
Number 51	8,476	33,835	20,527	5,261	0	68,099

Direct Payments By NI Legal Services Commission to Queen's Counsel by Year						
Financial Years 2006-07 to 2010-11						
QC Name	2006-07 £	2007-08 £	2008-09 £	2009-10 £	2010-11 £	Grand Total £
Number 53	8,448	7,203	15,079	0	17,867	48,597
Number 54	5,810	1,763	3,599	16,193	16,331	43,696
Number 55	13,219	0	3,688	18,791	7,068	42,766
Number 56	0	326	10,581	10,603	11,874	33,384
Number 57	0	0	0	26,315	0	26,315
Number 58	19,308	1,058	2,938	2,875	0	26,179
Number 59	0	0	20,814	0	0	20,814
Number 60	0	0	0	0	17,932	17,932
Number 61	0	0	11,869	0	0	11,869
Number 62	0	0	0	0	10,728	10,728
Number 63	0	9,500	0	0	0	9,500
Number 64	0	0	0	6,325	0	6,325
Number 65	0	0	6,286	0	0	6,286
Number 66	5,031	0	0	0	0	5,031
Number 67	0	4,705	0	0	0	4,705
Number 68	0	0	0	0	2,977	2,977
Number 69	0	0	2,598	0	0	2,598
Number 70	0	0	0	0	1,575	1,575
Total Direct Payments by NILSC to QCs during Financial Year	11,965,194	9,290,328	11,101,224	15,421,574	7,752,523	55,530,843

Londonderry Magistrates' Court Case of 10 May 2012

Mr Campbell asked Minister of Justice, in light of the dismissal of the case against four people who were present at a republican Easter commemoration in Londonderry in 2011, what guidelines are issued to judges to ensure that a final deadline for dealing with delayed cases can be given.

(AQW 11653/11-15)

Mr Ford: The case heard at Londonderry Magistrates' Court on 10 May 2012 was not dismissed, the court refused to return the defendants for trial to the Crown Court.

There are a wide range of factors which will impact on the time taken to prepare a case for hearing including the complexity of the investigation, the number and availability of witnesses and the volume of evidence.

The assessment of what may constitute an unreasonable delay, and any decisions flowing from that assessment, is a matter for the judiciary to determine on a case by case basis taking into account all the circumstances of the case. In terms of case management generally, I am aware that the Lord Chief Justice has issued protocols on Criminal Case Management in both the Crown Court and the Magistrates' Court.

Interpreters Deployed in Criminal Court Cases

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice what daily fee is paid to interpreters deployed in criminal court cases; and what has been the total cost of interpreters in each of the last five years.

(AQW 11661/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) is party to a contract with Connect-NICEM, who supply interpreters in a wide variety of languages for the criminal justice agencies.

NICTS is also a party to a similar contract with Action on Hearing Loss (AHL) for the provision of sign language interpretation services.

The rates under both contracts are exclusive of VAT.

Connect-NICEM

There are different rates depending on the type of court appearance and interpreter booked.

Local Interpreter (Northern Ireland based)

For all hearings other than a Crown Court trial one local interpreter is engaged. The fees are as set out below and apply whether there are one or more individuals requiring an interpreter at a particular court venue.

Minimum Fee (3 hour session)	Hourly Fee thereafter	Booking Fee	Fixed Travel Fee	Mileage Rate
£75.00	£25.00	£50.00*	£6.00	£0.45

* If less than 24 hours notice is given then an enhanced booking fee of £70.00 is charged.

There is also a £10.00 waiting fee between interpreting sessions if this is necessary.

National Register Interpreter

For all Crown Court trials two nationally registered interpreters are required for each case, these may be Northern Ireland based interpreters or may be sourced from outside the jurisdiction. The rates below are per interpreter.

Minimum Fee (6 hours)	Hourly Fee thereafter	Booking Fee	Fixed Travel Fee	Mileage Rate
£240.00	£40.00	£50.00	£6.00	£0.45

Where the interpreter has to be sourced from outside Northern Ireland all travel and accommodation costs and a daily meal allowance of £15.00 per interpreter are payable.

AHL

Sign language interpretation rates are dependent on the type of interpreting services required. The rates below are per interpreter and, where necessary, two sign language interpreters may be booked. The fees apply whether there are one or more individuals requiring an interpreter at a particular court venue.

Type of Interpreting Services	Minimum Fee	Hourly Fee thereafter
British Sign Language Deaf Blind Interpreters	£175.00 for up to 3 hours	£49.00
Irish Sign Language Lipspeakers Speech to Text Reporters	No fixed fee, charged at cost plus £15.00 administration fee	N/A

All rates are inclusive of travel expenses.

NICTS became responsible for processing interpreter invoices in 2009 and the tables below detail the total cost of interpreters for civil and criminal proceedings in the last three financial years. These costs are inclusive of 'language line' facilities at four court venues which may have been used for civil or criminal court proceedings.

Table 1 – Costs in Civil Proceedings

Year	Language Interpretation (£)	Sign Language (£)	Document Translation (£)	Language Line* (£)	Total (£)
2009/10	12,227.69	7,676.40	18,169.46	96.70	38,170.25

Year	Language Interpretation (£)	Sign Language (£)	Document Translation (£)	Language Line* (£)	Total (£)
2010/11	57,427.51	4,919.05	6,796.45	230.68	69,373.69
2011/12	56,837.67	11,324.70	8,989.26	276.72	77,428.35

Table 2 – Costs in Criminal Proceedings

Year	Language Interpretation (£)	Sign Language (£)	Document Translation (£)	Total (£)
2009/10	475,954.00	4,046.00		480,000.00
2010/11	411,436.95	3,110.20	240.00	414,787.15
2011/12	545,2294.46	2,446.75	203.27	547,944.48

Thomas Ward

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 10762/11-15, on how many occasions, between the date of his release from custody and 20 December 2010, were Thomas Ward's Sexual Offences Prevention Order breaches brought to court; and how the breaches were dealt with on each occasion.

(AQW 11674/11-15)

Mr Ford: Court records show that five cases relating to seven separate charges of breaching a Sexual Offences Prevention Order were taken against Thomas Ward. Two of the charges were subsequently withdrawn.

Mr Ward pleaded guilty to the remaining five charges. On one of the charges he was sentenced to three months imprisonment, suspended for one year and six months. Two charges resulted in a probation order for two years. On the remaining two charges Mr Ward was sentenced to three months imprisonment, to run concurrently.

Sexual Offences Prevention Orders

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether, in instances of repeated breaches, he has any plans to replace the Sexual Offences Prevention Orders with barring orders with more stringent conditions attached.

(AQW 11676/11-15)

Mr Ford: Breach of a Sexual Offences Prevention Order is an offence with appropriate criminal sanctions, including extended sentences for public protection. I have no plans to change this framework.

Motoring Offence Charges

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many cases which are currently in the court system, involve people from the Republic of Ireland who face motoring offence charges committed in Northern Ireland, but which are unable to proceed due to the incorrect service of summonses, broken down by court division.

(AQW 11677/11-15)

Mr Ford: A decision on whether or not a summons has been correctly served is a matter for the District Judge (Magistrates' Court). Information is only available for cases which have been concluded. In 2011 there were 187 cases involving defendants with an address in the Republic of Ireland which did not proceed because the court was not satisfied that the summons had been served. The following table gives this information by County Court Division.

County Court Division	Number of cases
Belfast	15
Londonderry	52
Antrim	7
Fermanagh and Tyrone	38
Armagh and South Down	67
Ards	2
Craigavon	6
Total	187

All data for 2011 is provisional

Speed Awareness Courses

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice how much income has been derived from speed awareness courses since their introduction.

(AQW 11683/11-15)

Mr Ford: The levels of income derived from the speed awareness courses 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.

Thomas Ward

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many sexual offences Thomas Ward has been convicted of in each year; and whether his Category 3 sex offender status was altered at any stage.

(AQW 11703/11-15)

Mr Ford: Thomas Ward was convicted of indecent assault in April 2007 and sexual assault in January 2012.

Levels of risk posed are determined by a number of factors at any given time and are not static. I cannot provide specific details of risk assessment and management in individual cases.

Speeding: Postal Summonses

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice why some residents of the Republic of Ireland, who receive postal summonses for speeding in Northern Ireland, are fined and receive penalty points in court, while others leave court with no penalty points or conviction because they received their summonses by post; and for his assessment of the adequacy with which postal summonses explain a defendant's right not to attend court and enter a plea.

(AQW 11711/11-15)

Mr Ford: The conviction of defendants who are served with a summons by post is a matter for the District Judge (Magistrates' Court) who must decide if the defendant is aware of the proceedings before the court. The conviction of a defendant and imposition of a fine and penalty points in speeding cases involving people residing in the Republic of Ireland is also a matter for the District Judge who must decide if the case against the defendant has been proven and then determine the penalty to be imposed.

If the prosecution or defence wish to challenge a decision by a District Judge on a point of law they may do so by way of stating a case to the Court of Appeal.

The Public Prosecution Service routinely includes documentation with summonses to enable a defendant, regardless of their place of residence, to plead guilty by post thereby negating the need to appear personally.

Sexual Offences Prevention Orders: Breaches

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether he plans to amend legislation to introduce more stringent penalties for people who breach Sexual Offences Prevention Orders, particularly in the case of higher category sex offenders.

(AQW 11713/11-15)

Mr Ford: I refer the Member to the reply I gave to him on 29 May (question number AQW/11676/11-15).

Capital and Revenue Savings

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Justice to detail the capital and revenue savings his Department has made in each of the last two years.

(AQW 11716/11-15)

Mr Ford: During 2010-11, the Department of Justice lived within the budget allocated to the Department following the devolution of justice on 12 April 2010.

Specific revenue savings targets were set by the Department as part of the Budget 2011-15 planning process, covering the financial years 2011-12 to 2014-15. The 2011-12 savings target was £36m and savings of £40m were delivered.

Throughout the Budget 2011-15 period the Department will regularly monitor progress against savings plans and will publish six monthly updates. This information is available on the Department's website www.dojni.gov.uk within the Publications section, category 2 – Departmental Business.

Capital budgets over the two year period in question were zero based. Therefore, in common with other departments, the Department of Justice was not required to make capital savings in these two years.

Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice what preparation work is being carried out at Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre for the rehabilitation of offenders.

(AQW 11748/11-15)

Mr Ford: Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre (JJC) works with each young person and their family to prepare them for release. Whilst in custody, every young person attends the Education and Learning Centre and is supported in acquiring a wide range of vocational and essential skills, including literacy and numeracy where required. Staff work with each young person on an individualised plan that addresses factors related to their offending. This often includes work on substance misuse.

The range of educational and vocational support provided to young people in custody is kept under review and may be adapted in response to changes in the age profile of those held at the JJC.

Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland published a detailed report in November 2011 following an inspection of the JJC. The report covers a wide range of areas including rehabilitation work undertaken in the JJC. Copies of the report are available in the Assembly Library or on the CJINI website: www.cjini.org.

Youth Justice Review

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice what training is envisaged for Prison Service staff as a result of the Youth Justice Review. **(AQW 11751/11-15)**

Mr Ford: It is not anticipated that any training will be developed for prison staff as a direct result of the Youth Justice Review. However in relation to the wider prison reforms and in particular the Owers Review, significant training is currently being developed for new and existing staff to ensure that they are adequately skilled to perform their roles of Custody Officer and Offender Supervisor.

This training programme is being developed and will shortly be going out to tender for accreditation by an appropriate educational body. The programme is designed to provide Custody Officers with a certificate of professional competence and Offender Supervisors with a higher level of licence to practice. This is in line with strategic organisational objectives of having a competent professionally qualified well trained workforce.

Coupled with this specific training, interventions are also being developed and designed in order to provide bespoke tailored programmes to managers in order that they too can utilise the benefits of specific management development programmes.

Youth Justice Review

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice to outline the timescale for the publication and implementation of the Youth Justice Review. **(AQW 11753/11-15)**

Mr Ford: The Youth Justice Review was published on 26 September 2011. It was then put out for full public consultation which concluded at the end of January following a number of requests for an extension to the original timescale.

We have been giving careful consideration to the many views expressed through the public consultation on the Review, and I intend to take the views of the Committee for Justice in the next few weeks. I will then make an announcement in the Assembly on the way forward. This statement will set out what work has been taken forward in the intervening period and how the Review recommendations are to be progressed.

For a number of the Review recommendations, Executive support and cross-Departmental working is vital if we are to deliver all of the outcomes envisaged by the Review Team.

Stuart Townsend

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether Stuart Townsend has signed the Sex Offender Register; and if so, for how long is he to remain on the Register.

(AQW 11771/11-15)

Mr Ford: Personal information of this nature is not provided due to data protection and human rights obligations.

Court Cases

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 11204/11-15, to outline the general nature of the charges that are dealt with by hospital, compulsory treatment or combination orders.

(AQW 11781/11-15)

Mr Ford: The nature of an offence is not a determining factor for the court when making a Hospital Order or Supervision and Treatment Order; they are made on the basis of medical evidence regarding a defendant's level of mental illness or impairment. However, a Hospital Order can only be made in cases where the offence of which a person is accused is punishable by imprisonment.

There is therefore a wide range of offences for which these orders can be made. The offences associated with the cases detailed in my answer to AQW11204/11-15 include, offences against the person, arson, serious sexual offences, robbery, possession of explosives/firearms and harassment.

Thomas Ward

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to list the agencies responsible for monitoring Thomas Ward after his release from custody for an offence committed in 2006; and which agency employed his Designated Risk Manager.

(AQW 11782/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Probation Board for Northern Ireland had statutory responsibility for the supervision of the probation order following release from custody. The police were responsible for enforcement of the sex offender notification requirements and the Sexual Offences Prevention Order.

These agencies worked together under the PPANI procedures, along with others listed in Article 50 of the Criminal Justice Order, to assess and address the risks posed. The Designated Risk Manager was from the Probation Board.

Listed Properties

Mr McQuillan asked Minister of Justice to detail the listed properties that are owned by his Department.

(AQW 11786/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Department of Justice does not currently own any listed properties.

Prisoners: Blood Samples

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Justice how many prisoners in the Maze/Long Kesh had blood samples taken in the aftermath of the fire and riots in October 1974.

(AQW 11811/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Prison Service has no record of medical teams carrying out large-scale blood tests in the aftermath of the fire and riots in October 1974. Many files have been destroyed from that era in accordance with Disposal Schedules and a search of our registry database has not uncovered any relevant information. There may still be some individual prisoner custody files in existence which could hold information relating to prisoners' particular medical treatments. However, it is impossible to say with certainty which files might hold any relevant information and any such search would incur a disproportionate cost and is unlikely to be conclusive.

Arm's-length Bodies: Invoices

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice what percentage of invoices, received by each of his Department's arm's-length bodies in the last twelve months, were paid within 30 days of receipt.

(AQW 11828/11-15)

Mr Ford: The attached tables show what percentage of invoices received by the Department's arm's length bodies, excluding agencies, were paid within 30 days of receipt during 2011/12.

Executive Non Departmental Public Bodies

Police Service Northern Ireland	97.7%
Northern Ireland Policing Board	99.9%
Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland	100%
Northern Ireland Police Fund	100%
RUC George Cross Foundation	100%
Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland	100%
Probation Board Northern Ireland	98%
Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission	100%

The NI Legal Services Commission does not report against payments to the legal profession as the legal aid claims against which the payments are made are not invoices and are subject to assessment.

Advisory Non Departmental Public Bodies

Northern Ireland Law Commission	Independent Assessor for PSNI Recruitment Applications
99.1%	N/A

The Independent Assessor for PSNI Recruitment Applications received no invoices during the 2011/12 financial year.

Other Arm's Length Bodies

Prisoner Ombudsman	100%
Parole Commissioner	98.4%
Independent Monitoring Boards	100%
Commissioner for Hearings Under Prison Rule 109B	N/A
Remission of Sentences Commissioner	N/A

The Commissioner for Hearings Under Prison Rule 109B received no invoices during the 2011/12 financial year.

Invoices for The Remission of Sentences Commissioner are paid via the Northern Ireland Prison Service and they do not separately record the prompt payment statistics for the Commissioner.

Civil Servants

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Justice how many civil servants currently employed in his Department have been re-employed after receiving a redundancy package from the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

(AQW 11849/11-15)

Mr Ford: The only civil servants currently employed in the Department of Justice who have been re-employed after receiving a redundancy package from the Northern Ireland Civil Service are 18 former prison officers employed by the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS). All 18 of these officers received their redundancy package through schemes that operated prior to 2002. The most recent redundancy scheme resulted in 160 prison grades being selected to leave. None of these staff has applied to rejoin NIPS.

It should be noted that, in relation to administrative staff within NIPS, it has not been possible to check the circumstances of staff employed prior to 2002 as the current NIPS HR system was introduced in 2002 and to check further back would require a manual inspection of records, which would incur disproportionate costs.

Thomas Ward

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the timescale of court activity, and other relevant activity, including prison release(s) in the case of Thomas Ward from his arrest and charge for the sexual assault of his first victim in 2006 to his imprisonment in 2012 for the sexual assault of his second victim in 2011.

(AQW 11850/11-15)

Mr Ford: The information requested regarding Thomas Ward's court activity is provided in the table below;

Date	Court Appearance	Details
22/4/2006	Dungannon Magistrates' Court	Following his arrest by PSNI on 18/4/2006 Thomas Ward was remanded in custody for attempted rape and other offences associated with the sexual assault which took place in Dungannon on 17 March 2006. He was subsequently convicted on 24/5/2007.
20/9/2006	Dungannon Magistrates' Court	Convicted of Disorderly Behaviour and a variety of motoring offences. Sentenced to four months detention in a Young Offenders Centre, disqualified from driving and fined.

Date	Court Appearance	Details
5/1/2007	Craigavon Magistrates' Court	Convicted of Driving while disqualified and other motoring offences. Sentenced to two months detention in a Young Offenders Centre and disqualified from driving.
24/5/2007	Enniskillen Crown Court	Convicted of Indecent Assault, False Imprisonment, and other offences. Sentenced to a Custody Probation Order of four years custody and three years probation.
28/1/2009	Omagh Crown Court	Convicted of breaching the probation element of his sentence. Sentenced to a further 12 months in custody.
9/2/2009	Belfast Magistrates' Court	Convicted of a variety of motoring offences, possessing drugs and two charges of breaching a Sexual Offences Prevention Order. He received a number of penalties including disqualification from driving, a fine, a suspended prison sentence and three months imprisonment to run concurrently.
8/5/2009	Belfast Magistrates' Court	Convicted of driving while disqualified and having no insurance. He was sentenced to six months imprisonment suspended for two years and disqualified from driving for five years.
12/8/2009	Dungannon Magistrates' Court	Convicted of breaching a Sexual Offences Prevention Order on 6 November 2008 and sentenced to imprisonment for one month. This sentence was subsequently varied on appeal on 26 March 2010 to a probation order for two years.
11/11/2009	Belfast Crown Court	Convicted of motoring offences including taking a motor vehicle without the owner's consent, driving while disqualified and having no insurance. He received a total of nine months imprisonment suspended for 18 months, a five year disqualification from driving and a £200 fine.
26/3/2010	Belfast Crown Court	Convicted of breaching a Sexual Offences Prevention Order on 15 December 2008; he was sentenced to a two year probation order.
9/4/2010	Belfast Magistrates' Court	Convicted for an assault on police and fined £200.
26/11/2010	Belfast Magistrates' Court	Convicted of breaching a Sexual Offences Prevention Order. Sentenced to three months imprisonment suspended for 18 months.
24/2/2010	Belfast Magistrates' Court	Convicted on a charge of common assault: ordered to pay £500 compensation and received a sentence of two months imprisonment suspended for two years.

Date	Court Appearance	Details
2/3/2011	Dungannon Crown Court	Convicted of sexual assault committed on 1 February 2010 and sentenced to an indeterminate custodial sentence.

The information requested in relation to Mr Ward's prison releases constitutes sensitive personal data as defined at section 2 of the Data Protection Act 1998. The disclosure of such information is likely to breach Mr Ward's rights under the Act and would be incompatible with the Data Protection principles. The information cannot therefore be provided as requested.

Child Abandonment

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many cases of child abandonment are currently in the court system, broken down by court division.

(AQW 11860/11-15)

Mr Ford: There are currently two cases of child abandonment within the meaning of Section 20 of the Children and Young Persons Act (Northern Ireland) 1968 before the courts.

There is one in the County Court Division of Londonderry and one in the County Court Division of Fermanagh and Tyrone.

Legal Aid Budget

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether he plans to introduce a maximum annual amount that a barrister or law firm can be paid from the legal aid budget.

(AQW 11907/11-15)

Mr Ford: There are no plans to introduce a maximum annual amount that a barrister or firm of solicitors can be paid from the legal aid budget.

Thomas Ward

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice what was the nature and date of the offences for which Thomas Ward was given a suspended sentence, which he was subject to, when he committed a further offence on 1 February 2011.

(AQW 11934/11-15)

Mr Ford: Thomas Ward pleaded guilty and was convicted on 26 November 2010 of breaching a Sexual Offences Prevention Order due to being absent from his registered address during curfew hours on 4 May 2010.

He received a prison sentence of three months which was suspended for 18 months.

Women's Aid: Funding

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how much funding his Department has provided to Women's Aid, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 11952/11-15)

Mr Ford: Since the Department of Justice was devolved on 10 April 2010 it has provided the following funding to Women's Aid:

Service	2010/11	2011/12
Domestic Violence Helpline	£96,722	£105,000
Support services to potential victims of Human Trafficking	£9,390.52	Not Known
Total	£106,112.52	£105,000

Women's Aid operates the 24 Hour Domestic Violence Helpline on behalf of the three funding agencies; Department of Justice, Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

In addition, since the devolution of the Department of Justice, Women's Aid has assisted in delivering a pilot programme which provides support services to potential victims of Human Trafficking. My Department funded Women's Aid directly for these services until 31 January 2011. Since 1 February 2011 Migrant Helpline, along with its delivery partner Women's Aid, has provided support services to potential victims of Human Trafficking under contract but it is not possible to itemise separately the amount paid to each organisation for the services provided.

Sex Offenders: GPS Tracking

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether he has any plans to follow the example set by the Scottish Parliament, in introducing GPS tracking to monitor sex-offenders in the community, particularly those offenders who are classified as the most dangerous.

(AQW 11953/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Scottish Government has not introduced GPS tracking of offenders. The Scottish First Minister announced on 3rd May that his administration was currently giving consideration to recommendations made in an independent report, which included using GPS technology for monitoring certain high risk offenders. He indicated that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice would update the Scottish Parliament on the actions which would be taken in response to that report in due course.

The use of GPS in the monitoring of offenders has been constrained across the United Kingdom by technological limitations. The technology is continuing to develop and my department is keeping a watching brief on progress. While I have no immediate plans to introduce this technology in Northern Ireland, I am open to reviewing this position, should future evaluations evidence the efficacy and cost-effectiveness of such systems.

Serious Case Reviews

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many Serious Case Reviews have been carried out by agencies within, or under the remit of, his Department in each of the last five years, broken down by agency.

(AQW 11954/11-15)

Mr Ford: Six serious case reviews under paragraph 2.14 of the Guidance to Agencies on Public Protection Arrangements (PPANI) have been carried out in the last five years. It is not possible to allocate reviews to particular agencies as reviews are carried out by all agencies involved in the multi-agency risk management of a particular case. The breakdown by year is as follows:

Year	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Number of Serious Case Reviews	1	1	nil	nil	4

Child Abandonment: Convictions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many people have been convicted of child abandonment in each of the last five years, broken down by court division.

(AQW 11955/11-15)

Mr Ford: The table below sets out the number of defendants convicted of at least one charge of child abandonment in each of the last five years, broken down by County Court Division.

County Court Division	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011*	Total
Belfast	0	0	0	1	0	1
Antrim	0	0	0	1	1	2
Ards	1	0	0	0	0	1
Total	1	0	0	2	1	4

* Figures for 2011 are provisional.

Sex Offenders Register

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Justice how many people were on the Sex Offenders Register in (i) January 2008; and (ii) January 2012.

(AQW 11966/11-15)

Mr Ford: The information requested is a matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable and the role of the Policing Board.

You may therefore wish to direct your question to the PSNI.

Illegal Fuel and Smuggling

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice whether he will consider a cross-departmental task force to help address the threat posed to the legitimate freight industry by the use of illegal fuel, unlawful interference with tachograph equipment and smuggling. **(AQW 12003/11-15)**

Mr Ford: My reply to AQW11638/11-15 explained the Organised Crime Task Force's multi-agency approach to tackling organised crime, including fuel fraud and smuggling, and my consideration of adding evasion of duty on fuel to the list of referable offences contained within the Criminal Justice Act 1988 (Reviews of Sentencing) Order (Northern Ireland) 2006.

Although unlawful interference with tachograph equipment is not an organised crime matter, I intend to ask the Minister of the Environment to permit his officials to brief members of the OCTF's Fuel Fraud Group on the licensing regime for road hauliers that is being introduced by his Department from July 2012. This should enable the identification of opportunities to work in partnership to tackle criminality and the threat posed to the legitimate freight industry.

Legal Aid: Payments List

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 11462/11-15, given that both barristers made representations, why one was permitted to remain anonymous and the other was not.

(AQW 12015/11-15)

Mr Ford: In this instance, the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission (NILSC) received representations from two barristers. The first person contended that there was no need for the NILSC to publish any names. As the NILSC had considered similar objections in the context of previous publications, they did not accept that this representation prevented publication. The second person raised issues, under the Data Protection Act (DPA), regarding the publication of personal information. At the time of publication of the 2010/11 figures, consideration of the issues raised by the second individual had not been completed and as a result the name of this individual could not be included in the published list at that time. The NILSC can only decide whether or not to publish the name of the individual concerned once the statutory process laid down in the DPA is complete.

The NILSC is required to comply with the provisions of the DPA, which requires public bodies to notify individuals of personal information it intends to publish. Those individuals have a right to object to publication and the public body is required to consider each objection.

Migrant Helpline

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how much funding his Department has provided to Migrant Helpline, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 12017/11-15)

Mr Ford: Since April 2010 DOJ has provided the following funding to Migrant Helpline. Information is provided in line with the terms of the contract rather than in financial years.

Service	April 2010 – January 2011	February 2011 - January 2012	February 2012 – April 2012
Support Services for Potential Victims of Human Trafficking Pilot Programme	£4521.45		
Support Services for Potential Victims of Human Trafficking		£137743.57	£9422.95
Total	£4521.45	£137743.57	£9422.95

From April 2010 to January 2011 Migrant Helpline received funding from the Department of Justice to deliver a pilot programme to provide Support Services for Potential Adult Victims of Human Trafficking. The pilot was delivered by Migrant Helpline and Women's Aid.

With effect from 1 February 2011 Migrant Helpline, and their delivery partner Women's Aid, were awarded the support service contract. Under the terms of the contract all payments are made directly to Migrant Helpline, as contractor.

Magilligan Prison: Cost of Replacement Facility

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Justice what is the estimated cost of a replacement facility for Magilligan Prison. **(AQW 12022/11-15)**

Mr Ford: The Outline Estate Strategy presented to the Justice Committee on 26 April 2012 identifies the need for a new medium security establishment built to Category B standards. The strategy and its recommendations are in the process of undergoing a full public consultation exercise.

The establishment's size and configuration will be informed by undertaking a core needs analysis of the prisoner population. The location of the establishment also needs to be determined and will be informed by a site search to identify suitable land on which it can be built. As such the cost of such land is unknown at this time.

A Rough Order of Measure cost of £140 million has been estimated for this facility based on experiences of other prison services in the UK and associated benchmark costs. The cost, size and configuration of this facility will be subject to a detailed Business Case.

Treatment of Male and Female Children

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice why the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland's recommendation that, by April 2012, male children should be treated the same as female children has not been implemented; and when he intends to implement this recommendation.

(AQW 12033/11-15)

Mr Ford: While I fully support the thrust of the recommendation made by Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland, the timescale suggested did not allow for the preparations that had to be put in place to enable it to be implemented. As a result of intensive work led by the Youth Justice Agency, there are now only three 17 year olds in Hydebank Wood YOC. Work is proceeding on this front and I will be announcing, in the context of the Youth Justice Review, how custodial arrangements will operate in future for all those under the age of 18.

Sentencing Tariffs for Murder

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice what plans he has to review the level of sentencing tariffs for murder.

(AQW 12036/11-15)

Mr Ford: The legislation governing the determination of tariffs where a court has passed a life sentence is the Life Sentences (Northern Ireland) Order 2001.

I am currently considering whether a review of the current legislation is warranted and will make an announcement in the near future.

Apprenticeship Programmes

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the apprenticeship programmes available within his Department; (ii) the apprenticeship programmes provided by his Department; (iii) the number of people currently enrolled in these programmes; and (iv) the number of places available on the programmes.

(AQW 12089/11-15)

Mr Ford: There is currently one internal Apprenticeship Programme available and provided by the Department of Justice.

The specification of the 2012/13 Programme is currently under consideration therefore no staff are currently enrolled.

There will be approximately 20 places available in 2012/13.

Magilligan Prison: Workforce

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Justice how many of HMP Magilligan's workforce live in the constituencies of (i) East Londonderry; (ii) Foyle; and (iii) North Antrim.

(AQW 12105/11-15)

Mr Ford: As of 25 May there was a total of 440 staff employed at Magilligan Prison.

332 of these live in the East Londonderry constituency. 16 of these staff members live in the Foyle Constituency. 71 staff members live in the North Antrim constituency.

The remaining 21 staff live outside the three named constituencies.

Small Claims Court: Appeals

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice to detail the process by which papers submitted in an appeal to a Small Claims Court ruling are dealt with in the 21 days from the court ruling to determine whether the appeal has merit.

(AQW 12114/11-15)

Mr Ford: On receipt of an appeal, court office staff review the documentation to ensure that it complies with procedural requirements. Where there is an issue with the lodged papers, the court office contacts the appellant to bring this to their attention. Court office staff do not assess whether the appeal has merit as that is a judicial function.

The Northern Ireland Courts & Tribunals Service (NICTS) Small Claims Guide provides information about the small claims system including the appeal process. It is not intended to be exhaustive advice and refers customers to NICTS staff for assistance with the procedures to follow when lodging or responding to an appeal. The Small Claims Guide also recommends contacting a solicitor or the Citizens Advice Bureau for legal advice.

Small Claims Court: Appeals

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice whether papers lodged in respect of an appeal to a Small Claims Court ruling, that are found to be unsatisfactory, are returned to the appellant or kept by the Courts Service.

(AQW 12115/11-15)

Mr Ford: On receipt of an appeal, court office staff review the documentation to ensure that it complies with procedural requirements. Where there is an issue with the lodged papers, the court office contacts the appellant to bring this to their attention. Court office staff do not assess whether the appeal has merit as that is a judicial function.

The Northern Ireland Courts & Tribunals Service (NICTS) Small Claims Guide provides information about the small claims system including the appeal process. It is not intended to be exhaustive advice and refers customers to NICTS staff for assistance with the procedures to follow when lodging or responding to an appeal. The Small Claims Guide also recommends contacting a solicitor or the Citizens Advice Bureau for legal advice.

Small Claims Court: Appeals

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice why the Small Claims Court Guide does not detail how unsatisfactory papers, that are lodged in respect of an appeal, are dealt with.

(AQW 12116/11-15)

Mr Ford: On receipt of an appeal, court office staff review the documentation to ensure that it complies with procedural requirements. Where there is an issue with the lodged papers, the court office contacts the appellant to bring this to their attention. Court office staff do not assess whether the appeal has merit as that is a judicial function.

The Northern Ireland Courts & Tribunals Service (NICTS) Small Claims Guide provides information about the small claims system including the appeal process. It is not intended to be exhaustive advice and refers customers to NICTS staff for assistance with the procedures to follow when lodging or responding to an appeal. The Small Claims Guide also recommends contacting a solicitor or the Citizens Advice Bureau for legal advice.

Review of Public Administration

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Justice what powers or functions he plans to devolve to local councils under the Review of Public Administration; and whether this represents a change to his previous commitments.

(AQW 12261/11-15)

Mr Ford: I can confirm that there are currently no plans to transfer any powers or functions from my Department to local councils under the Review of Public Administration. This does not represent a change to my previous commitments.

Londonderry Magistrates' Court Case of 10 May 2012

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 11604/11-15, whether this case will proceed to trial; and if not, to outline the reasons.

(AQW 12267/11-15)

Mr Ford: The decision whether to recommence these proceedings is a matter for the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Juvenile Defendants

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice how many court cases have involved juvenile defendants, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 12297/11-15)

Mr Ford: The table below sets out the number of cases involving youth defendants dealt with in the Crown Court and Youth Court in each of the last five years.

Year	Crown Court	Youth Courts*	Total
2007	54	3,275	3,329
2008	55	3,082	3,137
2009	47	3,120	3,167
2010	45	3,317	3,362
2011**	47	3,018	3,065
Total	248	15,812	16,060

* A youth defendant is defined as someone who at the date of the commission of the offence had not yet attained the age of eighteen years.

** Figures for 2011 are provisional

Northern Ireland Policing Board: Staff

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Justice to detail the staff reductions at the Northern Ireland Policing Board since the publication of the review of the Board by Ken Reed Consultancy; and what are the projected budget savings at the Policing Board for the next financial year.

(AQW 12322/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Interim Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Policing Board has informed me that the Policing Board has reduced its permanent staffing complement by seven since the Ken Reed Report was made public on 3 November 2010.

The projected Savings Delivery Plans for the Policing Board for 2012-13 and 2013-14 are £1,112,000 and £1,249,000 respectively, as previously published. Reductions in staff contribute towards those plans.

Maghaberry Prison: Roe House Population

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Justice, given the on-going protest and the infection controls that are in place for prisoners and staff, what measures he intends to put in place in Roe House should the prison population there continue to rise.

(AQW 12384/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Prison Service routinely monitors prisoner numbers in all areas including Roe House. Contingency plans are in place to manage the rising prisoner population.

RUC George Cross Foundation

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Justice how many applicants' names were released in error, by electronic mail, to an applicant for the post of Trustee of the RUC George Cross Foundation.

(AQW 12391/11-15)

Mr Ford: A list containing the names of nine individuals, who had requested an application pack for the position of Trustee of the Royal Ulster Constabulary George Cross Foundation, was released in error, by electronic mail, by my Department to one potential applicant. It did not include contact details, addresses or any other identifying information.

I apologise again for this breach and for any distress it has caused.

Department for Regional Development

Public Transport Links

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Regional Development what public transport links are in place to facilitate visitors to (i) the Marble Arch Caves; (ii) Florence Court House; (iii) Devenish Island; (iv) Aughakillymaude Mummerys Centre; (v) the Janus Figures on Boa Island; and (vi) Belleek Pottery.

(AQW 11607/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): Translink, who have operational responsibility for the provision of services, has advised me that:-

- (1) Services to Marble Arch Caves are served by Translink service 64 together with Bus Éireann's service 66 providing options between 09:25 and 17:35.
- (2) Florencecourt House is served by Translink service 192 with buses at 07:30 and 18:05.
- (3) The boat to Devenish Island leaves from Round 'O' Jetty in Enniskillen which is a 10-minute walk from the bus depot.
- (4) Translink service 58 provides buses between 08:50 and 17:55 to facilitate visitors to Aughakillymaude Mummerys' Centre.
- (5) Service 194/195 facilitates visitors to the Janus Figures on Boa Island. Buses are at 11:30 and 15:45.
- (6) The same service (194/195) also facilitates visitors to Belleek Pottery. Bus Éireann service 30 also operates to Belleek at 09:30, 11:30, 13:30 and 15:30.

Translink recognise that the bus stops used by these services may not always be close to the visitor sites. However some of the sites – Devenish Island and The Mummerys' Centre – are not accessible by bus and to provide services directly to the sites would not, in its opinion be commercially viable. Translink has also advised me that representatives from the relevant tourist organisations have not approached Translink in regard to the provision of bus transport.

Translink: Managerial Posts

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to list the managerial posts that Translink (i) has created in the last twelve months; (ii) intends to create in the next twelve months, and the salary attached to each of these posts; and to outline the justification for the creation of these posts given that Translink is predicting financial losses in the coming years.

(AQW 11641/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink has advised that (i) there have not been any managerial posts established in the last 12 months; (ii) there are no plans to establish any new managerial posts in the next 12 months however during the financial year ahead there are plans to remove two senior managerial posts.

Roads Service: Vesting of Land

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what consultation is carried out with residents who will be affected by the vesting of land by Roads Service.

(AQW 11647/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that there is an initial consultation at an early stage with all landowners affected by a road scheme, regardless of whether the land is acquired by agreement or through the vesting process. This often takes the form of a series of meetings and correspondence to explain the scheme and discuss any concerns raised by landowners or their agents.

If vesting is the proposed method of acquisition of lands required for a minor works scheme, following the initial consultation, a copy of the Vesting Order, which includes, information on the objection procedure and details of the proposal, is sent by recorded delivery to each landowner. Further negotiation and consultation will take place in an effort to resolve any objections. Any outstanding objections to the proposed Vesting Order are forwarded to Roads Service Headquarters for a decision on whether to proceed without recourse to a public inquiry.

Additional information is available on my Department's website at <http://www.drdni.gov.uk/index/roadimprovements.htm>

Roads Service: Vesting of Land

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what protocols are in place to determine the process of vesting land by Roads Service.

(AQW 11648/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that there is an initial consultation at an early stage with all landowners affected by a road scheme, regardless of whether the land is acquired by agreement or through the vesting process. This often takes the form of a series of meetings and correspondence to explain the scheme and discuss any concerns raised by landowners or their agents.

If vesting is the proposed method of acquisition of lands required for a minor works scheme, following the initial consultation, a copy of the Vesting Order, which includes, information on the objection procedure and details of the proposal, is sent by recorded delivery to each landowner. Further negotiation and consultation will take place in an effort to resolve any objections. Any outstanding objections to the proposed Vesting Order are forwarded to Roads Service Headquarters for a decision on whether to proceed without recourse to a public inquiry.

Additional information is available on my Department's website at <http://www.drdni.gov.uk/index/roadimprovements.htm>

Roads Service: Vesting of Land

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the rationale for vesting land near the proposed sightline improvement works on the A2 near the Millisle and Ballyvester Roads.

(AQW 11649/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that there is an initial consultation at an early stage with all landowners affected by a road scheme, regardless of whether the land is acquired by agreement or through the vesting process. This often takes the form of a series of meetings and correspondence to explain the scheme and discuss any concerns raised by landowners or their agents.

If vesting is the proposed method of acquisition of lands required for a minor works scheme, following the initial consultation, a copy of the Vesting Order, which includes, information on the objection procedure and details of the proposal, is sent by recorded delivery to each landowner. Further negotiation and consultation will take place in an effort to resolve any objections. Any outstanding objections to the proposed Vesting Order are forwarded to Roads Service Headquarters for a decision on whether to proceed without recourse to a public inquiry.

Additional information is available on my Department's website at <http://www.drdni.gov.uk/index/roadimprovements.htm>

Roads Service: Vesting of Land

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what consultation took place with residents of the Millisle Road and Ballyvester Road prior to the decision to vest land near the proposed A2 road improvement scheme.

(AQW 11650/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that there is an initial consultation at an early stage with all landowners affected by a road scheme, regardless of whether the land is acquired by agreement or through the vesting process. This often takes the form of a series of meetings and correspondence to explain the scheme and discuss any concerns raised by landowners or their agents.

If vesting is the proposed method of acquisition of lands required for a minor works scheme, following the initial consultation, a copy of the Vesting Order, which includes, information on the objection procedure and details of the proposal, is sent by recorded delivery to each landowner. Further negotiation and consultation will take place in an effort to resolve any objections. Any outstanding objections to the proposed Vesting Order are forwarded to Roads Service Headquarters for a decision on whether to proceed without recourse to a public inquiry.

Additional information is available on my Department's website at <http://www.drdni.gov.uk/index/roadimprovements.htm>

Railway Line Between Londonderry and Coleraine

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development whether preparatory work for a permanent passing loop can be carried out on the railway line between Londonderry and Coleraine during the upgrading work that is currently taking place and which is due to last for the next ten months.

(AQW 11652/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I secured the funding to bring forward the Coleraine to Londonderry Track Renewals project. The project will be completed over three Phases, with Phase 1 scheduled to start on site at the end of July this year.

The construction of the passing loop will take place under Phase 2 of the project which will be completed during the 2014/15 year and for which funding is in place in that year.

In these circumstances preparatory work such as the design and land acquisition (if required) will not be progressed during the closure of the line from July 2012 to April 2013. However, Translink has advised that it will be able to construct the passing loop alongside the main line work during Phase 2 without any unnecessary closure of the line. Any such closure would be limited to weekend work.

Public Bicycle Schemes in Cities

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration his Department has given to the introduction of public bicycle schemes in cities, similar to those in place in London and Dublin.

(AQW 11672/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: A partnership project was established in 2010 involving Belfast City Council, my Department and the Strategic Investment Board 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 concluded that an opportunity exists for the introduction of a bike hire scheme in Belfast. The partnership project did not include consideration of public bike hire schemes in other cities within Northern Ireland.

Officials from my Department and Belfast City Council have been considering the report with a view to agreeing the most appropriate way forward.

Northern Ireland Water: Reclassification

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 10826/11-15, to detail the extra cost to the public purse incurred as a result of the reclassification of Northern Ireland Water as a non-departmental public body.

(AQW 11693/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: As noted in the earlier response, the reclassification of Northern Ireland Water as a non-departmental public body was a direct consequence of the Executive's decision to defer the introduction of domestic water charges. The financial implications of deferral are that DRD requires public expenditure budget cover for the bulk of Northern Ireland Water's expenditure of around £340 million in 2012/13.

The extent to which these costs would be reduced if Northern Ireland Water was reclassified as a public corporation, (i.e. if it was majority self-funding) would depend on the policy decisions taken about funding arrangements, for example, any arrangements for vulnerable groups, phasing in of additional payments and so on.

An indirect cost of the reclassification is that Northern Ireland Water has less freedom to achieve efficiencies because of public expenditure constraints.

Motorway Speed Limits

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration he is giving to following the plans, that are soon to be announced in England, to assess test sites to increase motorway speed limits to 80 mph.

(AQW 11701/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would advise the Member that 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 relevant stretches of motorways in England and Wales.

I have asked my officials in Roads Service to keep a watching brief on future developments on this issue. I am aware that increasing motorway speeds could lead to an increased risk of more severe collisions in addition to higher levels of fuel consumption and these factors may outweigh any improvements in journey times.

Roads Service: Enforcement

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Regional Development why Roads Service enforces the law on bill posters on departmental property in some areas, whilst in other areas, sectarian material remains on display on departmental property for long periods of time. **(AQW 11702/11-15)**

Mr Kennedy: Firstly, I should like to make it clear to the Member that neither I nor my Department's Roads Service condone or support the unauthorised use of departmental property for any purpose.

In accordance with my Department's policy in relation to unauthorised advertising, I can confirm that where advertising is erected illegally on Roads Service property or adjacent to special roads, action is taken by Roads Service officials to try to remove these under articles 87 & 21 of the Roads (NI) Order 1993.

Where possible, the owner of the sign may be contacted to seek co-operation and agreement in having the material removed. Where cooperation is not forthcoming, Roads Service may remove the material in question and may subsequently seek to recover costs.

The removal of sectarian material is not so straightforward. The erection of such material is akin to other unauthorised activities such as kerb painting, lamppost painting and flying flags, which have local and political sensitivities in addition to posing health and safety risk for those tasked with their removal. Consideration must also be given to the risk of escalating the problem.

Given the sensitivities surrounding this issue, Roads Service reluctantly tolerates such activities unless road safety is affected, or there are clear indications that action to remove the offending material would have widespread local support.

As with other unauthorised activities which it encounters, Roads Service must fully consider the possible consequences of taking action to remove sectarian material. For example, in the case of flag removals, this is generally done through consultation and negotiation with local communities. Roads Service is not generally perceived to be best placed to lead on such consultations, but provides appropriate support and technical assistance, if requested. Roads Service considers that removal of sectarian material warrants a similar approach.

When Roads Service becomes aware of such material on its property, it will assess the situation to determine if action can be taken, either directly or in support of others. This often involves working with elected and local community representatives and the PSNI. Roads Service gives priority to situations that are considered to present a road safety hazard.

UK City of Culture 2013

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development, given the opportunities of growth for Londonderry and district, arising from its status as UK City of Culture 2013, what assurances he can give that bus or rail services will not be reduced in the area, under the guise of Translink efficiencies, or otherwise. **(AQW 11707/11-15)**

Mr Kennedy: Translink will be working to clarify its financial plans for 2013/14 and 2014/15 which, based on current projections, suggest that measures to get closer to a financial balance will be required. There are no indications, at this stage, that these measures will materially impact in the Londonderry area or impact on the transport arrangements required for City of Culture events.

Capital and Revenue Savings

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the capital and revenue savings his Department has made in each of the last three years. **(AQW 11717/11-15)**

Mr Kennedy: As part of the Budget 2008-11 settlement Departments were required to deliver 3% cash releasing savings year on year across the Budget period. For DRD this equated to a total saving of £65 million by March 2011.

The Final Budget 2011-15 requires DRD to take forward a range of measures to deliver savings of £15.5 million / £27.1 million / £58.1 million / £58.4 million in current expenditure against the 2010-11 baseline by 2014-15. The measures for delivering these savings were set out in our published Savings Delivery Plan which can be accessed via the Departmental website.

<http://www.drdni.gov.uk/index/publications/publications-details.htm?docid=7811>

The table below details the resource and capital savings delivered in 2009-10 and 2010-11 under the Efficiency Delivery Plans and the savings measure targets for 2011-12. Delivery of the 2011-12 savings will be confirmed following finalisation of the Department's resource accounts.

£'m	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Resource Savings	11.6	11.2	15.5
Capital Savings	10.2	10.0	Not applicable
Total Savings	21.8	21.2	15.5

No specific capital savings targets were set as part of the Budget 2011-15 process.

NI Water: Embedded Contractors

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) why, given that the term ‘embedded contractors’ appears on page 26 of the March edition of its staff magazine, ‘Waterline’, has NI Water consistently stated, in replies to Assembly Questions, that it does not recognise this term; and (ii) how much it would cost NI Water to recall, reprint and redistribute this edition of Waterline, to ensure that its staff are not misled or misinformed.

(AQW 11721/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that (i) it is aware that the term “embedded contractors” was used erroneously in the recent staff magazine article and (ii) it intends to advise staff of the error through a suitable correction in the next edition of the magazine, at no additional cost.

NI Water: Tender C398

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 10366/11-15, (i) to provide details of the legal challenge to NIWater tender C398, including who launched the challenge.

(AQW 11723/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that FM Environmental Limited served a writ of summons associated with contract C398 alleging that the decision of NIW to award contract C398 to Williams Industrial Services Limited was unlawful and/or was reached in a manner which was in breach of:-

- (i) the requirements of the Utilities Contracts Regulations 2006 (as amended); and/or
- (ii) general principles of EU Law; and/or
- (iii) the implied tendering contract between FM Environmental Limited and NIW.

As a result of the legal challenge contract C398 was not awarded by NIW.

NI Water: Tender C071

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Regional Development how many times the head of NI Water's Mechanical and Electrical (M&E) function met with embedded contract staff in relation to tender C071, in each of the last three years, broken down by M&E area; and to detail (i) the location of the meetings; (ii) the reasons for the meetings; (iii) who requested the meetings; and (iv) whether the current, or previous, Chief Executive Officer was made aware of the meetings.

(AQW 11725/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my answer to AQW 8815/11 dated 12 March 2012. I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it does not recognise the term “embedded contract staff”. Employees of contractors engaged by NIW under a tendered contract arrangement are not deemed NIW employees. NIW has informed me that the meeting on 27 January 2012, referred to in that answer, was the only occasion in the past three years that its Head of Mechanical & Electrical Services met with contractor employees.

NI Water: Tender C527

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 10373/11-15, (i) to clarify what NI Water considers to be ‘applicable employment laws’; (ii) whether the employment rights of the embedded contractors engaged under tender C527 have been affected by the award of this tender; (iii) whether NI Water is aware that, at 4 May 2012, the embedded contractors employed under this tender did not have signed contracts of employment; (iv) how the lack of signed employment contracts impacts on the award and monitoring of this contract under the Utilities Contract Regulations 2006, NI Water’s internal auditing processes and other UK and EU legal requirements; and (v) what actions NI Water will take to address this issue.

(AQW 11728/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that (i) the reply to AQW 10373/11-15 relates to the employment laws applicable within the jurisdiction of Northern Ireland at the date of award of contract C527. (ii) NIW does not recognise the term “embedded contractor”. To the best of NIW’s knowledge, information and belief, the employment rights of those employees of third party contractors who previously provided the services now encompassed within contract C527, have not been prejudiced by the award of contract C527. (iii) NIW cannot comment on matters relating to the contracts of employment entered into between third party contractors and their employees. (iv) NIW cannot comment on matters relating to the contracts of employment entered into between third party contractors and their employees. (v) NIW cannot comment on matters relating to the contracts of employment entered into between third party contractors and their employees.

Housing Developments: Adopted Roads

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Regional Development how many housing developments, which were determined for adoption under the Private Streets (NI) Order 1980, are subject to enforcement action by the National Asset Management Agency, with the roads remaining unadopted; and for his assessment of the impact that this might have on the adoption process.

(AQW 11735/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it is aware of eleven housing developments, which were determined for adoption under the Private Streets (NI) Order 1980, and are currently listed as being subject to enforcement action by the National Asset Management Agency, with these roads remaining unadopted.

In cases where housing developers have ceased trading, including those sites owned by NAMA, Roads Service officials will liaise with the responsible parties to seek completion of unfinished roads. Irrespective of current ownership, the bond providers remain liable for the cost of completing the roads, if the developer or administrators are unable or are unwilling to do so. If necessary, enforcement action will be taken, with bond monies being accessed and used to complete the roads to a suitable standard for adoption into the public road network.

Car Parks

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the current cost of parking in each of the car parks that are under the control of his Department, broken down by council area.

(AQW 11784/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Details of all car park tariffs, for which my Department's Roads Service is responsible, can be accessed on my Department's website at:

<http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/index/information-and-services/travel-transport-and-roads/parking-and-parking-enforcement/off-street-and-on-street-parking.htm>.

Translink: Posts

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development how many posts Translink has (i) cut; and (ii) left unfilled across its network of operations over the last three years, broken down by grade.

(AQW 11790/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink has advised that the total workforce in Translink over the last 3 years is as follows. This represents a net position taking account of inflows and outflows.

2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/2012
4020 employees	3959 employees	3860 employees

The workforce total as at 31 March 2009 was 4,200. Translink has advised that they cannot break down unfilled posts over this 3-year period by grade.

Whilst Translink do not keep a record of unfilled posts it works to a resource plan. Given the current need to reduce costs, when vacancies arise the posts are considered to see how they can best be covered and whether there is no alternative but to recruit to fill the post. Translink HR reports vacancies in progress on a monthly basis. At the end of March 2012 a total of 67 unfilled posts were included in the recruitment process.

Translink: Posts

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development how many management level posts currently exist in Translink compared with three years ago.

(AQW 11792/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink has advised that there are currently 82 managerial posts in Translink, compared to 87 three years ago.

Translink: Managers Working in Seconded Roles

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development how many managers Translink currently has working in seconded roles.

(AQW 11793/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink advises that within the organisation there are four managers currently working on internal secondment. This approach has allowed the organisation to undertake specific projects without the requirement to employ either additional staff or specialist consultants.

Berryhill Road, Donemana: Water Mains Network

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the reasons for the delay in Asset Management Unit bringing forward plans for the replacement of the water mains network on the Berryhill Road, Donemana; and when this work will be begin.

(AQW 11818/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it is aware of the recent burst history in this area but it has not yet been possible to commence work on the replacement of water mains in the Berryhill Road area of Donemana owing

to funding priorities. It is unlikely that work will commence until the 2013/14 financial year but, in the interim, NIW will continue to closely monitor the situation to ensure that the existing water supply system is operating as effectively as possible.

Berryhill Road, Donemana: Water Mains Network

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Regional Development how many pipes have burst in the mains water network in the Berryhill Road, Donemana, in the last twelve months; and what was the total cost of repairing the pipes.

(AQW 11820/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that during the period May 2011 to April 2012, there were 13 burst watermains within the Berryhill Road area. The total cost of repairing the bursts was approximately £20,000.

Arm's-length Bodies: Invoices

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what percentage of invoices, received by each of his Department's arm's-length bodies in the last twelve months, were paid within 30 days of receipt.

(AQW 11830/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: In the past twelve months the Department's arm's-length bodies have paid 94.3% of invoices within 30 days. This is detailed as follows:

Arm's-Length Body	Invoices Paid	Invoices Paid in 30 days	Prompt Payment %
Translink / NITCo	57,176	55,493	97.1
NI Water	36,665	33,022	90.1
Combined	93,841	88,515	94.3

Gas Escaping from Water Taps

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide details of any instances where people have set fire to the water or gas escaping from their taps.

(AQW 11832/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it is unaware of any situations where gas would escape from water taps or of any incidents of water from taps being set on fire.

Roads Service: Adopted Roads

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the criteria used to determine whether a private road will be adopted by Roads Service; and (ii) how many private roads have been adopted by Roads Service in the last year.

(AQW 11863/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: It is presumed you are referring to private roads, for example, pathways, alleys, lanes etc, as opposed to unadopted roads within private developments.

My Department's Roads Service has advised that the adoption of a private road is governed by Article 9 of the Private Streets (NI) Order 1980. A street may be considered for adoption where the following three criteria are met:

- the majority of the owners/frontagers so request it;
- the Department is of the opinion that the street, or part of a street, should become a public road; and
- the street is first brought up to the required standard at the expense of the owner/frontagers.

I can advise that one private road was adopted by Roads Service in the last year.

Car Parks

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the location of (i) his Department's car parks; and (ii) charged on street parking, in each council area, including the type of charges imposed; and whether there any variations in the charges such as 'first half hour free' and bank holiday exclusions.

(AQW 11864/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Details of all car park tariffs, for which my Department's Roads Service is responsible, can be accessed on my Department's website at:

<http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/index/information-and-services/travel-transport-and-roads/parking-and-parking-enforcement/off-street-and-on-street-parking.htm>.

With regard to charged on-street parking spaces, I can advise that these are provided in Belfast, Lisburn and Newry. In Belfast, there are two rates of charge which apply, these being, £0.80 per hour, that is, £0.20 per 15 minute period in some streets and £1.20 per hour, that is, £0.30 per 15 minute period, in others. Charges apply from 8.00am to 6.00pm, Monday to Saturday.

In Lisburn, a charge of £0.60 per hour, that is, £0.15 per 15 minute period applies in all charged streets. Charges apply 8.00am to 6.00pm, Monday to Saturday.

In Newry, a charge of £0.40 per hour, that is, £0.10 per 15 minute period applies in all charged streets. Charges apply 8.30am to 6.15pm, Monday to Saturday.

On-street charges do not apply on 1 January, Easter Monday, 12 and 13 July, 25 and 26 December, or days in lieu. These excepted days and dates are listed on the Pay and Display machines.

Lynda Avenue, Jordanstown: Proposed Footway

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) when work will begin on the proposed footway between Lynda Avenue and the railway halt on the Jordanstown Road, Jordanstown; (ii) why there has been a delay in the commencement of the work; and (iii) what steps have been taken to resolve any outstanding issues preventing the commencement of the work.

(AQW 11873/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, subject to the acquisition of the necessary land, work on the proposed footway between Lynda Avenue and the railway halt on the Jordanstown Road, is scheduled to commence in August 2012, and is expected to last between four to six weeks. This is in accordance with the programmed timings for construction work due to commence during Summer 2012.

Roads Service is actively progressing the vesting of the land, and as no objections are anticipated, remains optimistic that the process can be completed on time.

Translink: Management Roles

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he will conduct a review and evaluation of all management functions and roles within Translink in light of its request for more funding.

(AQW 11874/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Management functions and roles are essentially an operational issue for Translink. While my Department currently has no plans to conduct a specific review and evaluation of all management functions, an overall review was carried out as part of the Public Transport Reform Programme. As part of this ongoing programme of reform Translink has been taking forward the delivery of efficiency measures including consideration of appropriate staffing levels and roles.

In addition my Department, with input from Department of Finance and Personnel, is in the process of initiating a further efficiency review of Translink.

Translink: Staff Sickness Absence

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development what systems Translink has in place to deal with bus and rail staff sickness absence; and whether it is planning any changes to the management or operation of the systems.

(AQW 11877/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink advises that it has an attendance management and rehabilitation policy which applies to all employees.

The policy which has been communicated to all employees and is available on the company intranet, sets out standards, systems and procedures relevant to effective management of sickness absence and legal compliance.

The company's Executive team reviews its absence figures monthly in order to ensure good management of this area.

The Company's management also engages with its trade unions in relation to the management of employee sickness absence with an objective of seeking continual improvement.

Balmoral Show: Relocation

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development what modelling or steps have been taken to evaluate the capacity of access roads to cope with traffic volumes in the event of a re-location of the Balmoral Show to the Maze/Long Kesh site; and to detail the outcome of the evaluation.

(AQW 11878/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that no planning application has been submitted relating to the relocation of the Balmoral Show to the Maze/Long Kesh site.

However, I can confirm that my officials have recently met with Transport Consultants, at their request, to discuss Roads Service's requirements regarding the impact of increased traffic to the area. It is anticipated that these issues will be evaluated in due course, when Consultants formally submit scoping documentation related to all transportation aspects of the proposed relocation.

Springfield Road, Belfast: Subsidence

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) when work to address the subsidence problem on the Springfield Road, Belfast, will commence; (ii) how long this work will take to complete; and (iii) why temporary traffic lights have been erected at the site for two months without any work commencing.

(AQW 11901/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that upon being informed of the subsidence problem on the Upper Springfield Road, it immediately closed the affected section of the carriageway in the interests of public safety. Subsequently, the situation was fully investigated and remedial works to stabilise the embankment on the Upper Springfield Road were designed.

Roads Service officials further advise that remedial work to address the subsidence problem will take between 8 and 10 weeks to complete and will commence immediately upon the successful completion of ongoing negotiations with the landowner.

Until the necessary remedial works are completed, the temporary traffic lights will remain in place for safety reasons. During this period, up to date information will be provided on Roads Service's TrafficwatchNI website.

Gortmerron Link Road, Dungannon

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 11031/11-15, why these roads have yet to be adopted; and when they will be adopted.

(AQW 11905/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the developer of the roads referred to in AQW 11031/11-15 continues to liaise with Roads Service, in order to progress the various development phases to adoption standard and fulfil his obligations under the Private Streets (NI) Order 1980. As these phases are brought up to adoption standard, my Department will make arrangements to have the roads and footways adopted.

Roads Service officials further advise that the developer believes that Article 32 bond reductions are not dependent on a Northern Ireland Water (NIW) Article 161 agreement being signed off. However, under the terms of a Memorandum of Understanding with NIW, Roads Service will not proceed beyond a 50% reduction in the bond amount until NIW has signed off the Article 161 agreement.

Civil Servants

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Regional Development how many civil servants currently employed in his Department have been re-employed after receiving a redundancy package from the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

(AQW 11911/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Two existing members of staff within my Department were re-employed by the NI Civil Service having received voluntary redundancy benefits some years earlier.

Banbridge Bus Station

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department has any plans to work with Translink to provide a site for a bus station in Banbridge.

(AQW 11916/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service is committed to assisting Translink and Banbridge District Council in their efforts to provide new bus facilities in Banbridge. I note that planning permission is already in place for such facilities at Kenlis Street and that funding and lands transfers are the key issues to be addressed.

Translink advise that it and Roads Service officials are currently working together on a feasibility study of options, with a view to producing an Economic Appraisal. The Economic Appraisal will be submitted to my Department for approval, probably at the end of summer this year.

In the meantime I will be meeting with Translink's Chief Executive later this month to discuss the matter further.

I should point out that at this point, there is no provision for this project in Translink's current Corporate Plan but this will be reviewed when the Economic Appraisal process is complete. As you will appreciate this will have to be considered in the context of future Translink and Departmental budget scenarios.

Public Bodies: Board Members

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development how many former civil and public servants are employed as (i) paid; and (ii) unpaid board members of public bodies which are sponsored by his Department; and what this figure is as a proportion of the total number of board members.

(AQW 11918/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Our records indicate six former civil and public servants from a total of 52 board members are serving on the boards of public bodies sponsored by my Department. All six of these board members are paid which represents 11.54% of the total.

Water Supply: Connection

Mr Lynch asked the Minister for Regional Development how many homes are not connected to a mains water supply, broken down by county; and what plans are in place to connect these homes.

(AQW 12091/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Northern Ireland Water maintains records of its customers i.e. those who are connected to the mains network. It does not hold specific records on the number of properties unconnected to the public water supply.

A consultation carried out by my Department between November 2010 and February 2011 as part of the Review of Financial Assistance For Domestic Properties Not Served By A Water Main identified around 1200 properties in Northern Ireland that are not served by a water main. This information was collated by local council area (rather than county) as follows:

Local Council District	Number of Properties not served by a water main
Antrim	32
Ards	5
Armagh	58
Ballymena	193
Ballymoney	14
Banbridge	24
Belfast	0
Carrickfergus	11
Castlereagh	0
Coleraine	44
Cookstown	27
Craigavon	7
Derry	16
Down	22
Dungannon	47
Fermanagh	59
Larne	121
Limavady	38
Lisburn	8
Magherafelt	86
Moyle	90
Newry & Mourne	110
Newtownabbey	10
North Down	1
Omagh	82
Strabane	77

Properties that are 'not served' are those that do not have a water main in the public road nearest to the property (or within 100m of the nearest access point) as opposed to those which are not connected where there is an available mains supply. The latter would be a higher figure than the number of properties not "served".

On 9 May 2012, I announced the launch of the Rural Borewell Scheme which will provide a grant to households in isolated rural areas for a private borewell where the cost of a water mains requisition is prohibitively high. This innovative cross-departmental scheme will help provide affordable access to a wholesome water supply for households who are outside the reach of the public network. The scheme will come into operation this summer and will run for four years subject to demand.

Arm's-length Bodies: Board Members

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development how many former senior civil servants, from deputy secretary grade to permanent secretary grade, serve on the boards of his Department's arm's length bodies in a (i) paid; and (ii) unpaid capacity. **(AQW 12098/11-15)**

Mr Kennedy: Our records indicate one former senior civil servant, from deputy secretary grade to permanent secretary grade, is serving on a board of a public body sponsored by my Department. This board member serves in a paid capacity.

Car Park Ticket Vending Machines

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) whether he has considered replacing car park ticket vending machines with machines that dispense change; and (ii) to estimate the additional revenue raised annually by using ticket vending machines that do not dispense change.

(AQW 12403/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that car parks with a 'Pay on Foot' operation, do offer change. 'Pay and Display' machines do not offer this facility, but instead calculate the time of parking permitted, depending on the amount of money inserted.

The cost of changing the current Pay and Display machines, to dispense change would be prohibitively expensive and, under the current budgetary pressures, there are no plans to do so.

As Pay and Display machines calculate the time of parking allowed depending on the amount of money inserted, it is not possible to calculate how much additional revenue is raised.

For your additional information, I can advise that a cashless parking system is currently being trialled in Belfast, Newry, Lisburn, Omagh and Londonderry, whereby parking can be paid using mobile phones without the need to put cash into the Pay and Display machine. Under this system, the 'parking event' can be stopped upon return to the vehicle and the user therefore only pays for the parking used. If this trial is successful, it will be rolled out throughout Northern Ireland.

Railways: Coleraine to Londonderry

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he can give an assurance that railway safety will not be compromised if the Castlerock and Londonderry signal boxes are closed when the signalling system between Coleraine and Londonderry is upgraded.

(AQO 2065/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his question and am pleased that this work will be going ahead as I have secured the necessary funding and the Executive and Assembly's approval to bring forward the Coleraine to Londonderry Track Renewal Work. The project will be completed in three phases, with the first phase commencing in July 2012 and finishing in April 2013. While this means the line will be closed at the start of the City of Culture year, it will be open again for key events in the City of Culture calendar.

The responsibility for the safe operation of the railway system rests with Translink. My Department, as the Safety Authority for Northern Ireland, approves the processes used. This includes change management processes to ensure that any alterations to existing systems are introduced in a safe manner.

Translink has confirmed that all modern signalling systems are undertaken remotely from the railway itself without compromising safety. Indeed they also advise that the new system will enhance overall safety, with signalmen receiving feedback on the location of trains between Coleraine and Londonderry, unlike at present.

Grange Lane and Trench Lane Bridge, Mallusk

Mr Girvan asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions have taken place with other departments on the replacement of the bridge at Grange Lane and Trench Lane, Mallusk.

(AQO 2066/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Grange Lane and Trench Lane, Mallusk, including the bridge over the Ballymartin River, are in private ownership and are, therefore, not the responsibility of Roads Service. However, my Department's Roads Service is aware of the deterioration of the bridge structure, having previously attended inter-agency meetings at Newtownabbey Borough Council offices on 9 December 2011 and 19 January 2012 when this issue was discussed with a view to identifying a potential solution.

Roads Service also met with Rivers Agency officials on 15 December 2011 to discuss options and design concerns. Roads Service subsequently forwarded information to Newtownabbey Borough Council on 23 December 2011 in relation to the basic design, costs and operational difficulties associated with undertaking replacement bridge works. My officials recommended that the residents employ the services of a Project Manager and contractor with the expertise to provide a 'Design and Build' service.

At the most recent meeting on 19 January 2012, Roads Service officials advised that it was not possible to offer any further assistance over and above the technical assistance already provided, as the bridge is a private structure and Roads legislation does not permit my Department to spend public money on privately owned structures. However, I understand that ongoing discussions are taking place between various agencies and Departments and I will await their outcome.

A5 Dual Carriageway: Social Clauses

Ms Boyle asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he is taking to ensure that the social clauses included in the contracts for the A5 road project will be honoured.

(AQO 2067/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that for contracts, commencing the tender process after 1 September 2011, social clauses have been included in all one-off contracts of value greater than £1m.

These clauses have been agreed with the Construction Industry Forum for Northern Ireland and will form part of the phase two contracts associated with the delivery of the proposed A5 Western Transport Corridor project.

Subject to a successful outcome to the Public Inquiry process, it is proposed to commence construction later this year.

Monitoring of the implementation of these social clauses, which will take place in conjunction with the Department for Employment and Learning, will form part of the overall management of the contracts.

Water Supply: Connection

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Regional Development how many rural homes are currently without a mains water supply.

(AQO 2068/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Northern Ireland Water maintains records of its customers i.e. those who are connected to the mains network. It does not hold specific records on the number of properties unconnected to the public water supply.

A consultation carried out by my Department between November 2010 and February 2011 as part of the Review of Financial Assistance For Domestic Properties Not Served By A Water Main identified around 1200 properties in Northern Ireland that are not served by a water main. Properties that are 'not served' are those that do not have a water main in the public road nearest to the property (or within 100m of the nearest access point) as opposed to those who are not connected to the mains supply as a matter of choice.

On 9 May 2012, I announced the launch of the Rural Borewell Scheme, which will provide a grant to households in isolated rural areas for a private borewell where the cost of a water mains requisition is prohibitively high. This innovative cross-departmental scheme will address a long standing problem by helping to provide affordable access to a wholesome water supply for households who are outside the reach of the public network. The scheme will come into operation this summer and will run for four years subject to demand.

Traffic-calming Measures

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the effectiveness of the current criteria for the introduction of traffic calming measures.

(AQO 2069/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service is committed to providing safer roads for the vulnerable road user. Traffic calming is recognised as an effective way of improving road safety in urban and residential areas by reducing speed and managing driver behaviour.

Roads Service receives numerous requests for traffic calming schemes and undertakes an extensive prioritisation exercise to ensure the most deserving and appropriate schemes are implemented.

The method of prioritisation for proposed schemes considers many factors, including traffic collisions, traffic speed and volume, the local environment and the effectiveness of the proposed works. This is followed by a widespread consultation exercise with affected stakeholders and residents, to ensure the most appropriate measures are implemented.

Roads Service reviews traffic calming schemes that have been in place and operational for at least six months, to ensure the intended objectives have been fully met. In addition, analysis of road traffic collisions at each location is undertaken by comparing the three year periods prior to and after implementation of each scheme. Changes in traffic speeds can also be measured as part of the monitoring process.

Roads Service's experience has shown that these relatively low cost measures have had a positive effect on residents living in areas where traffic calming has been implemented. This is most evident where the speed and volume of traffic has reduced and subsequently the personal injury road collision history has improved accordingly.

I am, therefore, satisfied that the current policy and assessment criteria is appropriate. I can, however, assure the Member that roads safety is a key priority for Roads Service and my officials are constantly researching methods to continually improve the safety of our roads.

Translink: 60 Plus SmartPass

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development how his Department monitors the number of people availing of the 60+ SmartPass scheme every year.

(AQO 2070/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department monitors the number of people availing of the 60 plus SmartPass every year by gathering information regarding usage from each operator and from information provided by independent external auditors acting on behalf of the Department. These auditors carry out an annual assessment of the scheme.

The terms and conditions for the 60 plus concessionary fares scheme are designed to safeguard public monies with payments on actuals only and with a rigorous audit trail.

Buses: Renewable Energy

Mrs McKeivitt asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he intends to take to introduce a new generation of buses which are more reliant on renewable energy than on fossil fuels.

(AQO 2071/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department has invested considerably in recent years to upgrade the Translink fleet with the aim of improving accessibility and average fleet age. Over 900 buses costing around £135m have been purchased from 2004 to 2012. Future investment in buses will be determined by available Capital budgets

Possible future transport power sources are numerous from biofuel to gas to electricity but there is no established trend for take up by Bus companies anywhere in the UK.

Translink already uses one twentieth (5%) bio-diesel fuel, and were early adopters of this fuel source in Northern Ireland. There are doubts about whether this bio-diesel element can be increased. Translink does not have any trials in place for electric vehicles. Its assessment is that this is still an emerging technology. Vehicles are currently expensive with infrastructure and replacement battery costs an additional factor to be considered.

My department has, however, funded Translink to invest in initiatives to reduce the use of fuels used by its buses. Over the past 18 months Translink has installed idle shut down systems in three quarters (75%) of its fleet ensuring that engines switch off once they have been idling for a pre-determined time. Following a successful eco-driving pilot which demonstrated that specific driver training supported by on-bus systems to inform drivers as to their 'driving style' can yield fuel efficiency gains, roll out of this system is due to commence in June 2012.

Roads Service: Unadopted Roads

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the current position on unadopted roads and developments.

(AQO 2072/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The issue of unadopted roads in housing developments has become much more significant primarily due to the effects of the economic downturn. My Department's Roads Service is working to adopt properly constructed development roads, in line with current Private Streets legislation and processes.

The process of construction and adoption of new roads in housing developments is usually led by private developers. The changing economic circumstances have presented developers with major challenges and impacted upon their capacity to complete developments as originally planned. However, it must be emphasised that responsibility for these new roads remains with the developers (or other responsible parties), until the adoption process is completed.

My Department is cooperating with the Committee for Regional Development's Inquiry into Unadopted Roads, and I will respond to its findings in due course.

Translink: Fare Increases

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions his Department has had with Translink in relation to the recently announced increases in rail and bus fares.

(AQO 2073/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Each year Translink produces a 3 year Corporate Plan which is discussed with my Department. The focus is on the year ahead. Translink is obligated under the Transport and Company acts to consider going concern issues and must break even year on year. Plans are drawn up which take account of Translink's statutory obligations, funding, costs, fares, fare income and levels of service.

My role, and that of my officials, is to consider and accept the Translink Corporate Plan in whole or in part, on the understanding that this will impact on fares and will be updated within a year.

Discussions begin at official level a number of months before the start of the financial year, mainly about funding scenarios. Prior to approving any increases I also take into account the views of key stakeholders including the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland.

Following these discussions I accepted the need for the fare increases for the current 2012/13 financial year. In my assessment of the fare increases I had to balance the impact on customers against the commercial obligations placed on Translink. Obviously fare increases are not welcome but in the current financial climate particularly given increasing fuel costs, an average fare increase of below the rate of inflation set in the context that Translink has not put fares up since June 2010, which contrasts markedly with the position in the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland, is a positive outcome.

Accessible Transport Strategy

Ms Brown asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the impact that the recent Translink price rise may have on the draft Accessible Transport Strategy.

(AQO 2074/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Accessible Transport Strategy was approved and published in 2005. It contained an objective to “provide help with travel costs to enable older people and people with disabilities to use the transport services available to them”. I have not carried out a formal assessment, but I do not expect the recent decision on Translink fares to impact adversely on the achievement of this objective.

In pursuit of this objective, the Northern Ireland Concessionary Fares Scheme provides free travel for people aged 60 and over and to those registered blind, and half fare travel for certain people with disabilities, including those in receipt of Disability Living Allowance.

In 2012/13, benefits for people with disabilities, including Disability Living Allowance, were increased by over one twentieth (5.2%), whilst Translink fares, on average, have risen by less than the current rate of inflation (3% compared to 3.5%). Affordability of public transport, therefore, is unlikely to impact this year on delivery of the Accessible Transport Strategy. My decision to approve the fare increases was key to underpinning the Translink business plan and will enable the company to meet its commercial obligations and mitigate the risk of contraction in the network of bus and rail services.

I acknowledge that any fare increase is unwelcome however it is also important to note that fares have not increased since June 2010. This contrasts markedly with the position in the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

In January 2012, my Department published a draft Action Plan to take forward the Accessible Transport Strategy up to 2015. The draft plan includes two actions in relation to the affordability objective. Neither of these actions will be affected by the recent fare increases.

Ballyquin Road, Dungiven

Mr Ó hOisín asked the Minister for Regional Development what is the current position on the realignment of a bend on the Ballyquin Road in Dungiven where five young people died in three separate accidents.

(AQO 2075/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: May I firstly say that the death of the young people on the Ballyquinn Road and indeed, any death on our roads, is deeply regrettable, and our sympathy goes out to all those who have lost loved ones due to road accidents.

My Department's Roads Service has advised that a scheme has been developed to realign the bend on the Ballyquin Road in the townland of Scriggan. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to include this scheme in the 2012/13 minor works programme. However, subject to the availability of finance and the successful acquisition of land, it will be considered for prioritisation and inclusion in a future programme.

Department for Social Development

Housing Executive: Double-glazing Scheme

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development whether any incremental yearly targets have been set at Housing Executive district level in relation to upgrading existing properties that do not have double glazing,

(AQW 10955/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): The Housing Executive has not set any yearly targets at District Office level for double glazing installation. At my request it is currently finalising an extensive review of its replacement window specification, that will enable it to firm up a three year programme to ensure that all of its stock has double glazing installed by the Programme for Government target date of 2015.

Photographs Taken by Publicly Funded Photographers

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Social Development, for each of the last three years, to detail the (i) number; and (ii) percentage of photographs taken by publicly funded photographers in which he has appeared in his Ministerial role and which included another member of the DUP who was not there in their Ministerial role, and which have been released to the media or published on the Executive's Flickr account.

(AQW 11009/11-15)

Mr McCausland:

- (i) Since May 2011, I have been in photographs taken by publicly funded photographers on 9 occasions which have also included another member of the DUP who was not there in their Ministerial role, and which have been released to the media or published on the Executive's Flickr account. In all cases those included in the photographs were elected representatives for the area or were directly associated with the event.
- (ii) We do not hold the information in the format requested.

Innishargie Gardens, Bangor: New Windows for Properties

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the new windows for the flats and houses at Innishargie Gardens, Bangor.

(AQW 11084/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information requested is not currently available as I have considerable concern about the value for money of the Housing Executive's current specification to contractors for window installation and believe that significant savings could now be made. I have therefore asked the Housing Executive to rigorously review the entire glazing specification. Until that review is completed, all further double glazing installations are to be held until the new contract provisions, to include any revised specifications, can be put in place. The only exception to that would be where a current Egan contractor has a contract placed with a supplier for delivery of frames and any cancellation would mean nugatory expenditure. While it is estimated that around 30,000 homes will be included in the double glazing programme, and this will be completed in the current CSR period, any delay will be as short as possible while the Housing Executive carries out the review requested by me.

Barnagh Grove, Donaghadee: Refurbishment of Flats

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the refurbishment of flats at Barnagh Grove, Donaghadee.

(AQW 11085/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Kitchen and window replacement schemes are planned for the flats in the current financial year. However, as I have considerable concern about the value for money of the Housing Executive's current specification to contractors for window installation and believe that significant savings could now be made. I have therefore asked the Housing Executive to rigorously review the entire glazing specification. Until that review is completed, all further double glazing installations are to be held until the new contract provisions, to include any revised specifications, can be put in place. The only exception to that would be where a current Egan contractor has a contract placed with a supplier for delivery of frames and any cancellation would mean nugatory expenditure. While it is estimated that around 30,000 homes will be included in the double glazing programme, and this will be completed in the current CSR period, any delay will be as short as possible while the Housing Executive carries out the review requested by me.

Rathgill Park, Bangor: Window Replacement Scheme

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the timescale of the window replacement scheme for the flats at Rathgill Park, Bangor.

(AQW 11160/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information requested is not currently available as I have considerable concern about the value for money of the Housing Executive's current specification to contractors for window installation and believe that significant savings could now be made. I have therefore asked the Housing Executive to rigorously review the entire glazing specification. Until that review is completed, all further double glazing installations are to be held until the new contract provisions, to include any revised specifications, can be put in place. The only exception to that would be where a current Egan contractor has a contract placed with a supplier for delivery of frames and any cancellation would mean nugatory expenditure. While it is estimated that around 30,000 homes will be included in the double glazing programme, and this will be completed in the current CSR period, any delay will be as short as possible while the Housing Executive carries out the review requested by me.

Housing Executive: Rent

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development what is the average rent for a three-bedroom Housing Executive house.

(AQW 11490/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive does not calculate rents based on the number of bedrooms but rather on the number of bed spaces. Typically a three bed roomed house could have 3, 4, 5 or 6 bed spaces. The table appended details typical weekly rents by number of bed spaces across property types.

I hope this information is useful.

Typical weekly Housing Executive rents by number of bed spaces across property types

Property Type	Number of Bed Spaces			
	3	4	5	6
Detached House	£64.62	£66.28	£72.91	£74.57
Semi detached house	£59.65	£61.31	£67.94	£69.59
Terrace house	£58.00	£59.65	£66.28	£67.94
Flat/Maisonette (2 Storey or less)	£49.71	£51.37	£58.00	£59.65
Flat Maisonette (3 Storey or More)	£44.74	£46.40	£53.02	£54.68

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Disability Living Allowance/Personal Independence Payment

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Social Development to detail his Department's involvement in assessing the tenders to deliver the medical assessment to be introduced in moving claimants from Disability Living Allowance to Personal Independence Payment.

(AQW 11505/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Social Security Agency in Northern Ireland is participating with the Department for Work and Pensions in Great Britain in a procurement process which was launched on 2 May 2012 to procure Assessment Providers to support Personal Independence Payment.

The Social Security Agency has had extensive involvement and input to the procurement process including the service specification which reflects Northern Ireland specific differences. These differences reflect the Customer Journey proposed in Northern Ireland, distinct security requirements and the required legislative passage of the Welfare Reform Bill through the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Officials from the Social Security Agency will evaluate the bids to provide services in Northern Ireland and will sit on the Department for Work and Pensions Personal Independence Payment Programme Board and on supplier panel meetings.

Housing Waiting List: Single Occupancy

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Social Development how many people on the housing waiting list require accommodation for single occupancy.

(AQW 11507/11-15)

Mr McCausland: At the 1st May 2012 there were 15,253 single applicants on the waiting list for social housing in Northern Ireland.

Social Housing Units: Single Occupancy

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Social Development how many of the 4,600 housing units planned to be built in the next three years are designed for single occupancy.

(AQW 11508/11-15)

Mr McCausland: During the next 3 years, we plan to deliver 4600 new social homes.

The current 3 year Programme includes 315 schemes with the potential to deliver 6,181 new homes, of which approximately 50% will be suitable for single occupancy.

However, some of these schemes may not progress for a variety of reasons and other schemes will be added, particularly in years 2 and 3 of the programme.

I am particularly conscious of the challenges that will be posed by forthcoming welfare reform changes and have already made clear that our future new build plans must take account and be responsive to the challenges faced.

Housing Executive: Double-glazing Scheme

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to whom he spoke to in the glass and glazing industry that led to his concerns about the value for money of the Housing Executive's current specification to contractors for double-glazing installation.

(AQW 11510/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I and my officials along with the Chief Executive of the Housing Executive have had informal approaches and letters from a number of firms in the double glazing industry. I and the Chief Executive of the Housing Executive then met

with representatives of the Glass and Glazing Federation and Fusion 21 to discuss double glazing specifications in Housing Executive properties in relation to the Glass and Glazing Federations guidelines 'The Good Practice Guide for the Installation of Replacement Windows and Doors'.

Kilcooley, Bangor: Double-glazing

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development whether the double-glazing scheme for Housing Executive properties in parts of Kilcooly, Bangor, will proceed in 2012.

(AQW 11519/11-15)

Mr McCausland: As part of the Housing Executive's review of double glazing, I have agreed what category groups and schemes should now proceed and I have asked the Housing Executive to urgently write to all contractors to confirm the position. With regard to the scheme for Kilcooley, I can confirm that it is scheduled to commence in 2012/13.

Housing Executive: Double-glazing Scheme South Down

Mrs McKeivitt asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties in the South Down constituency without double-glazed windows; and (ii) when they will be fitted with double-glazed windows.

(AQW 11535/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information requested is not currently available as the Housing Executive does not routinely collate information by Parliamentary Constituency. In addition the Housing Executive's records on the level of double glazing within its stock are incomplete as many such schemes were carried out prior to the introduction of its computerised recording system and they are now carrying out an extensive exercise to identify those properties which require double glazing. This will be completed by the end of May 2012.

I have had considerable concern about the value for money of the Housing Executive's current specification to contractors for window installation and believe that significant savings could be made. I therefore asked the Housing Executive to rigorously review the entire glazing specification. As part of the Housing Executive's review I have agreed what category groups and schemes should proceed and I have asked the Housing Executive to urgently write to all contractors to confirm the position. It is estimated that around 30,000 homes will be included in the double glazing programme overall and this will be completed in the CSR period, by 2015 as set out in the Executive's Programme for Government.

With regard to schemes in the South Down constituency I can confirm that two double glazing schemes in Downpatrick and one in Newry should commence in 2012/13 financial year.

Social Housing Developments in the South Down Area

Mrs McKeivitt asked the Minister for Social Development how many social housing developments have been built in the South Down area since 2006.

(AQW 11539/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The table below details the number of social housing units completed within the South Down Parliamentary Constituency during the period 2005/06 – 2011/12: -

Year	Units completed
2011/12	116
2010/11	14
2009/10	29
2008/09	40
2007/08	33
2006/07	31
2005/06	11

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Cookstown: Newbuilds

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development (i) what assessment has been carried out into the need for new build housing in Cookstown in the last two years; (ii) who carried out this assessment; (iii) how long it took to complete; (iv) what its findings were; (v) how many of these findings has been implemented; (vi) whether any projects have been scheduled as a result

of these findings; (vii) what stage these projects reached; and (viii) what is the current status of all new build projects in the Cookstown District.

(AQW 11569/11-15)

Mr McCausland:

- (i) A housing need assessment is carried out annually for all local housing areas across Northern Ireland. In addition to this annual assessment, the Housing Executive has also undertaken a specific study of Cookstown Town.
- (ii) This assessment was carried out by the Housing Executive West Area Planning Unit.
- (iii) The Annual assessment is undertaken each year during the month of August. The specific study of Cookstown Town took a number of weeks to complete in 2009/10 and has been updated on a number of occasions since.
- (iv) The projected housing need for Cookstown Urban area is 65 units over the period 2011-2016.

The specific study is a useful and living document for identifying potential development sites for social housing in the Town

- (v) Several potential development sites were registered by housing associations with one specifically added to the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP). Within the last 3 years, 10 new homes have been completed in Cookstown. A previous scheme that could have delivered up to 50 units over different phases was identified and a housing association appointed to explore it further. Unfortunately site assembly issues have prevented that scheme from progressing further, hence the attempt to bring forward another scheme initially planned for 2014/15.
- (vi) A scheme for 15 new homes that was initially identified to begin during 2014/15 is now being considered for an earlier start if feasible.
- (vii) I understand work on that specific scheme is at an early stage.
- (viii) There is currently a scheme in year three of the SHDP for 15 units. The Unmet Need Prospectus now lists Cookstown as having an unmet need of 50 units over the period 2011-2016. This includes information relating to the development limits and an outline of the housing requirements to meet housing need in Cookstown for the 2011-2016 period. The Unmet Need Prospectus will assist housing associations in their search for sites in advance of the annual bidding round later this year.

Housing Executive Stock: Repair and Maintenance Schemes

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Social Development, for each of the last five years, to detail (i) the number of repair and maintenance schemes for Housing Executive stock; and (ii) the start and completion date of each scheme, broken down by council area.

(AQW 11583/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not differentiate between repair and maintenance schemes, nor do they collate this information by council area. However, the tables attached detail the schemes started and their completion date (where completion has been achieved) by Housing Executive District Office.

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Housing Executive: Reversible Windows

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development when the Housing Executive began installing reversible windows in its properties; and for what reason it decided to install them.

(AQW 11595/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive began installing fully reversible windows when the window replacement policy was changed in 2006/07. Their decision to install these types of windows was based on several factors:-

- The need for a universal window arrangement across property types.
- This window type is fully compliant with all respective standards and legislation pertaining to safety and security (BS 7950), operation and strength characteristics (BS 6375) and weather-tightness (BS EN 12211 & BS EN 1027)
- The steel construction and fewer moving parts than most other window operating systems make maintenance and lubrication of the window, if required, much easier coupled with the fact that specialised equipment or contractors do not have to be employed for simple maintenance purposes

There is a review of the above specification for the low rise housing stock and consideration of a window style and hinge arrangement used widely in the private sector. There will still be the key requirements of egress, easy clean and child restriction as standard as in the present arrangement. This change in the specification is aimed at effecting savings in the overall cost of the window.

Housing Executive/Housing Association: Vacant Properties in North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of vacant (i) Housing Executive properties; and (ii) housing association properties in the North Down constituency, broken down by electoral ward.

(AQW 11615/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In relation to (i) the information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not routinely collate information by electoral ward. However, Table 1 below details the vacant Housing Executive properties within the Housing Executive's Bangor District Office area which covers the North Down constituency. In relation to (ii) Table 2 details the vacant Housing Association properties by electoral ward for the North Down constituency.

Table 1 - Number of vacant Housing Executive properties in the Bangor District Office area

Estate/ Area	No. of vacant properties
Bloomfield/Rathgill/Willowbrook	8
Clandeboyne Road	1
Conlig/Breezemount	4
Kilcooley	29
Lisnabreen	1
Loughview	10
Redburn	3
Woodlands	1
Strand /Kinnegar	1
Whitehill	3
Total	61

Table 2 - Number of vacant Housing Association properties in the North Down constituency

North Down Electoral Wards	No. of vacant properties
Groomspoint	1
Broadway	1
Harbour	3
Bloomfield	1
Conlig	3
Silverstream	2
Rathgael	1
Hollywood Demesne	2
Total	14

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Social Houses: Energy Efficiency Rating of Energy Performance Certificates

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development (i) to detail the percentage of social houses which fall into (a) categories A to G on the energy efficiency rating of energy performance certificates; (b) each category code (1 to 6) for sustainable homes; (ii) for an estimate of the average additional cost, per dwelling, of requiring that all new build social houses conform to code 6 for sustainable homes; and (iv) given the increasing levels of fuel poverty, what consideration he has given to increasing the code for sustainable homes requirement for all new build social houses.

(AQW 11631/11-15)

Mr McCausland:

- (i) The Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) is the Government's standard method of rating the energy efficiency of a dwelling.

The most recent available figures regarding SAP readings are from the 2009 Northern Ireland House Condition Survey.

This indicated that of the estimated 110,000 dwellings in the social housing sector the SAP readings were as follows:

Band A/B	Band C	Band D	Band E	Band F	Band G
4,200	36,200	46,500	17,400	5,400	400

(Please note that the total number of dwellings selected for participation in the 2009 House Condition Survey was 3,000 and that these figures should be viewed as indicative.)

- (ii) The most up to date information available in relation to the categories in the code for sustainable homes relates to 2010/11, when there were 1516 new build units started, all of which were built to the Code for Sustainable homes codes 3 and 4.
- (iii) As the only code 6 scheme to be built in Northern Ireland was developed privately, there are no figures available on the additional cost requirements at this time. A scheme that will be started on site by Oaklee Housing Association in Carryduff later this year will deliver to Code 5 standard and may also include some Code 6 homes that will help us better understand the challenges and costs associated with this increased scale of development.
- (iv) The Code for Sustainable Homes was introduced to drive a step change in sustainable home building practice. It is a standard for key elements of design and construction which effect the sustainability of a new home. It does not specifically address issues associated with Fuel Poverty which remains a key priority for me both in new homes we build and existing homes we must seek to improve.

Welfare Policy: Development of

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development what discussions he has had with the UK Government in relation to a formal system of consultation on, and participation in, the development of welfare policy, including opportunities for the identification of potential policy variations, at an early stage of policy development, in relation to social security and the consequential impact on more fully devolved matters.

(AQW 11762/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Section 87 (1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, provides for consultation between the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and the Minister for Social Development to ensure that a single system of social security, child support and pensions exist for the United Kingdom. I have been working closely with Ministers in Department for Work and Pensions to develop more frequent and meaningful consultation at Ministerial level.

It is our experience that the full impact of any policy proposals only becomes known as the corresponding Bill and/or regulations are drafted, together with the Equality Impact Assessment. At this point, my officials would have ongoing contact with their counterparts in Department for Work and Pensions on the policy proposals and any primary or subordinate legislation arising.

At Ministerial level, both UK Ministers and I have formal and informal discussions and correspondence at appropriate points in the policy development process.

Since becoming Minister for Social Development, I have had, and continue to have, discussions around welfare reform with relevant UK Ministers including Lord Freud, Minister for Welfare Reform (Lords), Rt Hon Owen Patterson, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Rt Hon Iain Duncan Smith, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and Maria Miller, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State and Minister for Disabled People.

These discussions cover a range of issues including the specific challenges that may arise from the implementation of the proposed Welfare Reform changes in Northern Ireland and how best we can progress discussions on operational flexibilities, taking account of issues raised at the Executive Sub-Committee meeting.

I should also advise that Lord Freud met with the Executive Sub Committee on Welfare Reform on 17th May and the OFM dFM Advisory Group on Hardship the following day, the 18th May, to hear at first hand their views on the wider impacts of social security within Northern Ireland.

Welfare Reform

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development what work his Department has carried out to determine the accurate cost of the impact of Welfare Reform.

(AQW 11763/11-15)

Mr McCausland: A range of work is being taken forward to determine the cost and public expenditure implications of Welfare Reform.

Economic appraisals for each individual strand of Welfare Reform are being progressed including the required financial analysis on value for money and the related public expenditure impacts in line with Department of Finance and Personnel guidance; and

Two separate strategic models which cover the spending review 2010 and 2014 periods are being progressed.

The first model considers the impact on Northern Ireland social security benefit related spending funded directly from HM Treasury in line with actual demand and supports the work of the Executive Sub Committee on Welfare Reform. Early results were presented to the Sub Committee on 6 February 2012, with an update due prior to the summer recess

The second model considers the costs of implementing the Welfare Reform changes and administering the benefits system over the Spending Review 2010 and Spending Review 2014 periods and captures the impact on Northern Ireland Executive managed block funds.

The Department for Social Development and the Social Security Agency are also developing the use of the Department for Work and Pensions Policy Simulation Model which uses data from the Family Resources Survey to evaluate the impact of policy proposals on individuals and households. This is currently being used to evaluate the impact of Universal Credit. This work will continue to be updated and refined as projects progress and move from planning into implementation and delivery.

Listed Properties

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the listed properties that are owned by his Department.

(AQW 11785/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Department for Social Development owns two managed workspace properties, at 109/113 Royal Avenue, Belfast and 42 Waring Street, Belfast which are listed.

Building Control Fees for Loft Insulations

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the impact of Building Control fees for loft insulations on the Warm Homes Scheme.

(AQW 11833/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Building Control professionals have expressed concerns about the lack of ventilation in roof spaces which is leading to serious problems with damp. They argue that there is a need to inspect insulation given the focus there has been in recent years on roof space insulation. Article 13(2)(e) of The Building Regulations (Northern Ireland Order) 1979 authorises district councils to charge prescribed fees for inspection of roof space insulation. There is no mandatory obligation to do so but where District Councils decide to charge fees they can. The fees that are applicable are those set by the Department of Finance and Personnel. However, District Councils may absorb the fee ie. pay the fee itself using powers provided by Section 115 of The Local Government Act 1972.

A dispute process is underway between the Warm Homes Scheme managers and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to ascertain who is obliged to pay the Building Control Fee and this matter has not been concluded.

I am confident that the Public Service Agreement target of assisting 9,000 vulnerable homes with energy efficiency improvements will be met. The commitment of both the Warm Homes Scheme managers and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has ensured that, since the contract was awarded in 2009, the target has consistently been exceeded.

Universal Credit

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of (i) the benefits of maintaining a fortnightly payment of Universal Credit; (ii) the benefits of paying Universal Credit to the female head of the household and the impact this might have on a child's wellbeing.

(AQW 11838/11-15)

Mr McCausland:

- (i) I support the principle that, where possible, Universal Credit payments should mirror salary payments, which in the vast majority of cases for working families is a monthly payment. This could help people currently on benefit with the transition into employment and helps them avoid the 'poverty premium' with access to monthly direct debit payments and reduced costs. However, I also recognise that some customers will struggle with a monthly payment of benefit and I am therefore ensuring that appropriate support to cope with the change is available to those who require it. A payment service will also be available to allow for more frequent payment of Universal Credit for those customers who are unable to cope with monthly payments.

- (ii) A key aim of Universal Credit is to encourage greater responsibility for household budgeting through the payment of a single household monthly payment. Responsibility for nominating who should receive payment of Universal Credit will rest with the household. My Department would wish to ensure childrens' well being in whatever payment arrangements are put in place however, there is no evidence to support the view that mandatory payments of Universal Credit to the female head of household would have a significant impact on a child's well being.

Benefit/Social Fund Payments

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development what consideration he has given to the extent to which existing expenditure on (i) passported benefit payments; and (ii) social fund payments can be preserved.

(AQW 11840/11-15)

Mr McCausland:

- (i) There are a range of passported benefits currently available to those people in Northern Ireland who are in receipt of an out of work means tested benefit, tax credits or a low income. These benefits are delivered by a variety of Government Departments and decisions in respect of eligibility criteria and funding for a specific benefit are the responsibility of individual Departments. Departments with responsibility for passported benefits are currently considering the options for delivery of these benefits following the introduction of Universal Credit and the Personal Independence Payment in 2013. The Executive Sub-Committee on Welfare Reform has also discussed the issue of passported benefits and how they may be delivered in Northern Ireland.

My Department is also directly responsible for the provision of a number of passported benefits and my officials are currently considering the implications for these benefits from the introduction of Universal Credit. Benefits that will remain as part of the regulated Social Fund, including Cold Weather Payments, Funeral Payments, Sure Start Maternity Grants and Winter Fuel Payments will continue to be entitlement based. Funding for these benefits will continue to be met from Annually Managed Expenditure in common with other social security benefits. My Department also has no plans to reduce the level of housing renewal grant aid for the private housing sector as a result of welfare reform.

- (ii) There have been a number of discussions between Ministers in respect of the abolition of Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans for living expenses and household items and my Department's plan to replace them with new discretionary support provision. Discussion on the level of funding which will be made available for the new provision is ongoing with HM Treasury and the Department for Finance and Personnel and it is not currently clear what funding will transfer from HM Treasury. I will ensure that all efforts are made to negotiate the best possible financial settlement for replacement discretionary support. I have also secured Executive agreement that HM Treasury transferred funding will be ring-fenced for the purposes of discretionary support delivery.

Civil Servants

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Social Development how many civil servants currently employed in his Department have been re-employed after receiving a redundancy package from the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

(AQW 11845/11-15)

Mr McCausland: No civil servants currently employed in my Department have been re-employed after receiving a redundancy package from the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Welfare Reform

Mrs Overend asked the Minister for Social Development whether the Equality Impact Assessment on the proposed Welfare Reform changes considered the impact on foster carers.

(AQW 11858/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Equality Impact Assessment on the Welfare Reform changes did not specifically consider the impact on foster carers as they are not one of the groups listed within Section 75 (1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. However, as foster carers fall within a number of the protected groupings the impact of welfare reform on each of the protected groups (insofar as the data is available), has been considered within the Equality Impact assessment. An updated Equality Impact Assessment was published on the department's website on 4th May 2012.

Arm's-length Bodies: Invoices

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what percentage of invoices, received by each of his Department's arm's-length bodies in the last twelve months, were paid within 30 days of receipt.

(AQW 11867/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information requested is provided in the table below. Figures relate to the 2011-12 financial year ended 31 March 2012.

Name of body	% invoices cleared within 30 days
NI Housing Executive	84.4

Name of body	% invoices cleared within 30 days
ILEX Urban Regeneration Company	94.1
Charities Commission for N Ireland	99.5

Employment and Support Allowance: Appeal Hearings

Mr Lynch asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to the 8,417 Employment and Support Allowance appeal hearings which took place in 2011/12, how many of the appeals resulted in the initial decision being (i) upheld; and (ii) overturned.

(AQW 11963/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the manner requested. The Chairman of the tribunal hearing records whether the decision made on appeal is either more or less advantageous than a previous decision. A more advantageous decision may increase the allowance or direct that a new award is made. A less advantageous decision may reduce the allowance or make no change to the original determination. On this basis, the table below details the outcome of the 8,417 appeal hearings held in 2011/12.

ESA appeals held in 2011/12	Sub-Totals
Outcome More Advantageous	2193
Outcome Less Advantageous	4125
Cases pending final determination	2099
Total	8417

Social Housing Development Programme: North Antrim

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development how many new home starts have been delivered in the North Antrim constituency through the Social Housing Development Programme.

(AQW 12058/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The table below details the number of social housing starts within the North Antrim parliamentary constituency during the five year period from 2007/08 to 2011/12.

Year	Units started
2007/08	3
2008/09	10
2009/10	57
2010/11	16
2011/12	68

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.

Girdwood Site: Housing Strategy

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 11582/11-15, whether both sets of housing on the Girdwood site will be allocated according to the Common Selection Scheme, and not segregated on religious grounds.

(AQW 12068/11-15)

Mr McCausland: All social housing in Northern Ireland irrespective of where it is located is allocated in accordance with the Common Selection Scheme.

Housing Executive: Double-glazing Scheme

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development the number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties, in the North Down area, affected by the double-glazing scheme being put on hold.

(AQW 12075/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I have had considerable concern about the value for money of the Housing Executive's current specification to contractors for window installation and believe that significant savings could be made. I therefore asked the Housing Executive

to rigorously review the entire glazing specification. I have also agreed what category groups and schemes should proceed and I have asked the Housing Executive to urgently write to all contractors to confirm the position. With regards to the North Down area no double glazing schemes have been put on hold and there are 688 properties included in three schemes which can proceed and should go on site in this financial year.

Housing Executive: Double-glazing Scheme

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development what schemes are scheduled, for the North Down constituency, to replace single-glazed windows with double-glazed windows in Housing Executive properties, in the next twelve months.

(AQW 12077/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive's records on the level of double glazing within its stock are incomplete as many such schemes were carried out prior to the introduction of its computerised recording system and they are now carrying out an extensive exercise to identify those properties which require double glazing. This will be completed by the end of May 2012.

I have had considerable concern about the value for money of the Housing Executive's current specification to contractors for window installation and believe that significant savings could be made. I therefore asked the Housing Executive to rigorously review the entire glazing specification. I have also agreed what category groups and schemes should proceed and I have asked the Housing Executive to urgently write to all contractors to confirm the position. It is estimated that around 30,000 homes will be included in the double glazing programme overall and this will be completed in the CSR period, by 2015 as set out in the Executive's Programme for Government.

In relation to North Down, the Housing Executive has advised that there are three double glazing schemes programmed for North Down in 2012/13. They are: -

- Local Area Priority - Bangor District
- Lisnabreen/Clanmorris
- Whitehill

However, the findings from the survey exercise to identify those properties which require double glazing may result in additional schemes being programmed for North Down in 2013/14.

Housing Executive: Double-glazing Scheme

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development whether the double-glazing scheme for Housing Executive properties in parts of Bloomfield, Bangor, will proceed in 2012.

(AQW 12078/11-15)

Mr McCausland: All dwellings in the Bloomfield Estate have had double glazing installed with the exception of seventy one bungalows which are included in the current stock transfer proposal. Oaklee Housing Association is currently working on their proposal and has therefore still to confirm its improvement proposals for these bungalows. It is highly likely that double glazing will be part of these proposals and that work would therefore be carried out should the transfer go ahead. In the event that the transfer is rejected by the tenants, the Housing Executive will ensure that these bungalows are programmed for double glazing by the Programme for Government target date of 2015.

Housing Executive: Double-glazing Scheme

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties, in the North Down constituency, without double-glazed windows; and (ii) when they will be fitted with double-glazed windows.

(AQW 12079/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive's records on the level of double glazing within its stock are incomplete as many such schemes were carried out prior to the introduction of its computerised recording system and they are now carrying out an extensive exercise to identify those properties which require double glazing. This will be completed by the end of May 2012.

I have had considerable concern about the value for money of the Housing Executive's current specification to contractors for window installation and believe that significant savings could be made. I therefore asked the Housing Executive to rigorously review the entire glazing specification. I have also agreed what category groups and schemes should proceed and I have asked the Housing Executive to urgently write to all contractors to confirm the position. It is estimated that around 30,000 homes will be included in the double glazing programme overall and this will be completed in the CSR period, by 2015 as set out in the Executive's Programme for Government.

Social Housing Development Programme: North Antrim

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development how many disability adaptations have been carried out in the North Antrim constituency through the Social Housing Development Programme.

(AQW 12085/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I assume the Member is referring to Disabled Adaptation Grants paid to Housing Associations. 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 details the number of Disabled Adaptation Grants paid to Housing Associations in the Housing Executive's North East area, which includes the North Antrim constituency, for the five year period from 2007/08 to 2011/12.

North East Area: -

Year	No. of Grants
2007/08	205
2008/09	163
2009/10	206
2010/11	176
2011/12	138

This information refers to Housing Association stock only and excludes: -

- Applications made by Housing Associations for Disabled Adaptation Grants which have not been approved.
- Applications made by Housing Associations for Disabled Adaptation Grants which have expired/been withdrawn/ ineligible.
- Adaptations carried out by Housing Associations for which Disabled Adaptation Grants have not been claimed.

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Work Capability Assessments

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development how much has been paid to date to ATOS Healthcare for conducting Work Capability Assessments.

(AQW 12118/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Atos Healthcare provides medical support services on behalf of the Social Security Agency across a range of benefits. This includes medical experts, administrative staff, accommodation and ICT infrastructure. Under the contract charges are levied on a total basis including all services provided. I am unable to provide the specific information for the costs of conducting the Work Capability Assessment as the charging regime is designated as commercially sensitive information, in accordance with Schedule 30 of the Medical Support Services Agreement.

Housing Executive: Purchase of Property

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development whether the Housing Executive applies an age-limit to occupants who wish to buy a single-storey Housing Executive property.

(AQW 12124/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Under the current House Sales Scheme, introduced in September 2002, tenants irrespective of age whose tenancy of one and two bedroom bungalows commenced on or after 1 September 2002 do not have a right to buy them. This policy was put in place in order to protect the future limited supply of suitable properties for elderly and disabled people.

However, bungalows with three or more bedrooms are available to purchase by tenants who have five or more year's tenancy with the Housing Executive or any qualifying landlord. This is because such bungalows are viewed as family accommodation.

Jobseeker's Allowance: Lone Parents

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development how his Department expects lone parents on Jobseekers Allowance to actively seek work during the school holidays, given that no childcare allowance is provided to claimants.

(AQW 12145/11-15)

Mr McCausland: When a lone parent claims Jobseeker's Allowance, an Adviser will draw up a jobseeker's agreement, and amongst other things, will discuss the availability of suitable and affordable childcare with the lone parent. It is normally a condition of entitlement to jobseeker's allowance that claimants are willing and able to take up employment of at least 40 hours per week, but in the case of lone parents there are flexibilities which enable lone parents to restrict their availability for employment to the child's normal school hours. This does not prevent a lone parent from actively seeking work during the school holidays.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive: Advanced Land Purchase Grants

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Social Development whether it is the policy of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to pay Advanced Land Purchase grants to housing associations for sites where neither the necessary planning permission is in place nor where the site has been purchased subject to planning permission; and if so, to detail the rationale for the policy.

(AQW 12197/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Planning Approval is not a prerequisite for an application for an Advance Land Purchase (ALP) grant; however any association applying for an ALP must ensure the development proposals for the proposed land purchase are broadly acceptable to the Planning Service. Generally this will involve liaison with Planning Service and/or the engagement of a Planning Consultant to obtain a professional opinion on development potential of the site in question.

Killynure Road, Carryduff: Social Housing

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development (i) when construction of the new social housing at Killynure Road, Carryduff will be completed; and (ii) when these properties will be allocated.

(AQW 12206/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I understand that Oaklee Housing Association have had to retender this project and as such do not expect to have a contractor in place and ready to start development on the site until after the summer.

On this basis it is too soon to speculate on when the scheme will complete and be ready for allocation. Once construction begins I will be in a better position to advise you on these issues.

Welfare Reform

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development (i) to outline the reasons for the delay in introducing the Welfare Reform Bill; and (ii) whether he can give a commitment that, once introduced, he will not seek accelerated passage.

(AQW 12214/11-15)

Mr McCausland: There has been no undue delay in introducing the Welfare Reform Bill (the Bill). It is normal practice for a Northern Ireland parity Bill to be introduced as soon as possible after the corresponding Westminster Bill has received Royal Assent, in this case, The Welfare Reform Act 2012 received Royal Assent on 8th March, 2012.

I should advise that there are a number of pre-introductory legislative processes to be completed before I can seek the agreement of the Executive Committee to introduce the Bill. These include seeking confirmation from the Departmental Solicitor's Office and the Attorney General that the Bill is within the legislative competence of the Assembly, as well as seeking the consent of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on the inclusion of provisions which deal with excepted matters under section 4(1) of, and Schedule 2 to, the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

I can confirm that I have issued a paper to the Executive Committee seeking their agreement to introduce the Bill to the Assembly.

I do not intend to seek accelerated passage for this Bill.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 8 June 2012

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Fort George: Decontamination

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister why AQW 10588/11-15 was transferred to the Minister for Social Development for answer when there is a clear commitment in the Programme for Government for their Department to ensure that the decontamination programme at Fort George is complete in 2013/14.

(AQW 10715/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The additional information requested by the Member fell within the remit of DSD and therefore responsibility for provision of the answer lies with the Minister for Social Development.

Ministerial Subcommittee on Children and Young People

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People's Action Plan 2008-2011, including what actions were completed and what actions are outstanding.

(AQW 10914/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Progress against the six outcomes in the Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People is monitored on an ongoing basis through a range of indicators. A mid-term review of progress against these indicators was published in March 2012.

An assessment of progress on the activities included in the 2008-11 Action Plan is ongoing and will be completed by the end of August 2012. However, it is intended that future work to implement the Children and Young People's Strategy will focus on a smaller number of cross-cutting and strategic objectives which are additional to existing work across government and which will be implemented in the context of the Delivering Social Change framework.

Social Investment Fund

Mr Spratt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Social Investment Fund.

(AQW 11882/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: As you will be aware, the Social Investment Fund was subject to a public consultation in late 2011 and, in light of the views expressed, we brought proposals on the final operation of the Fund to the Executive on 17 May 2012.

We are pleased that at this meeting, Executive Ministers agreed the three key elements central to its operation; the Social Investment Zones, the process for nominating and selecting members of the Steering Groups and the basis on which areas within a zone will be eligible for consideration of an intervention.

The Fund will operate across nine Social Investment Zones, which we revisited to now include all areas from the start, given how strongly this emerged in the consultation. The nine zones will include four in Belfast (Assembly constituencies), one in Derry/Londonderry and four others aligned to the Health and Social Care Trust & Children and Young People Strategic Partnership boundaries.

However, we must balance this with the need to ensure that Funds are not diluted to the point of minimal impact and, as such, eligibility criteria will be applied to areas within each zone. This will help ensure that monies are targeted at areas of objective evidenced need.

Steering Groups will be established within each zone to oversee the identification and prioritisation of objective evidenced need and to co-ordinate a strategic area plan with proposed interventions to address such need.

We are therefore giving further thought to a number of methods of investment through SIF although the primary delivery of funding will be through the area plans.

More details on the composition of the steering groups and eligibility criteria are on the OFMDFM website. We will continue to provide updated information on the website as we progress this work.

Public Bodies

Mr Gardiner asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 10973/11-15, (i) to list the public bodies sponsored by their Department; and (ii) how many public bodies are sponsored by other Departments.

(AQW 11909/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The public bodies sponsored by our Department are as follows:

- Commissioner for Children and Young People;
- Commission for Victims and Survivors for NI;
- Commissioner for Older People for NI;
- Community Relations Council;
- Equality Commission for NI;
- Ilex Urban Regeneration Co Ltd;
- Strategic Investment Board Ltd;
- NI Judicial Appointments Commission;
- NI Memorial Fund;
- Planning and Water Appeals Commissions; and
- Victims and Survivors Service.

Information on the public bodies sponsored by other departments is set out in the Public Bodies and Public Appointments Annual Report published by our Department.

The most recent Report covers the 2010/11 financial year and is available from the OFMDFM website at www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/public-appointments-annual-report-2010-2011.pdf or from the Assembly Library (reference number R351.41609 NOR).

Public Bodies: Board Members

Mr Gardiner asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 10973/11-15, how many of the 60 board members who do not have a civil or public service background are (i) paid; and (ii) unpaid.

(AQW 11910/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The information provided to you in response to AQW 10973/11-15 was incorrect. Eighteen former civil and public servants are serving on the Boards of public bodies sponsored by our Department. This equates to 22.50% of the total number of Board members. Seventeen of these Board members are paid (21.25%) and one is unpaid (1.25%). Please accept our apologies for this error.

Of the remaining sixty-two Board members, seventeen are paid and twenty-one are unpaid. Twenty-four current civil or public servants hold Board positions either in an ex officio or representative position or in their own right.

Social Investment Fund Zones: Steering Groups

Mr Spratt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the timescale for the establishment of the steering groups for Social Investment Fund Zones, including the (i) proposed dates for public meetings for nominations from community and voluntary groups; (b) dates for the completion of officials' analysis to determine political party membership; (iii) dates for the nomination of statutory members; and (iv) dates for the nomination of business members.

(AQW 11928/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: On 17 May 2012, Executive Ministers agreed the operation of the Social Investment Fund (SIF) and work has now begun to establish the Steering Group in each Zone. It is hoped to have these structures in place during summer 2012.

In that regard, our officials are actively working to identify suitable dates to hold public meetings and it is likely that these will take place over the coming weeks. Final details of dates and venues will be published on the OFMDFM website in due course and key community and voluntary organisations will also be advised of the dates when they have been scheduled.

During this time we will also commence the process of identifying the political make up of the Groups and inviting political parties to confirm membership.

Similarly, our officials will be inviting nominations from appropriate statutory bodies and approaching key business organisations over the coming weeks with a view to having Steering Groups in place by autumn 2012 to begin the area planning process.

Maze/Long Kesh Site: Peace-building and Conflict Resolution Centre

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the four work strands of the Peace Building and Conflict Resolution Centre; and what public engagement has been conducted in relation to each strand.

(AQW 11945/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The four work strands of the Peace Building and Conflict Resolution Centre at Maze/Long Kesh will be:

- 1 International Exchange
- 2 Education, Research, Teaching and Training
- 3 Exhibition Space and Archive
- 4 Shared Location and Facilities

Officials in the Maze/Long Kesh Programme Delivery Unit established 6 Reference Groups to help outline the functions and work strands of Peace Centre. Some 65 local organisations are involved in the Reference Group process and officials have also met with a range of international organisations based in the US and Europe.

Plans for the Peace Centre are at an early stage and further extensive stakeholder engagement will be undertaken in due course to ensure all aspects of the Centre will be considered and approached sensitively.

Victims and Survivors: Permanent Forum

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to the appointment of members to the permanent Forum for Victims and Survivors, to detail (i) the processes and procedures used to appoint members; (ii) how they will ensure that a full and balanced representation of victims and survivors is achieved; and (iii) when the permanent Forum will be officially established and its membership announced.

(AQW 11971/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The establishment of the Forum is a statutory responsibility of the Commission for Victims and Survivors and as a result neither Ministers nor officials were involved in the selection process.

The first sitting is scheduled to take place on 21 June 2012.

Arm's-length Bodies: Board Members

Mr Gardiner asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many former senior civil servants, from deputy secretary grade to permanent secretary grade, serve on the boards of their Department's arm's length bodies in a (i) paid; and (ii) unpaid capacity.

(AQW 12161/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Three former civil servants who held Deputy Secretary grade are currently serving on the Boards of public bodies sponsored by our Department. All three hold paid positions.

Arm's-length Bodies and Quangos

Mr Gardiner asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the current number of arm's-length bodies and quangos that are attached to their Department; and how this figure compares with the number in (i) 2008; (ii) 2009; (iii) 2010; and (iv) 2011.

(AQW 12162/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Our Department currently sponsors thirteen bodies, including two independent statutory office holders to whom the arm's length principle is applied for financial management and corporate governance purposes. The comparative figures for 2008 to 2011 are as follows:

2008	12
2009	13
2010	14
2011	12

Review of Public Administration

Mrs D Kelly asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what powers or functions they plan to devolve to local councils under the Review of Public Administration; and whether this represents a change to their previous commitments.

(AQW 12265/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We currently have no plans to devolve any powers or functions to local councils under the Review of Public Administration from OFMDFM. This is in line with our previous commitment.

Government Advertising

Mr McClarty asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they has considered the impact on local weekly newspapers from limiting government advertising to government websites.

(AQW 12270/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: No decision has been taken to limit government advertising to government websites.

The Executive has agreed to introduce tight controls on advertising expenditure, open classified advertising up to competition and change the legislation to allow greater use of online and other media for classified advertising. Opening up classified advertising to competition will ensure compliance with procurement regulations and deliver better value for money. In the current financial climate, advertising expenditure is subject to the same scrutiny and control as other areas of expenditure.

Sickness Absence

Mr P Ramsey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the percentage of sickness absence in their Department in each of the last three years; and the agreed target rate of sickness as set out in any memoranda of understanding between their Department and the trade unions.

(AQW 12286/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: OFMDFM absence rates for the last three years for which validated figures are available are presented below, alongside results for the NICS as a whole for the purposes of comparison. Departmental target rates are not set out in any memorandum of understanding with the trade unions, but are included here for information.

	2008/2009		2009/2010		2010/2011	
	OFMDFM	NICS	OFMDFM	NICS	OFMDFM	NICS
Sickness absence (%)	6.8 days (3.1%)	11days (5.0%)	7.6 days (3.4%)	11days (4.9%)	5.4 days (2.4%)	10.4 days (4.7%)
Target rate	8.5 days	10.2 days	8.5 days	9.5 days	8.2 days	10.5 days

Planning Appeals Commission

Mr Givan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what progress has been made by the Planning Appeals Commission in creating an efficient organisation which can effectively deal with its workload in a timely manner.

(AQO 2101/11-15)

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 commitment of Commissioner resources to work referred by the Department of the Environment (draft Development Plans and Major proposals) combined with a prolonged increase in the number of appeals from the period 2005–2008 made the task of the Commission very challenging. However, the Commission has risen to this challenge and at 31 March 2012 the Commission had reduced its historic backlog of appeals from 2,834 in 2007/08 to 353.

There has been a significant improvement in the median times taken to process appeals over the same period. Median times have been reduced by 54 weeks for hearings, 57 weeks for written representations with an accompanied site visit and 58 for written representations.

Earlier this year the Commission delivered the final part of the report into the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan Public Inquiry to the Department as well as its report on the Public Examination of the Banbridge, Newry and Mourne Area Plan. These very complex tasks required the commitment of 7 full-time Commissioners over a prolonged period to consider thousands of objections. The Commission currently has 3 Commissioners committed to consideration of objections to the Northern Area Plan. The Public Examination was completed in March 2012 and the Commissioners would hope to present their report to the Department by the end of 2013.

The Commission has committed a considerable amount of its resources to addressing the large volume of major proposals which were referred from the Department of the Environment. At present the Commission has 3 major proposals for consideration, which has reduced from 14 major proposals in early 2010.

The Commission continue to utilise its resources efficiently to meet its targets and to deliver a fair, efficient and effective appellate service to the public. 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”.

Corporation Tax

Ms Gildernew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the discussions which are taking place on the devolution of Corporation Tax powers.

(AQO 2104/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We attended the second meeting of the Joint Ministerial Working Group on 7 March, and since then, officials from DFP, DETI and OFMDFM have met with HM Treasury and HMRC six times to continue work to establish, with clarity, the costs, administrative changes and the potential legislative vehicle for transferring responsibility for the rate of Corporation Tax. The Joint Ministerial Working Group is expected to meet again on 25 June where we will assess progress, and decide on the most appropriate way forward. The aim of the Group is to report to the UK Government in summer 2012, and a decision will be taken following this.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Crossmaglen: Republican Monument

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what advice her Department received from the European Commission on the proposal to use Rural Development Funding to refurbish the republican monument in Crossmaglen; and what action has been taken, or will be taken, as a result of that advice.

(AQW 11474/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): My Department is in receipt of correspondence from the European Commission about funding of projects under the Rural Development Programme, and the views expressed have been passed to SOAR.

Confirmation of the decision from the SOAR JCC is awaited.

Forest Service: Headquarters

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is the projected cost of the proposed relocation of Forest Service headquarters from Stormont to Co. Fermanagh.

(AQW 11921/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I announced at Balmoral Show on 17th May 2012 that I had asked the Chief Executive of the Forest Service to identify suitable premises in Fermanagh for the relocation of the headquarters of his Agency to that County.

This is an important project that will require careful research, planning and execution to ensure a successful outcome – the costs and benefits of which are a major consideration.

At this early stage it is too early to estimate what the costs will be. These will be identified as the project develops.

Forest Service: Staff

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many Forest Service staff will relocate with the Service to Co. Fermanagh.

(AQW 11922/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I announced at Balmoral Show on 17th May 2012 that I had asked the Chief Executive of the Forest Service to identify suitable premises in Fermanagh for the relocation of the headquarters of his Agency to that County.

There are 61 posts based in Belfast. Although there is some work to be done to separate out HQ functions from operational functions associated with eastern forests, over time I expect most of these posts to transfer to the new HQ in Fermanagh.

As part of the relocation process existing HQ staff will be given the opportunity to move to the new HQ. It is too early to say how many staff will wish to take up this offer.

Forest Service: Staff

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assurances she can give to Forest Service staff who are unable, or unwilling, to move with the Service to Co. Fermanagh; and whether these staff will be offered alternative posts within her Department.

(AQW 11923/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I announced at Balmoral Show on 17th May 2012 that I had asked the Chief Executive of the Forest Service to identify suitable premises in Fermanagh for the relocation of the headquarters of his Agency to that County.

Following my announcement, DARD Permanent Secretary sent a letter to all Forest Service Staff reassuring them that DARD HR will work closely with NICS Corporate HR to use the elective transfer process to ensure that Forest Service staff not wishing to move are given an opportunity to move to another Department, while at the same time staff from other NICS Departments

are provided the opportunity of transferring into DARD to avail of the move. Staff were advised, however, that although the Department and the rest of the NICS will do all it can to ensure that staff will be accommodated during the process, it may not be possible to provide posts in all individual circumstances.

Staff were also advised that Secretary had written separately to Trade Union Side to confirm that there would be full consultation on matters affecting their members throughout the process.

An initial meeting between Forest Service management and NIPSA representatives took place on 21st May 2012.

Forest Service: Headquarters

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is the proposed timescale for the relocation of the Forest Service to Co. Fermanagh.

(AQW 11924/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I announced at Balmoral Show on 17th May 2012 that I had asked the Chief Executive of the Forest Service to identify suitable premises in Fermanagh for the relocation of the headquarters of his Agency to that County.

This is an important project for the Forest Service that will require careful research, planning and execution to ensure a successful outcome.

At this early stage I have not set timescales but my intention is that the move take place sooner rather than later. This is important to remove uncertainty and allow staff and the organisation to plan more effectively.

Public Bodies: Board Members

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many former civil and public servants are employed as (i) paid; and (ii) unpaid board members of public bodies which are sponsored by her Department; and what this figure is as a proportion of the total number of board members.

(AQW 11949/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I can confirm that 17 former civil servants and public servants are employed as board members on public bodies sponsored by my Department, 8 in a paid capacity and 9 in an unpaid capacity. Former civil servants represent 17% of the total number of board members and former public servants 19%.

Apprenticeship Programmes

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the apprenticeship programmes available within her Department; (ii) the apprenticeship programmes provided by her Department; (iii) the number of people currently enrolled in these programmes; and (iv) the number of places available on the programmes.

(AQW 12007/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: There are currently no apprenticeship programmes provided within DARD. In the 2009/10 period DARD participated in the Programme-Led Apprenticeship programme and identified a number of work placements across the Department. However, there was no up-take by prospective participants and the programme has not been repeated within the Department since. Should demand arise in the future for work placements my Department will be happy to reconsider its position.

Wind Farms: Funding

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much Rural Development Programme funding has been awarded to wind farm related projects in the last three years, broken down by project.

(AQW 12011/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: In the past three years the Rural Development Programme has not funded any wind farm related projects. However under the Axis 3 measures letters of offer worth £27,145 have issued for 9 feasibility studies to test the viability of erecting wind turbines in certain areas. Additionally 1 wind turbine installation has been completed under Measure 3.1 with grant assistance paid totalling £30,900.

Arm's-length Bodies: Board Members

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many former senior civil servants, from deputy secretary grade to permanent secretary grade, serve on the boards of her Department's arm's length bodies in a (i) paid; and (ii) unpaid capacity.

(AQW 12071/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I can confirm that 2 former senior civil servants from the deputy secretary grade to permanent secretary grade serve on 2 boards of my Department's arm's length bodies, both in a paid capacity.

Countryside Management Scheme

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 11486/11-15, what steps her Department is taking to encourage and promote further uptake of the Countryside Management Scheme.

(AQW 12135/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Countryside Management Scheme closed to applications in 2006 and no further uptake will be promoted. However in 2010, my Department received 4800 applications to the NI Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS) which are being considered for progression to agreement stage. In September 2011, I announced that approximately 2300 of these applications would be progressed in two phases with approximately 1000 signed in 2012 and 1300 in 2013. Initially 1200 applicants were invited for face-to-face meetings and 990 attended these interviews. Following this, 717 applicants have been issued with agreements. In autumn 2012 work will be progressing to take forward the next tranche of NICMS applications to agreement stage. These applicants will be encouraged to sign agreements during a second phase of face-to-face meetings with Countryside Management Delivery Advisers.

Countryside Management Scheme

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 11486/11-15, what steps her Department is taking to simplify the Countryside Management Scheme, and thereby increase participation in the Scheme.

(AQW 12136/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Countryside Management Scheme closed in 2006 and my Department has no plans to simplify this scheme. However, during inspections of the 2010 NI Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS) claimants it was discovered that there was a high level of non-compliance and over-declaration. As a result my Department has taken steps to help farmers manage their scheme agreement more easily. For example, DARD offered face-to-face interviews to around 1200 farmers who applied to NICMS in 2010. Similar support will be offered to the next phase of applicants to be progressed later this year. These interviews aim to encourage uptake and participation in the scheme. DARD is also implementing a programme of communication activities to help agri-environment scheme participants follow the rules of the scheme more easily. This programme provides information to help farmers to comply with scheme rules and, in particular, has targeted areas where a high level of non-compliance was detected during inspection. Additional information has been provided in scheme literature and on the DARD website. Information events were held for new NICMS participants in April 2012 and 227 farmers attended these events. In addition, 4630 agri-environment scheme participants attended scheme training during 2011-12.

Countryside Management Scheme

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 11486/11-15, what targets her Department has set for the uptake of the Countryside Management Scheme.

(AQW 12138/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Countryside Management Scheme closed in 2006 and no further applications will be accepted. However in 2010, my Department received 4800 applications to the NI Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS). In September 2011, I announced the target that approximately 2300 of these applications would be progressed to agreements by the end of the current Rural Development Programme 2007 - 2013. We hoped to achieve this in a two-stage process with approximately 1000 agreements signed in 2012 and approximately 1300 more in 2013.

Agri-food Industry

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how the Agri-Food Strategy Board and the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise will work together to ensure that the agri-food industry has access to a pool of potential employees with the appropriate skills.

(AQW 12148/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My department and I recognise that having access to an appropriately skilled workforce is important for the future development of the local agri-food industry.

As you are aware, our College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) already seeks to ensure that those entering and those currently employed in the agri-food industry have the appropriate competences and skills. It is encouraging to see record numbers of students enrolling for full-time courses at CAFRE, particularly in agriculture and food.

Moving forward, it seems likely that skills will be one of the issues considered by the new Agri-Food Strategy Board (AFSB). I have nominated David Small, the DARD Deputy Secretary with responsibility for CAFRE, as one of the Government representatives on the AFSB. This will facilitate the Board's consideration of any skills issues relevant to CAFRE education and training provision.

The AFSB Chair, Tony O'Neill also chairs the Future Skills Action Group, which was established to address the skills needs in the food and drink processing sub-sector. I understand that this Group is due to publish its action plan shortly.

Inishkeen House, Enniskillen: Staff

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many departmental staff are based in Inishkeen House, Enniskillen, broken down by (i) grade; and (ii) community background.

(AQW 12156/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: There are 95 Departmental staff based in Inishkeen House, Enniskillen. The breakdown by grade is set out in the table below. The Department does not retain information on community background of its staff. Such information is collected by the NI Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and is used by the NI Civil Service for monitoring purposes as required under the Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998. The examination of individual offices by community background is not carried out.

Administrative Assistant (Casual)	1
Administrative Assistant	9
Administrative Officer	21
Agricultural Inspector Grade II	1
Agricultural Inspector Grade III	4
Deputy Principal	1
Divisional Veterinary Officer	1
Executive Officer I	1
Executive Officer II	3
Forest Officer Grade III	10
Forest Officer II	3
Inspector Group 1	15
Inspector Group 2	10
Inspector Group 4	4
Staff Officer	1
Support Grade Band 2	1
Typist	1
Veterinary Officer	5
Veterinary Officer Testing	3
Total	95

Bees

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) how many incidents involving exotic pests and diseases of bees have been reported to her Department by the National Bee Unit, in each of the last four years; (ii) to detail the nature of each incident; and (iii) what action was taken by her Department in each case.

(AQW 12440/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: There have been no incidents involving exotic pests and diseases of bees reported to my Department by the National Bee Unit, within the last four years.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Spectrum Centre: Funding from the Arts Council

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, given that the Spectrum Centre did not receive funding from the Arts Council under its Annual Funding Programme, how she will address the lack of arts funding in North Belfast and, in particular, the Greater Shankill area.

(AQW 11154/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): My Department's funding in support of the arts is disbursed by the Arts Council through a number of funding programmes. This funding is not allocated on the basis of area but on the merits of the application to the relevant funding programme.

Organisers are free to apply to any relevant competitive funding streams, and funding may be made available provided the organisation and event are eligible, the event/proposal fits the criteria of the given programme and the application scores well in what are generally highly competitive funding rounds.

Funding allocated to North Belfast for 2012-13 totals £3.7m to date. The Arts Council will continue to respond to applications for funding from the area through any and all of its programmes.

Irish Football Association: Facilities Strategy

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the consultation process that was undertaken in drawing-up the Irish Football Association's Facilities Strategy.

(AQW 11572/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Neither the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure nor Sport Northern Ireland holds this information. The Irish Football Association (IFA) is responsible for any consultation process undertaken in relation to its Facilities Strategy.

Association Football Stadia: Funding

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what independent oversight there will be as part of the allocation of funding for association football stadia.

(AQW 11573/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Around £36m for football's strategic stadium needs at sub-regional level was endorsed by the Executive on 10 March 2011 on the basis that it should be taken forward as a priority area of spend in the next CSR period (2015).

There is a process to be followed in taking forward sub-regional stadium developments. The IFA is currently working with Sport NI to develop a Strategic Outline Case (SOC) outlining football's sub-regional needs. This will provide initial statements of strategic aims, business needs and project objectives. Once completed the SOC will be considered by the Department and DFP prior to the production of Outline Business Cases (OBC) for the various projects within the sub-regional development programme. These OBCs will be used to inform bids for funding in the next CSR. Should funding be secured a process of allocation will be devised at that point. I am determined that through the allocation process funding is utilised to provide the best value possible to sport and football in the North of Ireland.

Association Football Stadia: Funding

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what criteria will be used to determine the funding applications for the association football stadia; and if weight will be given to sporting needs, social needs and public access.

(AQW 11574/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Around £36m for football's strategic stadium needs at sub-regional level was endorsed by the Executive on 10 March 2011 on the basis that it should be taken forward as a priority area of spend in the next CSR period (2015). The IFA (with the help of Sport NI) are working on a Strategic Outline Case outlining the areas where sub-regional funding might be required. Funding has still to be secured for sub-regional development therefore allocation criteria have yet to be developed.

Sport NI: Staff

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the number and grade; and (ii) the salary cost of SportNI staff appointed to the team supporting the Programme Director of the Regional Stadium Development Programme; and to detail the recruitment or appointment process.

(AQW 11601/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: There are 6 Sport NI staff in the team currently supporting the programme director, 2 at Deputy Principle grade, 3 at Staff Officer grade and 1 at Executive Officer II grade. The total salary cost of these staff is £227, 793 not including National Insurance or Employer Pension contributions. Arrangements are in hand to move these staff from the SportNI stadium team to DCAL.

Apprenticeship Programmes

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the apprenticeship programmes available within her Department; (ii) the apprenticeship programmes provided by her Department; (iii) the number of people currently enrolled in these programmes; and (iv) the number of places available on the programmes.

(AQW 12008/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Programme-Led Apprenticeship (PLA) programme was introduced by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) in September 2009, as an intervention measure to assist young people who have been unable to find employment as apprentices during the economic downturn. NICS Departments contribute by providing work placements for

participants on the PLA programme. While DCAL does not currently provide placements my Department remains committed to providing work placements for participants on the PLA programme.

Foras na Gaeilge

Mr Hussey asked Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (i) why Foras na Gaeilge has acquired the services of a public relations agency when it already has a press officer; (ii) whether she was consulted in advance of the arrangement being agreed; and (iii) what is the total value of the contract.

(AQW 12188/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: At present Foras na Gaeilge does not have a press officer in post within its organisation.

Sponsor Department Ministers were not informed by Foras na Gaeilge about its intention to engage a public relations agency. It is not normal practice to inform Ministers about operational matters.

Foras na Gaeilge has advised that the total value of the contract is €78,408 over a 12-month period (from 1 November 2011 to 31 October 2012).

Cultural Gifts Scheme

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, given that she is due to be given the power to decide whether an object should be accepted under the proposed Cultural Gifts Scheme, whether she has any plans to issue Northern Ireland specific guidance on the definition of 'pre-eminent property'.

(AQW 12203/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As you will be aware the Westminster Government is proposing to introduce a Cultural Gift Scheme which is intended to encourage a culture of philanthropy and charitable giving.

Offers to donate an object which is 'pre-eminent' or associated with an historic building will initially be made to the Arts Council England. A panel of expert advisors will consider if the object is pre-eminent and make a recommendation to me if the object is of interest to the north of Ireland. I will then determine if the object is significant enough to be accepted under the Scheme.

I am of the opinion that, as the Westminster Legislation clearly defines what 'pre-eminent property' is, there is no need to issue specific guidance for the north of Ireland. The exact definition is attached at Annex A.

Department of Education

Ebrington Primary School and Foyle College: Newbuilds

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Education when he will make an announcement on capital projects, such as the new builds for Ebrington Primary School and Foyle College, Londonderry.

(AQW 11458/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): As you will be aware the work on area planning is being taken forward at this time and will in due course identify priorities for capital investment. However, in the interim I recognise there is a need to ensure capital funding is utilised to improve the schools estate.

Therefore I have asked officials to consider an interim process for the identification of major school projects, which are consistent with and supportive of the Area Planning work and in which capital investment can be made in the coming period.

I would hope to be in the position to confirm an interim capital investment plan before the summer. Until then I cannot comment on any individual school proposal.

Education: Parental Preference

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education whether the results of the cross-border survey that he is undertaking jointly with the Dublin Government's Minister for Education and Skills, will be used to inform wider consideration within his Department in relation to measuring parental preference.

(AQW 11665/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The results from the cross border planning survey will allow both my Department and the Department of Education and Skills to understand the practical impact of legislative and administrative changes which would render schools more accessible to residents on both sides of the border in response to parental preference. The survey results should enable effective estimations of immediate demand from parents to inform school planning to meet local need.

Education and Library Board Areas: Enrolment

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the total maximum enrolment number in each Education and Library Board area, in each of the last three years, broken down by (a) year group; and (b) sector; and (ii) how this compares with the total maximum enrolment number for the 2012/13 academic year.

(AQW 11765/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The maximum (i.e. approved) enrolment number in each Education and Library Board broken down by sector (i.e. management type) for the 2009/10 to 2012/13 school years are detailed in the tables below.

It should be noted that schools are set a maximum approved admissions number for year 1 (primary schools) and year 8 (post primary schools) only; these are also detailed in the attached tables. So long as a school does not exceed its approved enrolment number there is no restriction on the number of children in other year groups (other than years 1 and 8). It is for this reason that the Department does not hold any data in relation to the number of places available in any school broken down by year group.

Approved Admissions and Enrolments in Primary Schools 2009/10 to 2012/13 by Education and Library Board and School Management Type

2009/10

Management type	Education and Library Board																
	Belfast			Western			North Eastern			South Eastern			Southern			Total	
	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	
Controlled	2,354	14,920	1,654	11,635	4,192	29,462	3,758	25,927	2,651	18,585	2,651	18,585	14,609	100,529			
Catholic Maintained	2,431	17,212	3,905	27,849	2,159	15,300	2,098	14,585	3,923	27,906	3,923	27,906	14,516	102,852			
Other Maintained	201	1,367	93	496	81	378	33	232	94	581	94	581	502	3,054			
Controlled Integrated	84	588	9	63	233	1,673	217	1,588	20	140	20	140	563	4,052			
Grant Maintained Integrated	87	609	144	1,073	186	1,309	171	1,147	193	1,219	193	1,219	781	5,357			
Total	5,157	34,696	5,805	41,116	6,851	48,122	6,277	43,479	6,881	48,431	6,881	48,431	30,971	215,844			

2010/11

Education and Library Board												
Management type	Belfast		Western		North Eastern		South Eastern		Southern		Total	
	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol
Controlled	2,246	14,101	1,654	11,635	4,153	29,128	3,772	26,021	2,652	18,632	14,477	99,517
Catholic Maintained	2,425	17,213	3,892	27,777	2,152	15,240	2,092	14,570	3,910	27,671	14,471	102,471
Other Maintained	202	1,388	93	521	93	446	33	232	94	582	515	3,169
Controlled Integrated	84	588	9	63	233	1,673	217	1,589	20	140	563	4,053
Grant Maintained Integrated	87	609	153	1,109	186	1,312	178	1,224	197	1,244	801	5,498
Total	5,044	33,899	5,801	41,105	6,817	47,799	6,292	43,636	6,873	48,269	30,827	214,708

2011/12

Education and Library Board												
Management type	Belfast		Western		North Eastern		South Eastern		Southern		Total	
	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol
Controlled	2,201	13,795	1,646	11,589	4,096	28,800	3,739	25,809	2,663	18,713	14,345	98,706
Catholic Maintained	2,289	16,194	3,900	27,802	2,152	15,247	2,050	14,253	3,926	27,737	14,317	101,233
Other Maintained	202	1,379	105	550	96	469	33	232	106	624	542	3,254
Controlled Integrated	84	588	9	63	286	2,047	225	1,630	20	140	624	4,468
Grant Maintained Integrated	87	609	153	1,119	186	1,309	178	1,240	197	1,249	801	5,526
Total	4,863	32,565	5,813	41,123	6,816	47,872	6,225	43,164	6,912	48,463	30,629	213,187

2012/13

Management type	Education and Library Board											
	Belfast		Western		North Eastern		South Eastern		Southern		Total	
	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol
Controlled	2,235	14,057	1,650	11,618	4,133	29,067	3,723	25,739	2,675	18,721	14,416	99,202
Catholic Maintained	2,289	16,187	3,633	25,990	2,133	15,097	2,036	14,205	3,932	27,704	14,023	99,183
Other Maintained	202	1,414	108	550	96	533	36	232	113	630	555	3,359
Controlled Integrated	84	588	9	63	286	2,047	226	1,660	20	140	625	4,498
Grant Maintained Integrated	87	609	162	1,137	186	1,309	182	1,269	197	1,263	814	5,587
Total	4,897	32,855	5,562	39,358	6,834	48,053	6,203	43,105	6,937	48,458	30,433	211,829

Approved Admissions and Enrolments in Post-Primary Schools 2009/10 to 2012/13 by Education and Library Board and School Management Type

2009/10

Management type	Education and Library Board											
	Belfast		Western		North Eastern		South Eastern		Southern		Total	
	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol
Controlled	1,063	6,320	1,147	6,695	2,761	15,685	2,092	11,842	2,836	12,277	9,899	52,819
Voluntary	2,080	14,556	1,196	8,660	1,343	9,170	981	6,870	1,288	8,545	6,888	47,801
Catholic Maintained	1,545	9,449	2,274	12,650	1,392	7,615	992	5,210	2,430	13,374	8,633	48,298
Other Maintained	100	585	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	100	585
Controlled Integrated	0	0	0	0	225	1,135	245	1,300	90	450	560	2,885
Grant Maintained Integrated	270	1,590	296	1,780	360	2,220	440	2,580	170	1,000	1,536	9,170

Education and Library Board												
Management type	Belfast		Western		North Eastern		South Eastern		Southern		Total	
	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol
Total	5,058	32,500	4,913	29,785	6,081	35,825	4,750	27,802	6,814	35,646	27,616	161,558

2010/11

Education and Library Board												
Management type	Belfast		Western		North Eastern		South Eastern		Southern		Total	
	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol
Controlled	953	5,760	1,147	6,695	2,751	15,685	2,016	11,422	2,836	12,277	9,703	51,839
Voluntary	2,080	14,556	1,191	8,590	1,253	8,560	981	6,855	1,283	8,525	6,788	47,086
Catholic Maintained	1,545	9,419	2,264	12,540	1,340	7,465	992	5,210	2,396	13,269	8,537	47,903
Other Maintained	100	585	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	100	585
Controlled Integrated	0	0	0	0	225	1,135	245	1,300	90	450	560	2,885
Grant Maintained Integrated	270	1,625	296	1,780	360	2,220	440	2,580	170	1,000	1,536	9,205
Total	4,948	31,945	4,898	29,605	5,929	35,065	4,674	27,367	6,775	35,521	27,224	159,503

2011/12

Education and Library Board												
Management type	Belfast		Western		North Eastern		South Eastern		Southern		Total	
	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol
Controlled	944	5,760	1,093	6,445	2,751	15,765	2,016	11,422	2,826	12,327	9,630	51,719
Voluntary	2,076	14,556	1,191	8,570	1,253	8,560	981	6,855	1,308	8,560	6,809	47,101

Education and Library Board												
Management type	Belfast		Western		North Eastern		South Eastern		Southern		Total	
	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol
Catholic Maintained	1,543	9,394	2,264	12,535	1,340	7,465	992	5,210	2,496	13,694	8,635	48,298
Other Maintained	100	585	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	100	585
Controlled Integrated	0	0	0	0	225	1,135	245	1,300	90	450	560	2,885
Grant Maintained Integrated	270	1,625	296	1,780	360	2,220	440	2,580	170	1,000	1,536	9,205
Total	4,933	31,920	4,844	29,330	5,929	35,145	4,674	27,367	6,890	36,031	27,270	159,793

2012/13

Education and Library Board												
Management type	Belfast		Western		North Eastern		South Eastern		Southern		Total	
	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol	App Adm	App Enrol
Controlled	899	5,508	1,093	6,445	2,751	15,765	2,016	11,422	2,836	12,327	9,595	51,467
Voluntary	2,046	14,556	1,191	8,570	1,253	8,560	981	6,855	1,308	8,560	6,779	47,101
Catholic Maintained	1,543	9,394	2,264	12,535	1,340	7,465	992	5,210	2,497	13,759	8,636	48,363
Other Maintained	100	585	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	100	585
Controlled Integrated	0	0	0	0	225	1,135	245	1,300	90	450	560	2,885
Grant Maintained Integrated	270	1,625	296	1,780	360	2,220	440	2,580	170	1,000	1,536	9,205
Total	4,858	31,668	4,844	29,330	5,929	35,145	4,674	27,367	6,901	36,096	27,206	159,606

Notes:

1. App Adm = Approved Admissions Number

2 App Enrol = Approved Enrolment Number

Source:

3 School Access Team

Schools: Spending

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, in the light of the recent Public Accounts Committee report which stated that the systems for checking school spending were not robust enough, whether he intends to review the current practice in Northern Ireland as a matter of urgency.

(AQW 11997/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: We are always seeking to ensure improved accountability. Administrative and funding structures differ greatly with England, however if there are any similarities to the North of Ireland we will ensure that any relevant lessons learned and good practice are accommodated.

Nursery Provision

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, given that 92 percent of nursery schools inspected are rated as good to outstanding, whether he is considering an extension of nursery provision as a means of raising standards when reviewing the 0-6 strategy.

(AQW 11998/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I wish to ensure that the revised Early Years 0-6 Strategy has a specific focus on raising standards. Pre School provision currently operates as a partnership between the statutory and voluntary/private sectors and I have recently restated my commitment to this mixed pattern of provision which has many strengths.

Recent reports by the Chief Inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) highlight strengths and improving standards in both the statutory and voluntary/private sectors. The ETI plays an important role not only in measuring and monitoring standards uniformly across both sectors but also, through the Together Towards Improvement quality indicators, encourages continuous self-evaluation aimed at raising standards across all funded early years provision.

While quality has been improving in the voluntary/private sector, the 2006-08 and 2008-10 Chief Inspector Reports and the Audit Office report on the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme, published in June 2009, highlighted the effect the lower per place funding allocation in the voluntary/private sector could have on the quality of provision.

In April I announced that an additional £1.3m will be available on a recurrent basis to voluntary and private providers, which equates to £150 per funded place, in order to maintain and sustain rising standards in the voluntary/private sector.

In addition, I continue to invest in and expand statutory nursery provision where and when appropriate. However, each development proposal for the establishment of new provision must be carefully considered on the basis of all the information pertinent to the individual case.

Whilst I recognise the important role of statutory nursery provision, in revisiting the strategy I intend to focus on the needs of the child, rather than particular sectors.

Education and Library Board Areas: Health and Safety Training Courses

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 11289/11-15, for each of the last three years, to detail the health and safety training courses available and the number of participants, broken down by Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 12027/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information requested is as follows:

Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB)

Course Title	Participants 2009/10	Participants 2010/11	Participants 2011/12
Abrasive Wheels	-	-	13
Circular Saw	14	-	17
Circular Saw Refresher	33		29
Metal Turning	-	-	12
Mig Welding	-	-	10
Oxy-Acetylene Welding	-	-	4

South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB)

Course Title	Participants 2009/10	Participants 2010/11	Participants 2011/12
Abrasive Wheels	-	-	36
Abrasive Wheels Refresher	-	-	60
Circular Saw and Bandsaw	14	-	4
Circular Saw and Bandsaw Refresher	22	101	16

Southern Education and Library Board (SELB)

Course Title	Participants 2009/10	Participants 2010/11	Participants 2011/12
Abrasive Wheels Refresher	4	-	-
Circular Saw and Bandsaw (Wadkin)	-	12	-
Circular Saw and Bandsaw Refresher (Felder)	79	13	85
Circular Saw and Bandsaw Refresher (Wadkin)	-	60	25
General Workshop Maintenance for Technicians	13	-	-
Milling Machine	52	-	-
Woodturning Health and Safety Course	-	6	-

North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB)

The NEELB has not directly provided health and safety training; however, where schools have identified a need, the Board has outsourced the required training through the BELB, SEELB or SELB as most appropriate.

Western Education and Library Board (WELB)

The WELB did not provide any health and safety training courses over the last three years. The WELB is aware of its responsibilities in this area and has taken steps to meet its commitments in the past and will continue to do so in the future.

The NEELB's and the WELB's provision is currently under review.

Down District Council Area: School Buildings

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education how much was spent from the (i) capital; and (ii) recurrent budget on school buildings in each of the last five years in the Down District Council area. (AQW 12028/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Capital and recurrent expenditure on school buildings in each of the last 5 years in the Down District Council area is shown below:

	2007/08		2008/09		2009/10		2010/11		2011/12	
	Capital	Recurrent	Capital	Recurrent	Capital	Recurrent	Capital	Recurrent	Capital	Recurrent
Controlled	1,905,495	458,334	1,307,850	432,566	1,677,847	440,348	396,508	678,075	1,726,974	596,707
Maintained	1,718,478	552,691	1,645,472	601,338	579,925	1,242,146	778,950	712,325	2,487,273	617,279
VGS & GMI	(a) 4,706,234	N/K (b)	4,237,723	N/K	5,454,079	N/K	1,591,980	N/K	362,781	N/K
Total	8,330,207	1,011,025	7,191,045	1,033,904	7,711,851	1,682,494	2,767,438	1,390,400	4,577,028	1,213,986

(a) Furniture & Equipment required for Voluntary Grammar Schools and Grant Maintenance Integrated Schools is funded through the capital budget.

(b) Maintenance funding for Voluntary Grammar Schools and Grant Maintenance Integrated Schools forms part of schools' Local Management of School (LMS) block grant.

Capital and Recurrent Budget

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education how much was spent from the (i) capital; and (ii) recurrent budget on school buildings in the (a) controlled; and (b) maintained sectors in each of the last five years, in the Down District Council area. (AQW 12029/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Capital and recurrent expenditure in the controlled and maintained sector in each of the last 5 years in the Down District Council area is shown below:

	2007/08		2008/09		2009/10		2010/11		2011/12	
	Capital	Recurrent	Capital	Recurrent	Capital	Recurrent	Capital	Recurrent	Capital	Recurrent
Controlled	1,905,495	458,334	1,307,850	432,566	1,677,847	440,348	396,508	678,075	1,726,974	596,707
Maintained	1,718,478	552,691	1,645,472	601,338	579,925	1,242,146	778,950	712,325	2,487,273	617,279

Investment Delivery Plan

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the current status of the new builds for the schools that were fully compliant in the Investment Delivery Plan.

(AQW 12032/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In answering this question it has been assumed that you are referring to the Review of Major Capital Projects completed in June 2010, which assessed all capital projects in the IDP against the Sustainable Schools Policy criteria. The objective was to ensure that the proposals remained consistent with the Department's policy framework and hence viable and sustainable in the long term. Projects were categorised as fully compliant, partially compliant or non-compliant.

I would stress that this provided a snapshot at that point in time and informed the decision which led to the last capital announcement in August 2010. The current status of the new build projects for those schools classed as fully compliant projects at the time of the review are detailed in the table below.

Any decisions for new capital investment will be based on the information available now and will be informed by the area planning work currently being undertaken. However, in the interim there is a need to ensure capital funding is utilised to improve the schools estate.

Therefore I have asked my officials to consider an interim process for the identification of major school projects, which are consistent with and supportive of the Area Planning work and in which capital investment can be made in the coming period.

Name of School	Status
Taughmonagh Primary School, Belfast	New school completed, January 2012.
Victoria Park Primary School, Belfast	RIBA Stage A/B.
Holy Family Primary School, Magherafelt	RIBA Stage A/B.
Scoil na Fuisioige, Belfast	Construction work progressing on site.
St Colman's Primary School, Lambeg	Construction work progressing on site.
Dromore Central Primary School	RIBA Stage D.
Edendork Primary School, Dungannon	RIBA Stage C.
St Clare's and St Colman's Abbey Primary Schools, Newry	RIBA Stage C.
St Joseph's Convent Primary School, Newry	RIBA Stage D.
St Mary's Primary School Banbridge	RIBA Stage C.
Eglinton Primary School	RIBA Stage C.
Enniskillen Primary School	RIBA Stage C.
Omagh Integrated Primary School	RIBA Stage A/B.
St Conor's Primary School, Omagh	RIBA Stage C.
Colaiste Feirste, Belfast	RIAB Stage C.
Methodist College, Belfast	RIBA Stage A/B.
Strathearn Grammar, Belfast	Construction work progressing on site.
Victoria College, Belfast	RIBA Stage D
Ballymoney High School	RIBA Stage A/B.
Parkhall Integrated College, Antrim	RIBA Stage F/G
Rainey Endowed School, Magherafelt	RIBA Stage A/B.
Bangor Grammar	Construction work progressing on site.
Priory Integrated College/Hollywood Primary School / Hollywood Nursery School	RIBA Stage C.
St Patrick's Academy, Dungannon	RIBA Stage C.
Foyle College /Ebrington Primary School , Derry	RIBA Stage C.

Notes

The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) Work Stages are:

Preparation

A Appraisal

B Design Brief

Design

C Concept (initial sketch plans and costs)

D Design Development (final sketch plans and costs)

E Technical Design (detailed specifications)

Pre-Construction

F Production information (working drawings etc)

G Tender Documentation

H Tender Action

Construction

J Mobilisation

K Construction to Practical Completion

Early Years (0-6) Strategy: Consultation

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Education what strategies and projects his Department intends to introduce for early years provision following negative responses received to the consultation on the draft Early Years (0-6) Strategy.

(AQW 12043/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am currently considering the approach to the revised strategy and will indicate the way forward in due course.

I am committed to working with Ministerial colleagues to enhance the delivery of early years and early intervention services. I recently met with Minister Poots to discuss matters of common interest and we have agreed that officials will progress enhanced collaborative approaches to respective early years services for the benefit of children and their families, taking account of the emerging Delivering Social Change Framework which the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister leads on.

Early Years Strategy: Co-operation

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Education what co-operation his Department has had with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department for Social Development to progress an early years strategy.

(AQW 12044/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am currently considering the approach to the revised strategy and will indicate the way forward in due course.

I am committed to working with Ministerial colleagues to enhance the delivery of early years and early intervention services. I recently met with Minister Poots to discuss matters of common interest and we have agreed that officials will progress enhanced collaborative approaches to respective early years services for the benefit of children and their families, taking account of the emerging Delivering Social Change Framework which the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister leads on.

Northern Ireland Substitute Teacher Register

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 11287/11-15, whether (i) 99 percent of substitute teachers are employed via the Northern Ireland Substitute Teachers Register; or (ii) 99 percent of substitute teachers employed by schools are on the Northern Ireland Substitute Teachers Register.

(AQW 12099/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Substitute Teachers Register (NISTR) usage figure is ascertained by taking the total number of days/hours notified by schools in respect of substitute teachers in a given month and calculating the percentage notified via NISTR.

Northern Ireland Substitute Teacher Register

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 11287/11-15, to detail the timescale for the tender of the Northern Ireland Substitute Teachers Register.

(AQW 12101/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The current contract for the provision of NISTR runs to 31 March 2013. A procurement competition to award a contract for provision of the service thereafter will be run in the latter half of 2012.

Arm's-length Bodies/Non-departmental Public Body

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 11136/11-15, and given that the Office of National Statistics advice has been in place for some time, why he has chosen to change these bodies to non-departmental public bodies.
(AQW 12104/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In December 2011, the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) commissioned a review of Arms Length Bodies (ALBs) across all Departments. DFP asked Departments to review existing ALBs and provide details and supporting documentation for those bodies that had not previously been formally classified.

The Department of Education provided information to DFP in respect of four ALBs that had not previously been formally classified. Following the review of the documentation provided, DFP determined the category of each body and informed DE of their decision.

Education and Library Boards: Invoices

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Education which Education and Library Boards, when reporting the number of invoices paid within 10 days, counted the number of days that elapsed from the date the invoice was first received, and which ones used another date as the starting date.
(AQW 12183/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: When reporting the number of invoices paid within 10 days, all five Education and Library Boards count the number of days that elapse from: the date the invoice was first received at source whether that is the school or ELB office; or the date that a dispute was resolved.

Education and Library Boards: Invoices

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Education whether existing departmental guidance states that all Education and Library Boards, when reporting prompt payment performance figures, should count the days elapsed from the date an invoice is first received.
(AQW 12184/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Departmental guidance issued to Education and Library Boards (ELBs) states that prompt payment performance should be calculated from the date a valid invoice is first received or from the date that the goods or services are received, if later.

Education and Library Boards: Invoices

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Education (i) which Education and Library Boards submitted their 10-day prompt payment performance figures in line with Annex 4.6.3 of Managing Public Money, and reported figures on the basis of working days; and (ii) which Boards changed their reporting period from calendar days to working days.
(AQW 12186/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: (i) Since April 2010 all five Education and Library Boards (ELBs) have submitted their 10-day prompt payment performance figures in line with Annex 4.6.3 of Managing Public Money, reporting on the basis of working days. There was one exception during 2011-12, when one ELB submitted figures on the basis of calendar days for a period of three months. When this was identified, it was quickly rectified and the figures were accurately restated; and

(ii) All ELBs changed their reporting period from calendar days to working days from April 2010.

Sickness Absence

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of sickness absence in his Department in each of the last three years; and the agreed target rate of sickness as set out in any memoranda of understanding between his Department and the trade unions.
(AQW 12221/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The level of sickness absence in my Department is measured by the number of days lost due to sickness absence per full time equivalent member of staff. The Department of Finance and Personnel advises Departments of the agreed target rates of sickness absence. No other sickness absence targets are agreed with the trade unions by my Department.

My Department's sickness absence levels for the last three years are as follows:

- 2009/10 - an average of 10.5 days were lost against a target of 8.5 days.
- 2010/11 - an average of 8.3 days lost against a target of 9.9 days.
- 2011/12 absence statistics are not yet available, and will be published by the Statistics & Research Agency (NISRA) in September-October 2012

Ballyholland Primary School, Newry and St Peters Primary School, Bessbrook

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Education what steps he intends to take to allow a derogation in the admissions numbers for Ballyholland Primary School, Newry, and St Peters, Bessbrook to ensure that all local children obtain a P1 place.
(AQW 12238/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The purpose of a school's admissions number is to define precisely the degree to which a school can respond to parental preference. Such limits are very important in maintaining a viable schools estate. Variations to admissions numbers may, therefore, only be granted according to Department of Education policy for children who otherwise do not have a primary school place available to them within a reasonable distance of their home address.

The Southern Education and Library Board has advised that there are 2 children seeking a place in a maintained primary school in the Newry / Bessbrook area that are currently unplaced and that there are 114 places still available in maintained primary schools which serve pupils living in the area. As there is no shortage of Year 1 places in the Newry / Bessbrook area the Department cannot intervene to approve additional places at either Ballyholland Primary School, Newry or St Peters Primary School, Bessbrook for September 2012. The Department would urge the parents of both unplaced pupils to identify further preferences, from the list of schools with places available provided by the Southern Education and Library Board, to enable them to be placed as quickly as possible.

Academic Selection

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education what action his Department intends to take to assess schools in areas such as the north east coast where academic selection is not used to ascertain levels of achievement and levels of achievement of pupils on free school meals, and the benefits of not having selection.

(AQW 12249/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The latest school leaver survey (for 2010/11) indicates that pupils who are entitled to free school meals (FSME pupils) achieve less favourable outcomes when compared against pupils not entitled to free school meals (non-FSME pupils). Only 31.7% of FSME pupils obtained at least 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C including GCSEs in English and maths compared to 65.1% of non-FSME pupils.

Schools practising academic selection do not admit FSME pupils in the same proportion as schools not practising academic selection. The latest available figures (for 2011/12) show that grammar school enrolments include only 7.1% FSME pupils compared to 27.0% for non-grammar schools.

One of the benefits of not practising academic selection would be that pupils from all social backgrounds would increasingly be able to apply to a school on an equal footing. If schools oversubscribed with applications were to adopt the Department of Education's recommended first criterion for admission in greater numbers, it would help ensure the admission of a proportionate number of FSME pupils. This criterion involves schools guaranteeing a certain number of places for FMSE applicants, reflecting the percentage of FSME first preference applications within the total number of first preference applications.

South Eastern Education and Library Board: Enrolment

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the post-primary schools in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area that exceeded their approved enrolment number in each of the last three years.

(AQW 12253/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The post-primary schools in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area which have exceeded their approved enrolment number in the last three years are listed in the table attached. These can be schools which have exceeded their numbers with or without the prior approval of the Department.

Schools must seek prior approval of the Department to exceed their approved numbers by way of a temporary variation. Each year the Department completes an exercise to identify schools that have exceeded their approved numbers without prior approval. This exercise requires verified data from the school census and as such has not yet been completed for the 2011/12 school year. This means that there may be other schools that have exceeded their approved enrolment number in the 2011/12 school year of which the Department is not yet aware. If any such schools are discovered, the Department will investigate and can sanction the schools in question in a number of ways including the zero-rating of pupil(s) for LMS purposes or by reducing the admissions number of school in a subsequent school year.

SEELB Post Primary Schools - Exceeded Enrolment Numbers

2009/10 – 2011/12 School Years

2009/10 School Year	2010/11 School Year	2011/12 School Year
Glastry College	Glastry College	Glastry College
St Columbanus' College	St Columbanus' College	St Columbanus' College
Assumption Grammar School	Assumption Grammar School	Assumption Grammar School
St Patrick's Grammar School, Downpatrick	St Patrick's Grammar School, Downpatrick	St Patrick's Grammar School, Downpatrick
	Priory Integrated College	Priory Integrated College
	Our Lady & St Patrick's College, Knock	Strangford Integrated College

2009/10 School Year	2010/11 School Year	2011/12 School Year
		Down High School
		Lagan College
		Fort Hill Integrated College

South Eastern Education and Library Board: Enrolment

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the primary schools in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area that exceeded their approved enrolment number in each of the last three years.

(AQW 12254/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The primary schools in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area which have exceeded their approved enrolment number in the last three years are listed in the table attached. These can be schools which have exceeded their numbers with or without the prior approval of the Department.

Schools must seek prior approval of the Department to exceed their approved numbers by way of a temporary variation. Each year the Department completes an exercise to identify schools that have exceeded their approved numbers without prior approval. This exercise requires verified data from the school census and as such has not yet been completed for the 2011/12 school year. This means that there may be other schools that have exceeded their approved enrolment number in the 2011/12 school year of which the Department is not yet aware. If any such schools are discovered, the Department will investigate and can sanction the schools in question in a number of ways including the zero-rating of pupil(s) for LMS purposes or by reducing the admissions number of school in a subsequent school year.

SEELB Primary Schools - Exceeded Enrolment Numbers

2009/10 – 2011/12 School Years

2009/10 School Year	2010/11 School Year	2011/12 School Year
St Mary's PS, Dunsford	Rowandale Integrated PS	Rowandale Integrated PS
All Children's Integrated PS	All Children's Integrated PS	Crawfordsburn PS
Bangor Central Integrated PS	St Comgall's PS, Bangor	Kirkistown PS
Millennium Integrated PS	Kilmaine PS	

Preschool Places

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education how many children in the North Down area aged (i) two; (ii) three; and (iii) four are currently enrolled in a pre-school place.

(AQW 12255/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Information on the numbers of children aged 2 and aged 3 at 1 July 2011 in funded pre-school education located in the North Down constituency is detailed in the table below. Children aged 4 at 1 July 2011 are not included because these children will have attained compulsory school starting age.

Age of children in funded preschool provision in the North Down constituency 2011/12

School type	Aged 2	Aged 3	Total
Total	0	970	970

Source: School census

Note:

- Figures relate to children in funded places in voluntary and private pre-school centres, nursery schools, nursery units and in reception classes in primary schools located in the North Down constituency.
- Age is at 1 July 2011.
- Individual pupil age data are not collected for voluntary and private pre-school settings. Figures included in the total above relate to those children in funded places, who are assumed to be three years old as at 1 July.

South Eastern Education and Library Board: Enrolment

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the maximum enrolment number for each (i) primary school; and (ii) post-primary school in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 12257/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The maximum enrolment number for each primary school and post-primary school in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area for the 2011/12 school year are as detailed in the attached tables.

(i) South Eastern Education and Library Board Primary School Approved Enrolment Numbers

School Name	Approved Enrolment Number
McKinney Primary School	145
Ballycarrickmaddy Primary School	203
Largymore Primary School	232
Brownlee Primary School	196
Dunmurry Primary School	262
Lisburn Central Primary School	254
Seymour Hill Primary School	256
Tonagh Primary School	228
Ballyvester Primary School	109
Loughries Primary School	102
Grey Abbey Primary School	78
Carrickmannon Primary School	100
Newtownards Model Primary School	401
Kirkistown Primary School	125
Castle Gardens Primary School	420
Victoria Primary School	174
Portavogie Primary School	209
Ballywalter Primary School	199
Ballynahinch Primary School	438
Derryboy Primary School	95
Carr Primary School	100
Dundonald Primary School	625
Comber Primary School	409
Castlewellan Primary School	100
Gilnahirk Primary School	445
Anahilt Primary School	300
Dromara Primary School	203
Hollywood Primary School	523
Cregagh Primary School	203
Killyleagh Primary School	175
Crawfordsburn Primary School	221
Victoria Primary School	592

School Name	Approved Enrolment Number
Ballykeigle Primary School	76
Ballyholme Primary School	630
Donaghadee Primary School	466
Lisnasharragh Primary School	447
Clandeboyne Primary School	544
Knockbreda Primary School	225
Millisle Primary School	225
Braniel Primary School	408
Redburn Primary School	356
Newcastle Primary School	198
Moneyrea Primary School	200
Belvoir Park Primary School	370
Bloomfield Road Primary School	408
Cairnshill Primary School	583
Tullycarnet Primary School	552
Lead Hill Primary School	210
Carryduff Primary School	333
Grange Park Primary School	361
Alexander Dickson Primary School	145
Harmony Hill Primary School	588
Derriaghy Primary School	125
Knockmore Primary School	212
Kilcooley Primary School	567
Londonderry Primary School	368
Carrowdore Primary School	194
Rathmore Primary School	552
West Winds Primary School	232
Moira Primary School	390
Towerview Primary School	319
Spa Primary School	200
Andrews Memorial Primary School	531
Old Warren Primary School	305
Killowen Primary School	420
Kilmaine Primary School	615
Academy Primary School	375
Ballinderry Primary School	200
Downpatrick Primary School	200

School Name	Approved Enrolment Number
Killinchy Primary School	350
Abbey Primary School	610
Pond Park Primary School	598
Maghaberry Primary School	227
Ballymagee Primary School	406
Ballymacash Primary School	350
Brooklands Primary School	665
Riverdale Primary School	203
Meadow Bridge Primary School	290
Downshire Primary School, Hillsborough	558
Cumran Primary School	203
Glasswater Primary School	97
Ballymacward Primary School	145
Ballymacrickett Primary School	285
St Joseph's Primary School, Lisburn	395
St Joseph's Primary School, Downpatrick	76
Christ the King Primary School	197
St Malachy's Primary School, Downpatrick	69
St Caolan's Primary School, Ballynahinch	90
St Patrick's Primary School, Saul	174
St Francis Primary School, Drumaroad	73
St Joseph's Primary School, Crossgar	163
St Patrick's Primary School, Holywood	316
St Joseph's Primary School, Carryduff	436
St Mary's Primary School, Comber	75
St Joseph's Primary School, Newcastle	194
St Patrick's Primary School, Ballynahinch	332
St Patrick's Primary School, Castlewellan	95
St Mary's Primary School, Saintfield	87
St Mary's Primary School, Ardglass	81
St Bernard's Primary School, Belfast	446
St Mary's Primary School Aughlissnafin	166
St Joseph's Primary School, Strangford	91
St Macartan's Primary School, Downpatrick	185
St Anne's Primary School, Donaghadee	76
The Holy Family Primary School	195
St Finian's Primary School, Newtownards	233
St Patrick's Primary School, Portaferry	129

School Name	Approved Enrolment Number
St Mary's Primary School, Killyleagh	219
St Joseph's Primary School, Tyrella	115
St Brigid's Primary School, Downpatrick	266
St Aloysius Primary School, Lisburn	490
St Colman's Primary School, Lambeg	348
St Joseph's Primary School, Killough	112
St Malachy's Primary School, Kilcoo	165
St Luke's Primary School, Belfast	665
St Nicholas' Primary School, Ardglass	269
Sacred Heart Primary School	136
St Mark's Primary School, Dunmurry	611
St Comgall's Primary School, Bangor	290
St Malachy's Primary School, Bangor	437
St Colmcille's Primary School, Downpatrick	338
The Good Shepherd Primary School	823
St Mary's Primary School, Kircubbin	291
St Malachy's Primary School, Castlewellan	350
Legamaddy Primary School	202
St Kieran's Primary School, Poleglass	650
St Mary's Primary School, Portaferry	379
Our Lady Queen of Peace Primary School	348
Christ the Redeemer Primary School	570
St Mary's Primary School, Newcastle	420
St Ita's Primary School, Belfast	495
Our Lady & St Patrick Primary School	460
Scoil Na Fuiseoige	145
Bunscoil Bheanna Boirche	87
Kircubbin Integrated Primary School	152
Portaferry Integrated Primary School	101
Bangor Central Integrated Primary School	588
Annsborough Integrated Primary School	85
Glencraig Integrated Primary School	252
Fort Hill Integrated Primary School	240
All Childrens Integrated Primary School	212
Loughview Integrated Primary School	406
Cedar Integrated Primary School	196
Oakwood Integrated Primary School	203
Millennium Integrated Primary School	203

School Name	Approved Enrolment Number
Drumlins Integrated Primary School	116
Rowandale Integrated Primary School	116

(ii) South Eastern Education and Library Board Post-Primary School Approved Enrolment Numbers

School Name	2011/12 Approved Enrolment Number
Movilla High School	900
The High School, Ballynahinch	380
Nendrum College	400
Glastry College	600
Lisnagarvey High School	500
Saintfield High School	340
Knockbreda High School	600
Newtownbreda High School	850
Dunmurry High School	400
Laurelhill Community College	948
Dundonald High School	600
Bangor Academy and Sixth Form College	1420
St Mary's High School	600
St Columba's High School, Portaferry	520
St Colmcille's High School, Crossgar	450
St Columbanus' College, Bangor	500
St Colman's High School, Ballynahinch	550
St Patrick's High School, Lisburn	530
St Malachy's High School, Castlewellan	950
St Colm's High School, Twinbrook	680
De La Salle Secondary School, Downpatrick	430
Priory College	450
Fort Hill College	850
Lagan College	1200
Shimna Integrated College	480
Strangford Integrated College	500
Blackwater Integrated College	400
Regent House School	1450
Down High School	934
Glenlola Collegiate School	1100
Bangor Grammar School	900
Sullivan Upper School	1060
Friends' School	970

School Name	2011/12 Approved Enrolment Number
Wallace High School	1160
Assumption Grammar School, Ballynahinch	840
St Patrick's Grammar School, Downpatrick	665
Our Lady & St Patrick's College, Knock	1260

Post-primary Schools in North Antrim: Independent Counselling Service

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) whether every post-primary school in the North Antrim constituency has a key contact in the Independent Counselling Service for Schools; (ii) how many counsellors operate in the area; and (iii) how many children have been assisted by counsellors since (a) 2007; and (b) 2011.

(AQW 12279/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Independent Counselling Service for Schools (I.C.S.S.) has been available in grant-aided post primary schools since 2007. The service was extended to cover post primary aged pupils in special schools from January 2011 under a separate contract.

Every school has a key contact. The key contact is a member of a school's staff and is nominated by its Senior Management Team to be the main contact for the counsellor from the ICSS. There are 9 counsellors attached to the ICSS working across the 15 schools in the North Antrim constituency. Each school is allocated a named ICSS counsellor. Schools can supplement this service by buying in counselling support from other sources.

The Department holds records of the number of counselling sessions provided in each school rather than the number of pupils seen. Some 1630 sessions were provided across the 15 schools in each of the years, 2007 to 2011. As most young people receive on average 6 sessions this equates to at least 272 young people in each year who have received counselling support.

Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education whether he has had any meetings with the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, since May 2011; and what was the subject matter of each meeting.

(AQW 12298/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have not met with the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove since May 2011. However, I have requested a meeting to discuss changes to A Levels and hope to be in a position to meet prior to recess.

Irish-medium Schools

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 11685/11-15, how much was paid by each Education and Library Board for the renting of premises.

(AQW 12331/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I can advise that the Education and Library Boards have paid a total of £1,275,150.61 in the last 10 years for the renting of premises for Irish-medium schools, broken down as follows:

Board Area	Amount of Rent Paid (£)
Belfast	517,921.00
Western	273,979.48
North-Eastern	119,877.00
South-Eastern	38,939.92
Southern	324,433.21
Total	£1,275,150.61

Curriculum and Advisory Support Services

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the (i) number; and (ii) cost of officers employed in the Curriculum and Advisory Support Services in each Education and Library Board area, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 12337/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The number and cost of officers employed in the Curriculum and Advisory Support Services in each Education and Library Board area, in each of the last five years is as follows:

BELB

Financial Year	Number of Staff (FTE)	Total Cost Of Staff £000
2007/08	68.4	2937
2008/09	68.64	3224
2009/10	71.54	3318
2010/11	77.02	3428
2011/12	64.65	2831

WELB

Financial Year	Number of Staff (Head Count)	Total Cost of Staff
2007/08	101	£3,395,915
2008/09	105	£3,615,097
2009/10	107	£3,651,542
2010/11	84	£3,263,393
2011/12	57	£2,152,848

NEELB

Financial Year	Number of Staff (FTE)	Total Cost of Staff
2007/08	69.96	£3,010,760
2008/09	50.8	£3,529,630
2009/10	80.7	£3,726,260
2010/11	66.9	£3,046,142
2011/12	38.7	£1,774,638

SEELB

Financial Year	Number of Staff (FTE)	Total Cost of Staff
2007/08	70	£2,823,780
2008/09	71	£2,779,240
2009/10	67	£2,998,069
2010/11	63	£3,297,088
2011/12	33	£1,977,417

SELB

Financial Year	Number of Staff (Head Count)	Total Cost of Staff
2007/08	100	£3,831,000
2008/09	96	£4,212,000
2009/10	99	£4,100,000
2010/11	96	£4,135,000
2011/12	67	£3,281,000

Redundancy Payments in Arm's-length Bodies

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education how much has been spent on redundancy payments in each of his Department's arm's-length bodies, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 12340/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The cost of redundancies for the last 3 financial years is as follows:

Organisation	Year	Cost
Belfast Education and Library Board	2009/10	£20,000
	2010/11	£3,003,000
	2011/12	£767,000
Western Education and Library Board	2009/10	Nil
	2010/11	£1,410,983
	2011/12	£3,041,250
North Eastern Education and Library Board	2009/10	£8,340
	2010/11	£1,436,417
	2011/12	£2,135,961
South Eastern Education and Library Board	2009/10	Nil
	2010/11	£1,445,102
	2011/12	£1,174,093
Southern Education and Library Board	2009/10	£46,000
	2010/11	£3,342,000
	2011/12	£2,390,000
Council Catholic Maintained Schools	2009/10	Nil
	2010/11	£460,000
	2011/12	£687,516
Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment	2009/10	Nil
	2010/11	£1,181,886
	2011/12	£674,732
Staff Commission	2009/10	Nil
	2010/11	£119,734
	2011/12	Nil
Youth Council	2009/10	Nil
	2010/11	£114,000
	2011/12	Nil

Organisation	Year	Cost
Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta	2009/10	Nil
	2010/11	Nil
	2011/12	Nil
Council for Integrated Education	2009/10	£43,186
	2010/11	Nil
	2011/12	Nil

Arm's-length Bodies and Quangos: Remuneration

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education to detail the current total annual cost of remuneration for board members at his Department's arm's-length bodies and quangos.

(AQW 12357/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The current total annual cost of remuneration for board members at my Departments arm's-length bodies are detailed in the following table. These figures relate to the 2011-12 financial year.

Arm's-Length Body	Annual Cost of Remuneration 2011-12
Belfast Education & Library Board	Chair - £10,000 per annum
Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta	N/A
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools	N/A
Exceptional Circumstances Body	£64,920
General Teaching Council	N/A
Middletown Centre for Autism Ltd	Chair - £230 per day Board Members - £160 per day
Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment	N/A
Council for Integrated Education (NICIE)	N/A
North Eastern Education & Library Board	Chair - £10,000 per annum
South Eastern Education & Library Board	£ 62,328
Southern Education & Library Board	Chair - £10,000 per annum
Staff Commission for Education and Library Boards	Chair - £6,501 per annum
Western Education & Library Board	Chair - £10,000 per annum
Youth Council	£19,663

Area-based Planning

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education how many formal meetings (i) each Education and Library Board; and (ii) the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools have had with (a) the Council for Integrated Education; and (b) Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta in relation to Area Based Planning.

(AQW 12421/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education and Library Boards have a statutory responsibility to ensure that there are sufficient schools in their area for providing primary and secondary education. The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) has a statutory responsibility to promote and co-ordinate the planning of the maintained estate.

The Terms of Reference for the area planning process which I have commissioned, and associated Guidance, require the Boards and CCMS to engage with each other, and with the other school sectors – integrated, Irish-medium and Voluntary Grammar - throughout the process.

The Department does not monitor their engagement with the other school sectors; however, when the area plans for the post-primary phase are issued for consultation in July, they will report the extent of that engagement.

Area-based Planning

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education how many times the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and the Education and Library Boards have met formally to discuss Area Based Planning.

(AQW 12422/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education and Library Boards have a statutory responsibility to ensure that there are sufficient schools in their area for providing primary and secondary education. The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) has a statutory responsibility to promote and co-ordinate the planning of the maintained estate.

The Terms of Reference for the area planning process which I have commissioned, and associated Guidance, require the Boards and CCMS to engage with each other, and with the other school sectors – integrated, Irish-medium and Voluntary Grammar - throughout the process.

The Department does not monitor their engagement with the other school sectors; however, when the area plans for the post-primary phase are issued for consultation in July, they will report the extent of that engagement.

Area-based Planning

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education how many times the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the Education and Library Boards, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and the Council for Integrated Education have met formally to discuss Area Based Planning.

(AQW 12423/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education and Library Boards have a statutory responsibility to ensure that there are sufficient schools in their area for providing primary and secondary education. The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) has a statutory responsibility to promote and co-ordinate the planning of the maintained estate.

The Terms of Reference for the area planning process which I have commissioned, and associated Guidance, require the Boards and CCMS to engage with each other, and with the other school sectors – integrated, Irish-medium and Voluntary Grammar - throughout the process.

The Department does not monitor their engagement with the other school sectors; however, when the area plans for the post-primary phase are issued for consultation in July, they will report the extent of that engagement.

Free School Meals

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the use of entitlement number to free school meals as an indicator of social need: and whether he is considering any alternative measurements.

(AQW 12427/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department remains content that that entitlement for free school meals (FSME) is an effective indicator of social need 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.

When appropriate, alternative measures of deprivation are used by my Department. For example, the Multiple Deprivation Measure and Neighbourhood Renewal Areas are used in relation to a number of its programmes such as Extended Schools and SureStart.

Numeracy and Literacy Levels

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education for an update on the numeracy and literacy levels of children leaving primary school.

(AQW 12433/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Over the past five years, there has been an improvement in the percentage of pupils achieving the expected level for Key Stage 2 Communication in English and in Key Stage 2 Maths. Between 2006/07 and 2010/11, the percentage of pupils achieving the expected level in Communication in English increased from 78.0% to 82.4%; and the percentage of pupils achieving the expected level in Maths increased from 79.5% to 82.9%. For pupils educated through the medium of Irish, the percentage achieving the expected level in Communication in Irish has increased from 83.1% in 2006/07 to 88.2% in 2010/11.

However, while this improvement in literacy and numeracy standards amongst primary school leavers is encouraging, nearly one-fifth of our primary school pupils transfer to post-primary school without adequate literacy and numeracy skills. In addition, the outcome of PISA 2009, the Programme for International Student Assessment, organised by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) showed that the achievement of pupils in the north of Ireland in reading and maths was not statistically different from the OECD average.

I am continuing to implement a coherent set of policies designed to improve educational outcomes for young people and to address the root causes when pupils are not achieving to their full potential. These policies include Count, read: succeed – a Strategy to Improve Outcomes in Literacy and Numeracy which aims to raise overall standards of attainment and close achievement gaps that exist. The strategy sets out the central role of teachers, supported by parents and school leaders, in their work to raise standards. It stresses the importance of effective leadership; having high expectations for all pupils; high quality teaching and learning; and early intervention to address underachievement.

I also want to stress the value of education and work with local communities to ensure that young people receive positive messages about the importance of doing well at school and are encouraged to have high expectations.

St Peter's High School, Derry

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Education, in relation to children being offered post-primary places at St. Peter's High School, Derry in 2012 when the school is recommended for closure, (i) when the consultation process on the future of St. Peter's ends; (ii) for his assessment of prospective pupils being left in limbo over the summer period without having finalised plans for their post-primary education from September 2012; and (iii) in the event of the closure of the school, whether the capacity at St. Joseph's College will be increased to accommodate the greater demand.

(AQW 12443/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: On 15 May 2012, the Western Education and Library Board (WELB), at the request of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, published Development Proposal (DP) No. 229, proposing that St Peter's High School would close, on a phased basis, from 31 August 2012, or as soon as possible thereafter. The two-month statutory objection period which follows publication will end on 16 July 2012.

The proposal is that the school will not admit any pupils to Year 8 or 11 for the 2012/13 school year and that the school will close with effect from 31 August 2013.

Whilst no assessment of the proposal can take place until the end of the 2-month statutory period on 16 July, I understand that there is surplus capacity at other maintained schools within the area but there is currently no proposal to increase capacity at St Joseph's College.

The Catholic Commission for Education (NICCE) strategic report on the review of catholic maintained post-primary provision outlines the Commission's proposals for provision throughout the Derry City area and can be viewed at <http://www.pprce.org/>. These proposals are also reflected in the Western Education and Library Board draft area plan.

Catholic Maintained Schools: Appointment of Teachers

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Education for his Department's assessment of section 7.6.10 of the Scheme for the Appointment of Teachers in Catholic Maintained Schools that all relevant documentation will be retained for two years; and whether this complies with Articles 6 and 12 of The Limitation (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 and the requirement for the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools to keep adequate records for the minimum limitation periods.

(AQW 12505/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: CCMS have determined that 2 years is an appropriate time period for the personal records associated with recruitment and selection exercises to be retained. This complies with the Employment Practice Code issued through the Information Commissioner's Office.

North Eastern Education and Library Board: Leak

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the leak from the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB), that led to local newspapers publishing the proposed Area Plan for Ballymena before it was presented to the NEELB Board.

(AQW 12506/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am disappointed that draft area plans prepared by the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) Area Plan have been obtained by newspapers; the making available of such plans before they have received the required approval from the Board or the Department and are published for consultation is detrimental to the ongoing area planning process and may cause anxiety among the affected schools, pupils and parents.

With regard to security of information, the area plans are Education and Library Board documents and the respective Boards are responsible for the security and dissemination of the information in them. Where a leak is suspected, the affected Board should establish what information has been disclosed and undertake an impact assessment to determine options for consideration. Any decision on further action rests with the relevant Chief Executive, taking into account that proportionality is a key factor.

The Department is not actively considering proposals in relation to Ballee Community High School or Cambridge House Grammar School at this time.

When area planning proposals are published, I would urge parents, pupils and the public to consider them fully. I want an estate shaped by the needs of our young people, not the needs of institutions, and I do not want this debate to be dominated by those who are afraid of change.

Every child deserves high quality education and I am determined through the process of area planning that we will have a network of strong viable schools delivering high quality education for all pupils.

North Eastern Education and Library Board: Leak

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Education what action he is taking to address the number of leaks from the North Eastern Education and Library Board in the last two months in regard to the Area Plan.

(AQW 12507/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am disappointed that draft area plans prepared by the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) Area Plan have been obtained by newspapers; the making available of such plans before they have received the required approval from the Board or the Department and are published for consultation is detrimental to the ongoing area planning process and may cause anxiety among the affected schools, pupils and parents.

With regard to security of information, the area plans are Education and Library Board documents and the respective Boards are responsible for the security and dissemination of the information in them. Where a leak is suspected, the affected Board should establish what information has been disclosed and undertake an impact assessment to determine options for consideration. Any decision on further action rests with the relevant Chief Executive, taking into account that proportionality is a key factor.

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Every child deserves high quality education and I am determined through the process of area planning that we will have a network of strong viable schools delivering high quality education for all pupils.

North Eastern Education and Library Board: Leak

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Education what action he will take to address the negative publicity that Ballee Community High School and Cambridge House Grammar School have received in regard to the North Eastern Education and Library Boards Area Plans being leaked to local newspapers.

(AQW 12509/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am disappointed that draft area plans prepared by the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) Area Plan have been obtained by newspapers; the making available of such plans before they have received the required approval from the Board or the Department and are published for consultation is detrimental to the ongoing area planning process and may cause anxiety among the affected schools, pupils and parents.

With regard to security of information, the area plans are Education and Library Board documents and the respective Boards are responsible for the security and dissemination of the information in them. Where a leak is suspected, the affected Board should establish what information has been disclosed and undertake an impact assessment to determine options for consideration. Any decision on further action rests with the relevant Chief Executive, taking into account that proportionality is a key factor.

The Department is not actively considering proposals in relation to Ballee Community High School or Cambridge House Grammar School at this time.

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Transfer Tests

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the estimated (a) revenue raised from; and (b) cost of, the AQE and GL transfer tests; and (ii) where any surplus money is spent or deficit is obtained.

(AQW 12549/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information requested is not held by the Department of Education as it relates to unregulated entrance tests which are operated independent of the Department and in contravention of policy on post-primary transfer.

Department for Employment and Learning

Equality Commission's Report 'Trends in Community Proportions of Applications and Appointments to the Private and Public Sectors'

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what response his Department will be making to the Equality Commission's publication, 'Trends in Community Proportions of Applications and Appointments to the Private and Public Sectors' (March 2012), particularly in so far as it shows a lower success rate for Protestant applicants for jobs in the private sector throughout the last decade.

(AQW 11939/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): It is not normal practice for my Department to respond to individual research reports which it has not commissioned. This report adds to the evidence base on employment equality issues. As such, it may be used by my Department in future equality screening and impact assessment of relevant policies.

Apprenticeship Programmes

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the apprenticeship programmes available within his Department; (ii) the apprenticeship programmes provided by his Department; (iii) the number of people currently enrolled in these programmes; and (iv) the number of places available on the programmes.

(AQW 12010/11-15)

Dr Farry: There is one apprenticeship programme in my Department in conjunction with the Department of Justice (DoJ) to deliver a pilot Apprenticeship programme for staff at Administrative Assistant and Administrative Officer grades. The programme was delivered between September 2010 and June 2011. Seven staff from DEL and eleven from DoJ took part, and all achieved the required elements of their Business Administration apprenticeship. The pending report on a NICS qualifications strategy will inform future use of the Business Administration Apprenticeship in NICS.

My Department also provides for the ApprenticeshipsNI training programme for those in employment. ApprenticeshipsNI provides participants with the opportunity to achieve an industry approved Level 2/Level 3 Apprenticeship Framework and is open to those who have reached school leaving age, are either entering or already in employment and contracted to work a minimum of 21 hours per week.

ApprenticeshipsNI training is delivered by contracted training suppliers throughout Northern Ireland and, as of 22 May 2012, there were 11,211 participants availing of this training opportunity. ApprenticeshipsNI is a demand-led provision and the number of apprenticeship places is determined by employers based on their business needs.

In terms of apprenticeship training for the unemployed, my Department introduced the Programme-Led Apprenticeship (PLA) programme in 2009 to assist young school leavers who have been unable to find the requisite employed status to train as an apprentice during the economic downturn. The programme provides a training guarantee of up to 104 weeks with participants following a level 2 Apprenticeship Framework, the same as is available under ApprenticeshipsNI. Participants can transfer to the employer-led ApprenticeshipsNI programme and continue with their training on securing employment. As of 22 May 2012, there were 4,869 young people undertaking a programme-led apprenticeship.

Review of Public Administration

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what powers or functions he plans to devolve to local councils under the Review of Public Administration; and whether this represents a change to his previous commitments.

(AQW 12060/11-15)

Dr Farry: I have no plans to devolve any powers or functions to local councils under the Review of Public Administration. This is consistent with earlier commitments by former DEL Ministers.

Arm's-length Bodies: Board Members

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many former senior civil servants, from deputy secretary grade to permanent secretary grade, serve on the boards of his Department's arm's length bodies in a (i) paid; and (ii) unpaid capacity.

(AQW 12074/11-15)

Dr Farry: Two former civil servants at deputy secretary grade sit on boards of my Department's arms length bodies, both in an unpaid capacity.

Further Education Colleges: Pay Awards

Ms Gildernew asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, given that many workers in the public sector, with a salary of less than £21,000, have received a £250 pay award and that the management of the further education colleges has refused to award this sum to staff in this salary bracket, what action he intends to take to address this issue.

(AQW 12150/11-15)

Dr Farry: Pay and conditions of all further education staff is a matter for each college Governing Body, in its capacity as the employing authority.

I am aware that non-teaching staff employed in the six further education colleges have contractual links to National Joint Council (NJC) pay agreements. I am advised that the NJC has chosen not to offer the award of £250 for those earning £21,000 or less, in line with established collective bargaining arrangements, for the 2011/12 year.

The college employers' decision not to offer this award aligns with the NJC position.

European Social Fund

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether any funding, under Priority 1 of the European Social Fund, was transferred to Priority 2; and if so, how much funding was transferred.

(AQW 12160/11-15)

Dr Farry: No funding, under Priority 1 of the Northern Ireland European Social Fund, was transferred to Priority 2.

European Social Fund: Appeals Mechanism

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether there was an appeal mechanism for unsuccessful applicants in the second round of the European Social Fund; and how much funding was set aside to allow for successful appeals.

(AQW 12167/11-15)

Dr Farry: There was an independent appeal mechanism for unsuccessful applicants in the second round of the European Social Fund. It is not normal practice to set aside funding in anticipation of successful appeals. If an appeal was successful, funding would be sought through in-year financial monitoring exercises.

Arm's-length Bodies and Quangos

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the current number of arm's-length bodies and quangos that are attached to his Department; and how this figure compares with the number in (i) 2008; (ii) 2009; (iii) 2010; and (iv) 2011.

(AQW 12227/11-15)

Dr Farry: There are currently fourteen bodies classified as NDPBs of the Department for Employment and Learning. From 2008 until October 2009, there were seven: three NDPBs, three tribunal NDPBs, and one non-executive advisory committee. Following the abolition of the latter in October 2009, there were six NDPBs until 1 April 2012, when the Office of National Statistics reclassified the six Further Education Colleges and the two University Colleges as NDPBs from an administrative perspective.

Further information may be found in the 'Public Bodies & Public Appointments Annual Report 2010-11', published by OFMDFM.

This is available from the Assembly Library under Reference number R351.41609 NOR.

Condition Management Programme

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what consideration he has given to extending the remit of the Condition Management Programme to the private sector.

(AQW 12260/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Condition Management Programme (CMP) was introduced as part of the Pathways to Work initiative in 2005. The programme is primarily aimed at improving the employability of Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) clients on incapacity-related benefits, such as Incapacity Benefit (IB), Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), Income Support (IS) based on incapacity and Severe Disablement Allowance (SDA). The programme has recently been extended to clients migrating from IB to Jobseekers Allowance (JSA).

The main objective of CMP is to assist in moving claimants from welfare to work. The service is delivered on behalf of DEL by health professional staff from the five Health and Social Care Trusts, including physiotherapists, Mental Health nurses and occupational therapists. DEL transfers funds to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) during the year to cover the staff costs of this cross-departmental service.

No plans exist at this time to extend CMP to the private sector. This is due to a combination of factors. Firstly, it is not in DEL's remit to provide an extended employee health and well-being service to private sector employers, and more significantly, the Department would not be resourced to do so.

Whilst DEL recognises that such a programme has the potential to help employees sustain employment or return to work following illness, this is something that should be explored and where, appropriate, introduced by employers as they see fit.

In the meantime, my Department, through the Disability Employment Service, will continue to manage and fund the Condition Management Programme to ensure it best meets the needs of its primary clients – those who are seeking to overcome health and disability related barriers to employment, and in doing so, move from welfare into work.

Arm's-length Bodies and Quangos: Remuneration

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the current total annual cost of remuneration for board members at his Department's arm's-length bodies and quangos.

(AQW 12358/11-15)

Dr Farry: During 2011/12, the total annual cost of remuneration for board members and chairs of my Department's arms-length bodies was approximately £109,500. This has been rounded up to reflect the total cost, had one of the Boards been at full complement.

Treehouse Kindergarten Crèche, Dungannon

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in relation to the recent closure of Treehouse Kindergarten Crèche in Dungannon, (i) what monitoring role his Department had in this facility; (ii) whether compensation will be made available to parents who paid in advance for a place for their children in the Crèche; (iii) whether compensation will be made available for the unpaid wages of staff; and (iv) what measures will be taken to provide extra childcare facilities in the area for the families who had used this facility.

(AQW 12450/11-15)

Dr Farry: The arrangements for crèche provision at the South West College were part of a Public Private Partnership (PPP) facilities management contract. In these circumstances the Department for Employment and Learning has no role in monitoring the crèche facilities in Dungannon FE campus. The crèche facilities were provided by a subcontractor who abandoned the facility with no forewarning.

Disputes between employers and staff in relation to unpaid wages are essentially a contractual matter to be resolved between the parties.

Parents who have paid in advance for services and staff who have not received wages can seek compensation from the crèche provider through the courts or Industrial Tribunals respectively.

The Private Sector provider is making every effort to put alternative arrangements in place as soon as possible and has identified a possible replacement. This process, however, is subject to stringent assurance arrangements such as statutory registration.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Public Bodies: Board Members

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many former civil and public servants are employed as (i) paid; and (ii) unpaid board members of public bodies which are sponsored by her Department; and what this figure is as a proportion of the total number of board members.

(AQW 11947/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): There are fifteen board members in a paid capacity who were civil/public servants, representing 36% of the total number of board members.

Hydraulic Fracturing

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 10517/11-15 and given that the geological characteristics of Co Fermanagh are unique, whether she will commission a study to assess the seismic hazards associated with hydraulic fracturing that will include (i) appropriate baseline seismic monitoring to establish background seismicity in the area; (ii) characterisation of any possible active faults in the region based on geological and geophysical data; and (iii) application of suitable ground motion prediction models to assess the potential impact of any induced earthquakes.

(AQW 12092/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department is currently awaiting the outcome of the consultation process on the experts' report into the induced seismicity associated with the hydraulic fracturing at the Preese Hall No. 1 well near Blackpool before making any decision on the seismic monitoring appropriate for County Fermanagh. DECC are not expected to publish their final recommendations until July, at the earliest.

Arm's-length Bodies: Board Members

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many former senior civil servants, from deputy secretary grade to permanent secretary grade, serve on the boards of her Department's arm's length bodies in a (i) paid; and (ii) unpaid capacity.

(AQW 12094/11-15)

Mrs Foster: There are two, both in a paid capacity.

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises: Improving Logistics

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to Aqw 10721/11-15, what discussions her Department has had with the Department for Regional Development on improving logistics solutions for small and medium-sized enterprises. **(AQW 12144/11-15)**

Mrs Foster: Invest NI has had no discussions with officials in the Department for Regional Development regarding improving logistics solutions for small and medium-sized enterprises.

Invest NI: Access to Finance Strategy

Mr Allister asked Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to Aqw 11547/11-15, and having regard to the constituency disparity in the uptake of the funds available within InvestNI's Access to Finance Strategy, for her assessment of whether the funds are being promoted equally; and what plans exist to secure greater equality of distribution.

(AQW 12176/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI's Access to Finance strategy provides a range of funding support for local SMEs throughout Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland Spin Out (NISPO) has been operational since 2009 and has conducted a series of regional roadshows throughout Northern Ireland, which have resulted in companies located in 17 out of the 18 Parliamentary Constituencies securing funding.

The Fund Manager makes investment decisions based on an independent evaluation of the quality of projects brought forward by businesses.

The second fund, Co-Fund NI has been open for applications since July last year and has made three investments to date. One large investment has skewed the figures at this stage.

Co-Fund NI does not seek investment opportunities but is dependent upon private investors regardless of location, who lead deals, bringing forward proposals.

There is absolutely no question of the funding not being promoted equally throughout Northern Ireland and all of the Funds are reliant on promoters bringing forward viable projects.

Hydraulic Fracturing: Correspondence

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to list all the outgoing correspondence that she, or her officials, have issued to outside organisations relating to the issue of hydraulic fracturing, since the beginning of 2012; and to detail (i) the date of the correspondence; (ii) the subject of the correspondence; and (iii) the name of the individual in the organisation to whom the correspondence was addressed.

(AQW 12209/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I refer the Member to the answer I gave to Aqw 11169/11-15.

Outgoing Correspondence

i) Date of correspondence	ii) Subject of correspondence	iii) Name of Individual/Organisation
05.01.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Irish News
18.01.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Fermanagh District Council
24.01.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
24.01.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Tamboran Resources Pty Ltd
09.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Fermanagh District Council
16.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Physicians, Scientists & Engineers for Healthy Energy
16.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
21.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
16.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
23.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
09.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
02.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
01.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public

i) Date of correspondence	ii) Subject of correspondence	iii) Name of Individual/Organisation
29.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
09.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
06.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
04.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
06.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
13.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
14.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	The Gateway Online
15.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	BBC
15.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
16.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
16.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
16.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
16.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
16.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
16.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
16.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
16.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
16.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
16.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public

i) Date of correspondence	ii) Subject of correspondence	iii) Name of Individual/Organisation
15.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
17.04.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Sligo County Council
23.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
23.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	BBC
12.04.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Leitrim County Council
06.04.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Rural Community Network West Fermanagh Positive Ageing Group
21.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Northern Ireland Co-Operative
12.04.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
18.04.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
26.04.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
04.05.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies
15.05.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Belfast Telegraph
15.05.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Northwest Telegraph
18.05.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
23.05.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
23.05.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
25.05.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public

Hydraulic Fracturing: Correspondence

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to list all the incoming correspondence that she, or her officials, have received from outside organisations relating to the issue of hydraulic fracturing, since the beginning of 2012; and to detail (i) the date of the correspondence; (ii) the subject of the correspondence; and (iii) the name of the individual in the organisation who contacted her or her officials.

(AQW 12210/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I refer the Member to the answer I gave to AQW 11169/11-15.

Incoming Correspondence

iv) Date of correspondence	v) Subject of correspondence	vi) Name of Individual/Organisation
05.01.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Irish News
13.01.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Fermanagh District Council
18.01.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
23.01.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Tamboran Resources Pty Ltd
09.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Fermanagh District Council
01.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Physicians, Scientists & Engineers for Healthy Energy
09.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
09.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
14.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
20.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
13.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public

iv) Date of correspondence	v) Subject of correspondence	vi) Name of Individual/Organisation
15.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
18.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
21.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
24.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
02.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
04.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.02.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Cross-Border Active Age Group
04.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
04.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
09.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
09.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
09.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
09.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
10.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
10.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
10.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
10.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
11.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
11.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
11.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public

iv) Date of correspondence	v) Subject of correspondence	vi) Name of Individual/Organisation
14.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
12.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Sligo County Council
12.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	The Gateway Online
15.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	BBC
17.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
23.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	BBC
29.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Leitrim County Council
21.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Rural Community Network West Fermanagh Positive Ageing Group
28.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Northern Ireland Co-Operative
12.04.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
26.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
26.03.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
19.04.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies
09.05.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
13.05.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
14.05.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Northwest Telegraph
15.05.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Belfast Telegraph
19.05.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public
20.05.12	Hydraulic Fracturing	Member of the Public

Arm's-length Bodies and Quangos

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the current number of arm's-length bodies and quangos that are attached to her Department; and how this figure compares with the number in (i) 2008; (ii) 2009; (iii) 2010; and (iv) 2011.

(AQW 12229/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The information sought for each year is set out in the last four editions of the OFMDFM Public Appointments Annual Report available from their website or via the following link:-

<http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/index/making-government-work/public-appointments/public-appointments-annual-reports.htm>

Arm's-length Bodies: Payroll

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether any employees of any of the Department's arm's-length bodies are working 'off payroll' so that their salaries are paid in such a way that they pay corporation tax rather than income tax.

(AQW 12240/11-15)

Mrs Foster: All employees of DETI's arm's length bodies are paid through payroll.

Promoted Jobs

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the criteria her Department uses to measure whether a job has been 'promoted'.

(AQW 12272/11-15)

Mrs Foster: To understand how the Department measures job promotions, one must understand the process through which it enters a contractual agreement with clients for offers of assistance.

Government grant support is offered at the start of a project based on a company commitment to create jobs.

As we do not expect to pay all of the investment costs to create new jobs, Invest NI will negotiate with the client to ensure that there is a significant investment from them in the project as well.

Based on these two matched financial commitments, the company will then contract with Invest NI to create an agreed quantity of jobs, which are referred to as "Promoted Jobs".

These commitments are then delivered over an agreed period of time and some may stretch for as long as five years. It is therefore important to point out that there is a lag between "promoted jobs", and the delivery of those by clients on the ground. However, these arrangements are monitored and managed by Invest NI and financial support is only released when commitments, including actual jobs created, have been met in line with the agreed plan.

Broadband Services

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how the set-up costs and running costs of Onwave broadband services compares with other broadband services.

(AQW 12296/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The current prices, as published on Onwave's website, indicate that the basic 6Mbps service costs £109.95 for installation and £39.95 per month thereafter. These prices compare favourably with similar products available in the market at this time.

The UK telecommunications market is fully competitive and it is proper that companies are free to set prices for these services as appropriate. The market is very dynamic and changes regularly and it is for consumers to compare costs and decide which products are most suitable for their needs.

North Coast: Visitor Numbers

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how visitor numbers to the North Coast are recorded; and how many people have visited the North Coast, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 12316/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Local authority visitor estimates for 2007 to 2009 (based on three year averages) were published by Northern Ireland Tourist Board and are available on <http://www.nitb.com/Document>

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) was commissioned to provide official statistics on visitor numbers and revenue on an NI-wide basis from 2010 onwards. NISRA is now working on establishing a robust method of estimating visitor numbers by local authority area for the period 2010 onwards.

Arm's-length Bodies and Quangos: Remuneration

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the current total annual cost of remuneration for board members at her Department's arm's-length bodies and quangos.

(AQW 12359/11-15)

Mrs Foster: This information is available from the most recent edition of the OFMDFM Public Appointments Annual Report available from their website or via the following link:-

<http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/index/making-government-work/public-appointments/public-appointments-annual-reports.htm>

Communications: Cost

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions she has had, in the last twelve months, with her counterpart in Dublin regarding improving efficiency and reducing the cost of communications, particularly postal and telecommunications, including roaming charges.

(AQW 12377/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I have had no discussions with my counterpart in Dublin over the last 12 months on improving efficiency and reducing the cost of postal and telecommunications including roaming charges.

Glenarm, Carnlough and the Glens of Antrim: Gas Supply

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether any natural gas companies have submitted a business plan for a gas supply in Glenarm, Carnlough and the Glens of Antrim.

(AQW 12393/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Utility Regulator has advised that they have not received a business plan from a natural gas company to take gas to Glenarm, Carnlough and the Glens of Antrim.

Any extension of the gas network must be economically viable, and is very dependent on there being sufficient gas loads in the proposed new areas.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Civil Servants

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many civil servants currently employed in his Department have been re-employed after receiving a redundancy package from the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

(AQW 11847/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): The Department currently employs 1 civil servant who was re-employed after receiving a redundancy package from the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Index of Multiple Deprivation 2010

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to list the areas included in the top 10 percent most deprived Super Output Areas on the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2010.

(AQW 11929/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The following table lists the 89, or 10 per cent, most deprived Super Output Areas in Northern Ireland with the associated rank of deprivation under the Multiple Deprivation Measure 2010.

Areas are ranked from 1 - the most deprived Super Output Area in Northern Ireland. A map showing the location of each Super Output Area is available at:

www.ninis.nisra.gov.uk/mapxtreme/InteractiveMaps/SOA_Deprivation_Map/atlas.html

Table: Ten per cent most deprived Super Output Areas (2010)

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Multiple Deprivation Measure 2010 Rank of Area (1 = most deprived)
Whiterock 2	Belfast	1
Whiterock 3	Belfast	2
Falls 2	Belfast	3
Falls 3	Belfast	4
New Lodge 1	Belfast	5
Shankill 2	Belfast	6
Crumlin 2	Belfast	7
Falls 1	Belfast	8
Ardoyne 3	Belfast	9
Creggan Central 1	Derry	10
Upper Springfield 3	Belfast	11
East	Strabane	12
Clonard 1	Belfast	13
New Lodge 2	Belfast	14
New Lodge 3	Belfast	15
Collin Glen 3	Lisburn	16
Twinbrook 2	Lisburn	17
Shankill 1	Belfast	18
Duncairn 1	Belfast	19
Upper Springfield 1	Belfast	20
Water Works 1	Belfast	21
Crumlin 1	Belfast	22

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Multiple Deprivation Measure 2010 Rank of Area (1 = most deprived)
Ballymacarrett 3	Belfast	23
Whiterock 1	Belfast	24
Shantallow West 2	Derry	25
The Diamond	Derry	26
Woodvale 3	Belfast	27
Strand 1	Derry	28
Shantallow West 1	Derry	29
Clonard 2	Belfast	30
Drumnamoe 1	Craigavon	31
Twinbrook 1	Lisburn	32
Collin Glen 1	Lisburn	33
Drumgask 2	Craigavon	34
Crevagh 2	Derry	35
Highfield 3	Belfast	36
Creggan South	Derry	37
Collin Glen 2	Lisburn	38
Culmore 2	Derry	39
Greystone	Limavady	40
Water Works 2	Belfast	41
Ardoyne 2	Belfast	42
Ardoyne 1	Belfast	43
Brandywell	Derry	44
Shantallow East	Derry	45
Westland	Derry	46
Glencolin 4	Belfast	47
Kilwee 2	Lisburn	48
Creggan Central 2	Derry	49
Ballymacarrett 2	Belfast	50
The Mount 1	Belfast	51
Shaftesbury 3	Belfast	52
Duncairn 2	Belfast	53
Shaftesbury 2	Belfast	54
Drumgor 2	Craigavon	55
Beechmount 2	Belfast	56
Woodvale 1	Belfast	57
Clondermot 1	Derry	58

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Multiple Deprivation Measure 2010 Rank of Area (1 = most deprived)
Ballymote	Down	59
Upper Springfield 2	Belfast	60
Ballycolman	Strabane	61
Glencolin 2	Belfast	62
Woodstock 2	Belfast	63
Ballysally 1	Coleraine	64
Coolessan	Limavady	65
Woodvale 2	Belfast	66
The Mount 2	Belfast	67
Glencairn 1	Belfast	68
Blackstaff 2	Belfast	69
Legoniel 1	Belfast	70
Drumgullion 1	Newry and Mourne	71
Poleglass 1	Lisburn	72
Water Works 3	Belfast	73
Glencolin 3	Belfast	74
Ballymacarrett 1	Belfast	75
Ladybrook 3	Belfast	76
Dunanney	Newtownabbey	77
Shaftesbury 1	Belfast	78
Botanic 5	Belfast	79
Lisanelly 2	Omagh	80
Cliftonville 1	Belfast	81
Coalisland South	Dungannon	82
Devenish	Fermanagh	83
Carn Hill 2	Derry	84
Old Warren	Lisburn	85
Ebrington 2	Derry	86
Glen Road 2	Belfast	87
Altnagelvin 1	Derry	88
Cliftonville 3	Belfast	89

Deprivation

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to list the areas included in the top 20 percent most deprived Super Output Areas in the key domains of income, employment, education and health.

(AQW 11930/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The following tables list the 20 per cent most deprived Super Output Areas and the corresponding rank of deprivation for the income, employment, education and health domains of the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2010.

Deprivation is ranked for each domain from rank 1 - the most deprived Super Output Area in that domain.

- Table 1: Income Domain 2010 – 20 per cent most deprived.
- Table 2: Employment Domain 2010 – 20 per cent most deprived.
- Table 3: Education, Skills & Training Domain 2010 – 20 per cent most deprived.
- Table 4: Health Deprivation & Disability Domain 2010 – 20 per cent most deprived.

A map showing the location of each Super Output Area is available at:

www.ninis.nisra.gov.uk/mapxtreme/InteractiveMaps/SOA_Deprivation_Map/atlas.html

Table 1: Top 20 % Most Deprived Super Output Areas – Income Domain 2010

Income Domain

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Income Deprivation Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Whiterock 2	Belfast	1
Creggan Central 1	Derry	2
Ardoyne 3	Belfast	3
Whiterock 3	Belfast	4
New Lodge 1	Belfast	5
Falls 2	Belfast	6
Shankill 2	Belfast	7
Collin Glen 3	Lisburn	8
East	Strabane	9
Shantallow West 2	Derry	10
Clonard 1	Belfast	11
Falls 1	Belfast	12
Falls 3	Belfast	13
Crevagh 2	Derry	14
Upper Springfield 3	Belfast	15
New Lodge 2	Belfast	16
Shantallow West 1	Derry	17
Crumlin 2 Belfast	Belfast	18
New Lodge 3	Belfast	19
Culmore 2	Derry	20
Collin Glen 2	Lisburn	21
Creggan South	Derry	22
Shantallow East	Derry	23
Westland	Derry	24
Creggan Central 2	Derry	25
Twinbrook 2	Lisburn	26
Brandywell	Derry	27
Twinbrook 1	Lisburn	28
Shankill 1	Belfast	29

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Income Deprivation Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Woodvale 3	Belfast	30
Crumlin 1 Belfast	Belfast	31
Upper Springfield 1	Belfast	32
Clonard 2	Belfast	33
Drumnamoe 1	Craigavon	34
Ballymacarrett 2	Belfast	35
Water Works 1	Belfast	36
The Diamond	Derry	37
Ardoyne 1	Belfast	38
Ardoyne 2	Belfast	39
Collin Glen 1	Lisburn	40
Drumgask 2	Craigavon	41
Strand 1 Derry	Derry	42
Ballysally 1	Coleraine	43
Whiterock 1	Belfast	44
Greystone Limavady	Limavady	45
Ballycolman	Strabane	46
Ladybrook 3	Belfast	47
Beechmount 2	Belfast	48
Duncairn 1	Belfast	49
Clondermot 1	Derry	50

Table 1: Top 20 % Most Deprived Super Output Areas – Income Domain 2010

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Income Deprivation Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Duncairn 2	Belfast	51
Upper Springfield 2	Belfast	52
Ballymacarrett 3	Belfast	53
Glencolin 4	Belfast	54
Water Works 2	Belfast	55
Carn Hill 2	Derry	56
Kilwee 2	Lisburn	57
The Mount 1	Belfast	58
Botanic 5	Belfast	59
Ballymacarrett 1	Belfast	60
Woodstock 2	Belfast	61
Coolessan	Limavady	62

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Income Deprivation Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Drumgullion 1	Newry and Mourne	63
Cliftonville 1	Belfast	64
Drumgor 2	Craigavon	65
Shaftesbury 2	Belfast	66
Crossmaglen	Newry and Mourne	67
Daisy hill 1	Newry and Mourne	68
Ballybot	Newry and Mourne	69
Poleglass 1	Lisburn	70
Shaftesbury 3	Belfast	71
The Mount 2	Belfast	72
Altnagelvin 1	Derry	73
Highfield 3	Belfast	74
Coalisland South	Dungannon	75
Old Warren	Lisburn	76
Dunanney	Newtownabbey	77
Glencolin 2	Belfast	78
Lisanelly 2	Omagh	79
Glencolin 3	Belfast	80
Ballymote	Down	81
Legoniel 1	Belfast	82
Water Works 3	Belfast	83
Glen Road 2	Belfast	84
Shaftesbury 1	Belfast	85
Castledearg	Strabane	86
Shantallow West 3	Derry	87
Glencairn 1	Belfast	88
Woodvale 1	Belfast	89
Callan Bridge	Armagh	90
Woodvale 2	Belfast	91
Crevagh 3	Derry	92
Springtown 1	Derry	93
Culmore 4	Derry	94
Ebrington 2	Derry	95
Ballee	Ballymena	96
Devenish	Fermanagh	97
Rosemount	Derry	98

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Income Deprivation Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Victoria Derry	Derry	99
Valley 2	Newtownabbey	100

Table 1: Top 20 % Most Deprived Super Output Areas – Income Domain 2010

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Income Deprivation Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Upper Malone 2	Belfast	101
Cliftonville 3	Belfast	102
Derryaghy 1	Lisburn	103
Cross Glebe	Coleraine	104
Enagh 1 Derry	Derry	105
Northland	Carrickfergus	106
Monkstown 1	Newtownabbey	107
Island 1	Belfast	108
Culmore 3	Derry	109
Beechwood	Derry	110
Chichester Park 1	Belfast	111
Blackstaff 2	Belfast	112
Derrymore 1	Newry and Mourne	113
Central Coleraine	Coleraine	114
Corcraun 1	Craigavon	115
Ballykeel	Ballymena	116
Glen Road 1	Belfast	117
Coalisland North	Dungannon	118
Foyle Springs 2	Derry	119
Hillhall 1	Lisburn	120
Carnmoney 1	Newtownabbey	121
Beechmount 3	Belfast	122
Carn Hill 1	Derry	123
Silver Bridge 1	Newry and Mourne	124
Creggan	Newry and Mourne	125
Court 1	Craigavon	126
Mossley 2	Newtownabbey	127
Glen Road 3	Belfast	128
Beechmount 1	Belfast	129
Drumgask 1	Craigavon	130
Enagh 2 Limavady	Limavady	131

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Income Deprivation Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Woodstock 3	Belfast	132
Court 2	Craigavon	133
Bessbrook	Newry and Mourne	134
Ballyloran	Larne	135
Churchland	Coleraine	136
Dungiven	Limavady	137
Dunclug	Ballymena	138
Church	Craigavon	139
Antiville	Larne	140
Ballysaggart	Dungannon	141
Keady	Armagh	142
Glencairn 2	Belfast	143
Sunnylands	Carrickfergus	144
Glen 1	Ards	145
Bloomfield 1 Belfast	Belfast	146
West 2	Strabane	147
Legoniel 2	Belfast	148
Bellevue 2	Belfast	149
Daisy hill 2	Newry and Mourne	150

Table 1: Top 20 % Most Deprived Super Output Areas – Income Domain 2010

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Income Deprivation Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Derrymore 2	Newry and Mourne	151
Ballysillan 1	Belfast	152
Newtownstewart	Strabane	153
Forkhill 1	Newry and Mourne	154
Coole	Newtownabbey	155
Irvinestown	Fermanagh	156
Moat	Ballymena	157
Ardboe	Cookstown	158
Glenderg	Strabane	159
Craigy Hill	Larne	160
Woodville 1	Craigavon	161
Falls Park 3	Belfast	162
Ladybrook 2	Belfast	163
Conlig 3	North Down	164

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Income Deprivation Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Farranshane	Antrim	165
Whitehouse	Newtownabbey	166
Love Lane	Carrickfergus	167
Central Ards	Ards	168
Ardglass 1	Down	169
Glebe 2 Magherafelt	Magherafelt	170
Scrabo 2	Ards	171
Knocklayd	Moyle	172
Caw	Derry	173
Finn	Strabane	174
Portaferry 2	Ards	175
Gortrush 1	Omagh	176
Lisnaskea	Fermanagh	177
Taghnevan	Craigavon	178

Table 2: Top 20 % Most Deprived Super Output Areas – Employment Domain 2010**Employment Domain**

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Employment Deprivation Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Whiterock 2	Belfast	1
Whiterock 3	Belfast	2
Upper Springfield 3	Belfast	3
Falls 2	Belfast	4
Crumlin 2 Belfast	Belfast	5
Creggan Central 1	Derry	6
East	Strabane	7
New Lodge 1	Belfast	8
Strand 1 Derry	Derry	9
Falls 3	Belfast	10
Whiterock 1	Belfast	11
Falls 1	Belfast	12
Shankill 2	Belfast	13
The Diamond	Derry	14
Clonard 1	Belfast	15
Upper Springfield 1	Belfast	16
New Lodge 2	Belfast	17
Twinbrook 2	Lisburn	18

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Employment Deprivation Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Westland	Derry	19
New Lodge 3	Belfast	20
Ardoyne 3	Belfast	21
Shantallow East	Derry	22
Drumnamoe 1	Craigavon	23
Clondermot 1	Derry	24
Water Works 1	Belfast	25
Clonard 2	Belfast	26
Creggan Central 2	Derry	27
Water Works 2	Belfast	28
Duncairn 1	Belfast	29
Greystone Limavady	Limavady	30
Glen Road 2	Belfast	31
Highfield 3	Belfast	32
Crumlin 1 Belfast	Belfast	33
Creggan South	Derry	34
Glencolin 3	Belfast	35
Ballycolman	Strabane	36
Shankill 1	Belfast	37
Glencolin 4	Belfast	38
Glencolin 2	Belfast	39
Brandywell	Derry	40
Kilwee 2	Lisburn	41
Culmore 2	Derry	42
Woodvale 3	Belfast	43
Woodvale 1	Belfast	44
Duncairn 2	Belfast	45
Ardoyne 1	Belfast	46
Ballymote	Down	47
Ballymacarrett 3	Belfast	48
Twinbrook 1	Lisburn	49
Drumgask 2	Craigavon	50

Table 2: Top 20 % Most Deprived Super Output Areas – Employment Domain 2010

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Employment Deprivation Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Beechmount 2	Belfast	51

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Employment Deprivation Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Ardoyne 2	Belfast	52
Ladybrook 3	Belfast	53
Collin Glen 3	Lisburn	54
Shantallow West 1	Derry	55
Crevagh 2	Derry	56
Castledearg	Strabane	57
Upper Springfield 2	Belfast	58
Ballymacarrett 2	Belfast	59
Glen Road 1	Belfast	60
Woodvale 2	Belfast	61
Shantallow West 2	Derry	62
Collin Glen 1	Lisburn	63
Altnagelvin 1	Derry	64
Glencairn 1	Belfast	65
Rosemount	Derry	66
Shaftesbury 3	Belfast	67
Legoniel 1	Belfast	68
Water Works 3	Belfast	69
Drumgullion 1	Newry and Mourne	70
Drumgor 2	Craigavon	71
Collin Glen 2	Lisburn	72
Ballysally 1	Coleraine	73
Upper Malone 2	Belfast	74
Coolessan	Limavady	75
West 2	Strabane	76
Victoria Derry	Derry	77
Beechwood	Derry	78
Coalisland South	Dungannon	79
Glencairn 2	Belfast	80
Sion Mills	Strabane	81
Cliftonville 3	Belfast	82
Carn Hill 2	Derry	83
Beechmount 3	Belfast	84
Ebrington 2	Derry	85
Farranshane	Antrim	86
Cliftonville 1	Belfast	87

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Employment Deprivation Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Craigy Hill	Larne	88
Poleglass 1	Lisburn	89
Blackstaff 2	Belfast	90
Court 1	Craigavon	91
Newtownstewart	Strabane	92
Ballysillan 1	Belfast	93
Foyle Springs 2	Derry	94
Woodstock 2	Belfast	95
Ballybot	Newry and Mourne	96
Sunnylands	Carrickfergus	97
Monkstown 1	Newtownabbey	98
Shaftesbury 2	Belfast	99
Court 2	Craigavon	100

Table 2: Top 20 % Most Deprived Super Output Areas – Employment Domain 2010

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Employment Deprivation Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Highfield 2	Belfast	101
Ballymacarrett 1	Belfast	102
Falls Park 3	Belfast	103
Beechmount 1	Belfast	104
The Mount 1	Belfast	105
Finn	Strabane	106
Dunanney	Newtownabbey	107
Whitehouse	Newtownabbey	108
Chichester Park 1	Belfast	109
Crossmaglen	Newry and Mourne	110
Ladybrook 2	Belfast	111
Andersonstown 2	Belfast	112
Enagh 1 Derry	Derry	113
Woodville 1	Craigavon	114
Corcraun 1	Craigavon	115
Churchland	Coleraine	116
Northland	Carrickfergus	117
Springtown 1	Derry	118
Portaferry 2	Ards	119
North	Strabane	120

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Employment Deprivation Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Ballee	Ballymena	121
Glen Road 3	Belfast	122
Ardglass 1	Down	123
Dunnamanagh	Strabane	124
Crevagh 3	Derry	125
Bessbrook	Newry and Mourne	126
Valley 2	Newtownabbey	127
Taghnevan	Craigavon	128
Legoniel 2	Belfast	129
Minnowburn	Castlereagh	130
Daisy hill 1	Newry and Mourne	131
Glenderg	Strabane	132
The Mount 2	Belfast	133
Lisanelly 2	Omagh	134
Devenish	Fermanagh	135
Antville	Larne	136
Andersonstown 3	Belfast	137
Carn Hill 1	Derry	138
Dungiven	Limavady	139
Culmore 4	Derry	140
Cross Glebe	Coleraine	141
Sydenham 1	Belfast	142
Coole	Newtownabbey	143
Roeside	Limavady	144
Caw	Derry	145
Carnmoney 1	Newtownabbey	146
Ardboe	Cookstown	147
Central Coleraine	Coleraine	148
New Buildings 1	Derry	149
Cathedral 2	Down	150

Table 2: Top 20 % Most Deprived Super Output Areas – Employment Domain 2010

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Employment Deprivation Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Drumnamoe 2	Craigavon	151
Botanic 5	Belfast	152
The Cut	Banbridge	153

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Employment Deprivation Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Mourneview	Craigavon	154
Enagh 2 Limavady	Limavady	155
Stewartstown	Cookstown	156
Victoria Bridge	Strabane	157
Kilkeel Central 2	Newry and Mourne	158
Tavanagh	Craigavon	159
Bellevue 2	Belfast	160
Moat	Ballymena	161
Old Warren	Lisburn	162
South 1	Strabane	163
Route	Ballymoney	164
Scrabo 2	Ards	165
Lisnagelvin 1	Derry	166
Hillhall 1	Lisburn	167
Ballyloran	Larne	168
Clare	Strabane	169
Ballybay	Craigavon	170
Castleview 3	Belfast	171
Shaftesbury 1	Belfast	172
Central Ards	Ards	173
Falls Park 2	Belfast	174
West 1	Strabane	175
Artigarvan	Strabane	176
Andersonstown 1	Belfast	177
Aldergrove 3	Antrim	178

Table 3: Top 20 % Most Deprived Super Output Areas - Education, Skills and Training Domain**Education, Skills and Training Domain**

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Education, Skills and Training Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Shankill 2	Belfast	1
Island 1	Belfast	2
Crumlin 1 Belfast	Belfast	3
Ballymacarrett 3	Belfast	4
Woodvale 3	Belfast	5
Crumlin 2 Belfast	Belfast	6
Duncairn 1	Belfast	7

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Education, Skills and Training Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Shankill 1	Belfast	8
Whiterock 2	Belfast	9
Woodvale 2	Belfast	10
Falls 2	Belfast	11
Falls 3	Belfast	12
Woodvale 1	Belfast	13
Highfield 3	Belfast	14
The Mount 1	Belfast	15
Whiterock 3	Belfast	16
Glencairn 1	Belfast	17
The Mount 2	Belfast	18
Shaftesbury 3	Belfast	19
Shaftesbury 1	Belfast	20
Dunanney	Newtownabbey	21
Shaftesbury 2	Belfast	22
New Lodge 1	Belfast	23
Falls 1	Belfast	24
Ballymacarrett 1	Belfast	25
New Lodge 3	Belfast	26
Drumgask 2	Craigavon	27
Upper Springfield 3	Belfast	28
Drumgor 2	Craigavon	29
Woodstock 2	Belfast	30
Woodstock 3	Belfast	31
Ballee	Ballymena	32
Tullycarnet	Castlereagh	33
Ballymacarrett 2	Belfast	34
Collin Glen 3	Lisburn	35
Corcrain 2	Craigavon	36
Woodstock 1	Belfast	37
Collin Glen 2	Lisburn	38
Shantallow West 2	Derry	39
Northland	Carrickfergus	40
East	Strabane	41
Monkstown 1	Newtownabbey	42
Upper Springfield 2	Belfast	43

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Education, Skills and Training Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Duncairn 2	Belfast	44
Ardoyne 3	Belfast	45
New Lodge 2	Belfast	46
Collin Glen 1	Lisburn	47
Ballysillan 1	Belfast	48
Blackstaff 2	Belfast	49
Upper Springfield 1	Belfast	50

Table 3: Top 20 % Most Deprived Super Output Areas - Education, Skills and Training Domain

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Education, Skills and Training Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Twinbrook 2	Lisburn	51
Enagh 2 Limavady	Limavady	52
Devenish	Fermanagh	53
Shantallow West 1	Derry	54
Poleglass 1	Lisburn	55
Crevagh 2	Derry	56
Drumnamoe 1	Craigavon	57
Ballysally 1	Coleraine	58
Old Warren	Lisburn	59
Coole	Newtownabbey	60
Love Lane	Carrickfergus	61
Greystone Limavady	Limavady	62
Culmore 2	Derry	63
Glencolin 4	Belfast	64
Corcraun 1	Craigavon	65
Bloomfield 1 Belfast	Belfast	66
Water Works 1	Belfast	67
Ardoyne 2	Belfast	68
Upper Malone 2	Belfast	69
Ardoyne 1	Belfast	70
Twinbrook 1	Lisburn	71
Glen 1	Ards	72
Dunclug	Ballymena	73
Ballyloran	Larne	74
Creggan Central 1	Derry	75
Coolessan	Limavady	76

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Education, Skills and Training Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Blackstaff 1	Belfast	77
Whiterock 1	Belfast	78
Cregagh	Castlereagh	79
Scrabo 2	Ards	80
Legoniel 1	Belfast	81
Scrabo 1	Ards	82
Ballymote	Down	83
Ballykeel	Ballymena	84
Brandywell	Derry	85
Conlig 3	North Down	86
Culmore 3	Derry	87
Clonard 1	Belfast	88
Daisy hill 1	Newry and Mourne	89
Carnmoney 1	Newtownabbey	90
Moat	Ballymena	91
Beechmount 2	Belfast	92
Creggan South	Derry	93
Glencairn 2	Belfast	94
Hilden 2	Lisburn	95
Altnagelvin 1	Derry	96
Antiville	Larne	97
Donaghadee South 1	Ards	98
Glengormley 2	Newtownabbey	99
Tavanagh	Craigavon	100

Table 3: Top 20 % Most Deprived Super Output Areas - Education, Skills and Training Domain

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Education, Skills and Training Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Cliftonville 3	Belfast	101
Lisanelly 2	Omagh	102
Castleview 1	Belfast	103
Daisy hill 2	Newry and Mourne	104
Botanic 5	Belfast	105
Court 1	Craigavon	106
Carn Hill 2	Derry	107
Shantallow East	Derry	108
Hillhall 1	Lisburn	109

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Education, Skills and Training Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Steeple	Antrim	110
Ballybay	Craigavon	111
Glencolin 1	Belfast	112
Clonard 2	Belfast	113
Callan Bridge	Armagh	114
Legoniel 2	Belfast	115
Coalisland South	Dungannon	116
Clipperstown	Carrickfergus	117
Valley 2	Newtownabbey	118
Ballycolman	Strabane	119
Mossley 2	Newtownabbey	120
Drumgullion 1	Newry and Mourne	121
Bessbrook	Newry and Mourne	122
Ballycraigy	Antrim	123
Highfield 2	Belfast	124
Sunnylands	Carrickfergus	125
Bellevue 2	Belfast	126
Woodville 1	Craigavon	127
Hilden 1	Lisburn	128
Whitehill	North Down	129
Glencolin 2	Belfast	130
Beechmount 3	Belfast	131
Ballysillan 2	Belfast	132
Glencolin 3	Belfast	133
Tonagh	Lisburn	134
Water Works 2	Belfast	135
Shantallow West 3	Derry	136
Ballynafeigh 3	Belfast	137
Cross Glebe	Coleraine	138
Botanic 1	Belfast	139
Minnowburn	Castlereagh	140
Ladybrook 3	Belfast	141
Ballylough & Bushmills	Moyle	142
Kilwee 2	Lisburn	143
Creggan Central 2	Derry	144
Portavogie 1	Ards	145

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Education, Skills and Training Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Comber North 1	Ards	146
Church	Craigavon	147
Farranshane	Antrim	148
Castlewellan 1	Down	149
Ballysaggart	Dungannon	150

Table 3: Top 20 % Most Deprived Super Output Areas - Education, Skills and Training Domain

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Education, Skills and Training Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Drumgask 1	Craigavon	151
Water Works 3	Belfast	152
Edenderry	Banbridge	153
Blackcave	Larne	154
Enagh 1 Derry	Derry	155
Botanic 3	Belfast	156
Belmont 3	Belfast	157
Cloughfern 2	Newtownabbey	158
Botanic 2	Belfast	159
Ballybot	Newry and Mourne	160
Gortalee	Carrickfergus	161
Botanic 4	Belfast	162
Loughview 2	North Down	163
Clonallan 1	Newry and Mourne	164
Lambeg 2	Lisburn	165
Enler	Castlereagh	166
Central Ards	Ards	167
Millisle 1	Ards	168
Derrymore 1	Newry and Mourne	169
New Buildings 1	Derry	170
Sydenham 3	Belfast	171
Sydenham 1	Belfast	172
Lagan Valley 1	Lisburn	173
Fair Green	Ballymena	174
Coalisland North	Dungannon	175
Loughview 1	North Down	176
Newhill	Ballymoney	177
Kilkeel South 2	Newry and Mourne	178

Table 4: Top 20 % Most Deprived Super Output Areas - Health Deprivation & Disability Domain**Health Deprivation and Disability Domain**

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Health Deprivation & Disability Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Whiterock 2	Belfast	1
Falls 2	Belfast	2
Falls 1	Belfast	3
Whiterock 3	Belfast	4
Clonard 1	Belfast	5
Ardoyne 3	Belfast	6
New Lodge 2	Belfast	7
Falls 3	Belfast	8
Collin Glen 3	Lisburn	9
Upper Springfield 1	Belfast	10
New Lodge 1	Belfast	11
Shankill 1	Belfast	12
Creggan Central 1	Derry	13
Twinbrook 2	Lisburn	14
Upper Springfield 3	Belfast	15
Drumnamoe 1	Craigavon	16
Crumlin 2 Belfast	Belfast	17
East	Strabane	18
Drumgask 2	Craigavon	19
Shankill 2	Belfast	20
New Lodge 3	Belfast	21
Lisanelly 2	Omagh	22
Ballymacarrett 3	Belfast	23
Brandywell	Derry	24
Clonard 2	Belfast	25
Duncairn 1	Belfast	26
Strand 1 Derry	Derry	27
Kilwee 2	Lisburn	28
Water Works 1	Belfast	29
Glencolin 4	Belfast	30
Shantallow West 1	Derry	31
Glencolin 2	Belfast	32
Collin Glen 1	Lisburn	33
Clondermot 1	Derry	34
Twinbrook 1	Lisburn	35

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Health Deprivation & Disability Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Drumgor 2	Craigavon	36
Shaftesbury 2	Belfast	37
Creggan South	Derry	38
Whiterock 1	Belfast	39
Ardoyne 1	Belfast	40
The Diamond	Derry	41
Shantallow West 2	Derry	42
Ardoyne 2	Belfast	43
Ballycolman	Strabane	44
Water Works 2	Belfast	45
Creggan Central 2	Derry	46
Shaftesbury 3	Belfast	47
Beechmount 2	Belfast	48
Crumlin 1 Belfast	Belfast	49
Collin Glen 2	Lisburn	50

Table 4: Top 20 % Most Deprived Super Output Areas - Health Deprivation & Disability Domain

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Health Deprivation & Disability Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
The Mount 1	Belfast	51
Devenish	Fermanagh	52
Drumgullion 1	Newry and Mourne	53
Woodville 1	Craigavon	54
Highfield 3	Belfast	55
Botanic 5	Belfast	56
Glen Road 3	Belfast	57
Ballymacarrett 2	Belfast	58
Ballymote	Down	59
Shantallow East	Derry	60
Woodstock 2	Belfast	61
Coalisland South	Dungannon	62
Upper Springfield 2	Belfast	63
Coolessan	Limavady	64
Woodvale 3	Belfast	65
Shaftesbury 1	Belfast	66
Poleglass 1	Lisburn	67
Old Warren	Lisburn	68

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Health Deprivation & Disability Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Drumgask 1	Craigavon	69
Callan Bridge	Armagh	70
Glen Road 2	Belfast	71
Blackstaff 2	Belfast	72
Carn Hill 2	Derry	73
Westland	Derry	74
Beechmount 1	Belfast	75
Culmore 2	Derry	76
Court 1	Craigavon	77
The Mount 2	Belfast	78
Duncairn 2	Belfast	79
Glencolin 3	Belfast	80
Daisy hill 1	Newry and Mourne	81
Foyle Springs 2	Derry	82
Chichester Park 1	Belfast	83
Legoniel 1	Belfast	84
Glencairn 2	Belfast	85
Glen Road 1	Belfast	86
Falls Park 1	Belfast	87
Ebrington 2	Derry	88
Cross Glebe	Coleraine	89
Ballymacarrett 1	Belfast	90
Water Works 3	Belfast	91
Crevagh 2	Derry	92
Ballybot	Newry and Mourne	93
Falls Park 3	Belfast	94
Greystone Limavady	Limavady	95
Beechmount 3	Belfast	96
Central Coleraine	Coleraine	97
Ladybrook 3	Belfast	98
Springtown 1	Derry	99
Daisy hill 2	Newry and Mourne	100

Table 4: Top 20 % Most Deprived Super Output Areas - Health Deprivation & Disability Domain

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Health Deprivation & Disability Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Ballysally 1	Coleraine	101

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Health Deprivation & Disability Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Woodvale 1	Belfast	102
Crevagh 3	Derry	103
Blackstaff 1	Belfast	104
Cliftonville 1	Belfast	105
The Cut	Banbridge	106
Court 2	Craigavon	107
Castleberg	Strabane	108
Kilkeel South 2	Newry and Mourne	109
Dunanney	Newtownabbey	110
Culmore 4	Derry	111
Coole	Newtownabbey	112
Kilkeel Central 2	Newry and Mourne	113
Taghnevan	Craigavon	114
Cliftonville 3	Belfast	115
Beechwood	Derry	116
Enagh 1 Derry	Derry	117
Rosemount	Derry	118
Glencairn 1	Belfast	119
Valley 2	Newtownabbey	120
Victoria Derry	Derry	121
Gortrush 1	Omagh	122
Bessbrook	Newry and Mourne	123
Ladybrook 2	Belfast	124
St Mary's	Newry and Mourne	125
Andersonstown 2	Belfast	126
Crossmaglen	Newry and Mourne	127
Conlig 3	North Down	128
Derrymore 1	Newry and Mourne	129
Minnowburn	Castlereagh	130
Woodstock 3	Belfast	131
Sion Mills	Strabane	132
Derryagh 1	Lisburn	133
Chichester Park 2	Belfast	134
Portaferry 2	Ards	135
Andersonstown 3	Belfast	136
Drumglass	Dungannon	137

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Health Deprivation & Disability Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Corcraun 1	Craigavon	138
Mossley 2	Newtownabbey	139
Upper Malone 2	Belfast	140
Northland	Carrickfergus	141
Killyclogher 1	Omagh	142
Altnagelvin 1	Derry	143
Newtownstewart	Strabane	144
Whitehouse	Newtownabbey	145
Mourneview	Craigavon	146
Monkstown 1	Newtownabbey	147
Farranshane	Antrim	148
Ballycraigy	Antrim	149
Sunnylands	Carrickfergus	150

Table 4: Top 20 % Most Deprived Super Output Areas - Health Deprivation & Disability Domain

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Health Deprivation & Disability Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
West 2	Strabane	151
Ballysaggart	Dungannon	152
Sydenham 1	Belfast	153
Hillhall 1	Lisburn	154
Ballybay	Craigavon	155
Ardboe	Cookstown	156
Tavanagh	Craigavon	157
Edenderry	Banbridge	158
Enler	Castlereagh	159
Castle Demesne	Ballymena	160
Woodstock 1	Belfast	161
Bloomfield 1 Belfast	Belfast	162
Legoniel 2	Belfast	163
Newhill	Ballymoney	164
Corcraun 2	Craigavon	165
Castleview 1	Belfast	166
Kilwee 1	Lisburn	167
Gortrush 2	Omagh	168
Ballee	Ballymena	169
Lisnagelvin 1	Derry	170

Super Output Area	Local Government District	Health Deprivation & Disability Domain 2010 Rank (Where 1 = most deprived)
Camowen	Omagh	171
Irvinestown	Fermanagh	172
Woodvale 2	Belfast	173
Seaview 2	Newry and Mourne	174
Steeple	Antrim	175
Oldtown	Cookstown	176
Falls Park 2	Belfast	177
Coalisland North	Dungannon	178

Unemployment: North Down

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 10551/11-15, in light of the number of economically active people and the number of claimants of unemployment related benefits in the North Down area, to detail how the percentage unemployment rate of 3.7 percent was derived.

(AQW 11986/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Labour Force Survey (LFS) estimate of the unemployment rate for Northern Ireland is based on the number of unemployed persons (aged 16 and over) expressed as a percentage of the equivalent economically active population.

However, due to the limitations of the LFS sample size it is not possible to provide reliable estimates of the unemployment rate at District Council level.

In such instances, it is necessary to use Claimant Count data, that is people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance at Job Benefits Offices.

The figure of 3.7 per cent that was provided in AQW 10551/11-15 is derived from the Claimant Count and was calculated by dividing the total number of claimants (1,877 in March 2012) in the North Down District Council Area (DCA) by the total 2010 mid-year population, aged 16-64, of North Down DCA (50,775).

Business Premises Occupied by Charity Shops

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps are being taken to assess and make available information on the number of business premises occupied by charity shops, or otherwise exempt from rates, across each of the district council areas.

(AQW 12039/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Information relating to movements within the non domestic valuation list is provided by Land & Property Services (LPS) to District Council Finance Officers on a quarterly basis. These updates show the number and value of properties within the valuation list by the various categories, including those properties shown in the list as exempt from rates.

The domestic and non domestic valuation lists are available to view on the LPS website via the following link:

http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/lps/index/property_valuation/valuation-of-property/valuation-lists.htm

The lists show all properties on a district, ward and street basis and include details as to the distinction of each property, whether for example, Exempt, Industrial, or Sport & Recreation. LPS has currently no plans to assess and make available information on the number of business premises occupied by charity shops or otherwise exempted from rates, over and beyond the arrangements as detailed above.

Review of Public Administration

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what powers or functions he plans to devolve to local councils under the Review of Public Administration; and whether this represents a change to his previous commitments.

(AQW 12063/11-15)

Mr Wilson: No powers or functions within my department have been identified for transfer to local councils under the Review of Public Administration either at the current time or previously.

Arm's-length Bodies: Board Members

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many former senior civil servants, from deputy secretary grade to permanent secretary grade, serve on the boards of his Department's arm's length bodies in a (i) paid; and (ii) unpaid capacity.
(AQW 12066/11-15)

Mr Wilson: There is currently one former senior civil servant serving on a paid basis on the board of one of DFP's arm's length bodies. There are no unpaid former senior civil servants serving on any of these boards.

Apprenticeship Programmes

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the apprenticeship programmes available within his Department; (ii) the apprenticeship programmes provided by his Department; (iii) the number of people currently enrolled in these programmes; and (iv) the number of places available on the programmes.
(AQW 12087/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Programme-Led Apprenticeship (PLA) was introduced by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) in September 2009. This is an intervention measure to assist young people who have been unable to find employment as apprentices during the economic downturn. The Department contributes to this programme by providing 16 placements for participants on the PLA programme.

We are also currently working to make additional places available for the Steps to Work apprenticeship programme, which is DEL's main adult return to work programme.

The Department is currently working with DEL to provide a pilot ICT Apprenticeship scheme. The scheme would involve the Department and private sector employers committing to employing and training ICT apprentices. A working group comprising public and private sector representatives are finalising the details of the scheme, which will launch in the autumn.

There is currently 1 person enrolled on the Programme-Led Apprenticeship with the Department, this leaves a further 15 places available.

The Department plans to offer 10 apprenticeship placements, with other private sector partners offering an additional 15 apprentices on the ICT Apprenticeship scheme.

Vacant Business Premises in the North Down Constituency

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an estimate of the amount of revenue lost in domestic and regional rates, in the North Down constituency, as a result of vacant business premises, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 12130/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Liability to unoccupied rate for both the domestic and non-domestic rate sectors is prescribed in legislation.

The legislative provisions supporting unoccupied rates are set out in Article 25A of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977, as amended, ("the 1977 Order") and the Rates (Unoccupied Hereditaments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (2011 No. 36). In the case of unoccupied non-domestic hereditaments rate liability is 50% and in the case of unoccupied domestic hereditaments rate liability is 100%.

There are a number of exceptions to unoccupied rates. These are set out in Regulations and the hereditaments concerned attract 100% exclusion from rate liability.

Maximum rate liability is therefore imposed by legislation and in the case of vacancy the discharge of associated rating liability is not classified as a loss. The only losses that can be incurred from vacant properties arise from certain write-off activity. Since write-off losses are not separately categorised for unoccupied hereditaments it is not possible to quantify that loss.

Empty Premises Relief Scheme

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many businesses in the North Down constituency qualify for the Empty Premises Rate Relief Scheme.
(AQW 12131/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Information on the number of businesses who would qualify is not readily available. Qualification for the Empty Premises Rate Relief Scheme requires an application to be made and is based on the property being vacant for 12 months or more and having been previously used for retail purposes. Information on applications is not available for the North Down Constituency as information is collated at district council and ward level only. As at 25th May 2012, two applications for Empty Premises Rate Relief have been received (in the Ards Borough Council Area). To date no awards have been made for properties in the North Down or Ards Borough Council Areas.

Vacant Business Premises in the North Down Constituency

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide the addresses of the business premises that are currently vacant in the North Down constituency.
(AQW 12132/11-15)

Mr Wilson: This information cannot be provided as it may disclose personal information relating to sole traders. Data on vacant premises are not available at constituency level as they are collated at District Council and Ward level only.

As at 20th May 2012 there were 582 and 443 non-domestic properties recorded as vacant in the Ards and North Down Borough Council Areas respectively. The following tables provide a breakdown of the number of vacant non-domestic properties at Ward level within the two Councils.

Vacant Non-domestic Properties in Ards Borough Council as at 20th May 2012

Ward Area	Number of vacant non-domestic properties
Ballygowan	13
Ballyrainey	58
Ballywalter	16
Bradshaws Brae	48
Carrowdore	18
Central	134
Comber East	58
Comber North	*
Comber West	12
Donaghadee North	38
Donaghadee South	6
Glen	*
Gregstown	*
Killinchy	9
Kircubbin	19
Lisbane	12
Loughries	6
Millisle	35
Movilla	13
Portaferry	39
Portavogie	23
Scrabo	11
Whitespots	*
Ards Borough Council Total	582

* 5 properties or less

Vacant Non-domestic Properties in North Down Borough Council as at 20th May 2012

Ward Area	Number of vacant non-domestic properties
Ballyholme	*
Ballymagee	*
Bangor Castle	40
Bloomfield	27
Broadway	7
Bryansburn	8

Ward Area	Number of vacant non-domestic properties
Clandeboye	15
Conlig	70
Craigavad	*
Crawfordsburn	6
Cultra	*
Dufferin	*
Groomsport	22
Harbour	113
Hollywood Demesne	44
Hollywood Priory	31
Loughview	7
Princetown	*
Rathgael	16
Silverstream	8
Spring Hill	*
Ward Area not known	*
North Down Borough Council Total	443

* 5 properties or less

Vacant Business Premises

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many business premises are currently vacant in (i) Bangor; (ii) Hollywood; (iii) Donaghadee; and (iv) Millisle.

(AQW 12133/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Information on the number of business premises that are currently vacant in (i) Bangor; (ii) Hollywood; (iii) Donaghadee; and (iv) Millisle is not available as information is collated at district council and Ward level only.

As at 20th May 2012 there were 582 and 443 non-domestic properties recorded as vacant in the Ards and North Down Borough Council Areas respectively. The following tables provide a breakdown of the number of vacant non-domestic properties at ward level within the two Councils.

Vacant Non-domestic Properties in Ards Borough Council as at 20th May 2012

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Bradshaws Brae	48
Carrowdore	18
Central	134
Comber East	58
Comber North	*
Comber West	12
Donaghadee North	38

Ward Area	Number of vacant non-domestic properties
Donaghadee South	6
Glen	*
Gregstown	*
Killinchy	9
Kircubbin	19
Lisbane	12
Loughries	6
Millisle	35
Movilla	13
Portaferry	39
Portavogie	23
Scrabo	11
Whitespots	*
Ards Borough Council Total	582

* 5 properties or less

Vacant Non-domestic Properties in North Down Borough Council as at 20th May 2012

Ward Area	Number of vacant non-domestic properties
Ballyholme	*
Ballymagee	*
Bangor Castle	40
Bloomfield	27
Broadway	7
Bryansburn	8
Clandeboye	15
Conlig	70
Craigavad	*
Crawfordsburn	6
Cultra	*
Dufferin	*
Groomsport	22
Harbour	113
Hollywood Demesne	44
Hollywood Priory	31
Loughview	7
Princetown	*
Rathgael	16
Silverstream	8

Ward Area	Number of vacant non-domestic properties
Spring Hill	*
Ward Area not known	*
North Down Borough Council Total	443

* 5 properties or less

Property Values: Disputes

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of whether an independent arbitration process would be of assistance in resolving disputes on the value of property, especially where investment and employment potentials are affected by a protracted disagreement with Land and Property Services on the disposal of property in the ownership of Executive Departments.

(AQW 12141/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Land & Property Services (LPS) advise NI Departments at every stage of the disposal process. In many high value and high demand sales, disposals are advanced by open market private treaty with estate agents acting on behalf of Departments. In some sales, for example, where there is limited market interest, or low offers, or where there is a special purchaser, the process is often concluded by direct negotiations between LPS and interested parties.

Disposing bodies are required by legislation to get the best price for land.

I consider that the existing procedures within the Disposal of Surplus Public Sector Property in NI guidelines are adequate in resolving the many different scenarios that can arise in the sale of land. The guidelines do not include recourse to arbitration and my assessment is that arbitration would not be of assistance in the circumstances you describe.

District Councillors

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many days special leave, with pay, are district councillors, who are employees of central government Departments, entitled to for the conduct of their council duties.

(AQW 12192/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Employees of central government departments who are elected members of district councils are allowed up to a limit of 18 days per leave year for the conduct of their council duties. This total may be increased up to a limit of 24 days per leave year if the department is satisfied that the duties equate to those of a Lord Mayor.

Sickness Absence

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the percentage of sickness absence in his Department in each of the last three years; and the agreed target rate of sickness as set out in any memoranda of understanding between his Department and the trade unions.

(AQW 12213/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The information requested is detailed in the following table:

Year	Ministerial Target	Absence Rate
09/10	8.5 days	10.3 days (4.6%)
10/11	9.7 days	9.5 days (4.3%)
11/12	9.1 days	* 9.1 days (4.1%)

* Remains un-validated. The 2011/2012 validated absence rate will not be available until the autumn.

Universal Credit: Impact

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the potential impact of the introduction of Universal Credit on (i) annual managed expenditure; (ii) departmental expenditure; and (iii) the block grant received from the Government of the United Kingdom.

(AQW 12216/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Universal Credit is one of the measures included within the GB Welfare Reform Act 2012.

Benefit related spending on Universal Credit is expected to be higher as protection has been included to ensure that a customer will not see a reduction in the level of benefit at the point of change where their circumstances remain the same. Benefit uptake levels are also expected to increase due to a simpler benefit claiming process.

Departmental expenditure on administering the Universal Credit is expected to increase as the new system and processes are designed and implemented and as customers migrate from the existing benefits to the new universal credit. However in the longer term administration costs are expected to decrease as delivery methods are more cost effective.

Spending on social security benefits is demand led and, as such, is classified as Annually Managed Expenditure (AME). Annually Managed Expenditure is funded directly from HM Treasury in line with actual need. The Block grant received will be adjusted to reflect changes in AME spending.

The cost of administering the benefits systems is met from the Northern Ireland Executive's Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL). The NI DEL, and therefore the Block grant, will be adjusted to reflect Barnett consequentials of any allocations to the Department for Work and Pensions in respect of the Welfare Reform programme. However, Barnett consequentials are unhypothecated and as such it is for the Executive to decide how these should be used.

The evaluation of the impact on Annually Managed Expenditure and departmental spending will continue as work on Universal Credit progresses from planning into implementation and delivery.

Arm's-length Bodies: Payroll

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether any civil servants or public servants in his Department's arm's-length bodies are working 'off payroll' so that their salaries are paid in such a way that corporation tax rather than income tax is paid. **(AQW 12252/11-15)**

Mr Wilson: I refer the member to my response to questions AQW 8394/11-15 and AQW 9668/11-15 answered on the 12th April 2012 and AQW 10514/11-15 answered on the 27th April 2012. I can confirm that the position remains, as set out in those answers.

Arm's-length Bodies and Quangos

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the current number of arm's-length bodies and quangos that are attached to his Department; and how this figure compares with the number in (i) 2008; (ii) 2009; (iii) 2010; and (iv) 2011. **(AQW 12288/11-15)**

Mr Wilson: The Department currently has 5 small arm's length bodies.

- NI Building Regulations Advisory Committee
- Statistics Advisory Committee
- Public Service Commission for NI (PSC)
- Lay Observer for NI
- Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (NI) Governance Group

In 2008 and 2009 the Department also had responsibility for The NI Law Commission, Lands Tribunal for NI and the NI Valuation Tribunal.

The NI Law Commission transferred to the Department of Justice (DoJ) with effect from 12 April 2010 and the Lands Tribunal for NI and the NI Valuation Tribunal transferred to DoJ with effect from 1 April 2011.

The Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (NI) Governance Group was first established with effect from 1 February 2010.

Further information on my Department's arm's length bodies can be found on the DFP Internet site in the document - Bodies for which DFP has a degree of responsibility.

Civil Service: Freeze on Promotion

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he has any plans to remove the freeze on promotion to higher grades in the Civil Service, should other public sector employees, who are currently remote from the main centralised public sector jobs, have an opportunity for promotion through the de-centralisation of public sector jobs. **(AQW 12349/11-15)**

Mr Wilson: There is no embargo on promotion to any grade, including to higher grades, in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS).

There is no central programme or strategy for the decentralisation of public sector jobs. Individual public bodies, departments and Ministers can of course consider the location of public sector facilities and jobs subject to the normal requirements of business need, value for money and affordability.

Other public sector employees can only avail of employment and promotion opportunities with the NICS if they have been recruited in accordance with the Recruitment Policy (www.nicsrecruitment.gov.uk) and in compliance with the Civil Service Commissioners' Recruitment Code (www.nicscommissioners.org).

Staff within the NICS are promoted in accordance with the NICS Careers Opportunity and Promotion Policy, (www.dfpni.gov.uk/1.05-career-opportunities-and-promotion.pdf).

All staff who meet the essential criteria are eligible to apply and to be assessed for promotion. Staff who are successful in promotion competitions are offered promotion opportunities in line with Departments' needs to fill their vacant posts to meet business objectives.

Arm's-length Bodies and Quangos: Remuneration

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the current total annual cost of remuneration for board members at his Department's arm's-length bodies and quangos.

(AQW 12410/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The annual cost of remuneration for Board members of my Department's arm's-length bodies is listed in the table overleaf.

Arms length Body	Number of members and remuneration			
	Chair	£	Members	£
NI Building Regulations Advisory Committee	1	Expenses only	17	Expenses only
Statistics Advisory Committee	1	Expenses only	7	Expenses only
Lay Observer	1	Fee basis depending on no. days worked & cases reviewed	-	-
Public Service Commission for NI	1	15,000	6	10,800 total
Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (NI) Governance Group	1	Fee basis depending on no. of days	6	Unpaid

'Managing Public Money Northern Ireland'

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he can confirm that the sentiments contained in the foreword, together with the chapters and annexes, of the Managing Public Money Northern Ireland document, apply equally to all public bodies in Northern Ireland, including all 26 local councils.

(AQW 12418/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Managing Public Money Northern Ireland, issued by DFP, sets out the main principles for dealing with resources used by public sector organisations in Northern Ireland. The guidance must be followed by all NI departments, Executive Agencies and NDPBs.

District councils are independent of central Government and responsible for their own financial affairs. They are regulated by specific pieces of legislation and codes of practices which set out the framework within which they may manage their finances.

Vacant Business Premises: North Down and Ards Borough Council Area

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many business premises in the (i) North Down; and (ii) Ards Borough Council areas were vacant on 31 March 2012.

(AQW 12424/11-15)

Mr Wilson: As at 31st March 2012, the number of vacant non-domestic properties in (i) the North Down Borough Council area and (ii) the Ards Borough Council area was (i) 448 and (ii) 582, respectively.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Trans Fats

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to reduce the use of trans fats; and whether he has considered banning or limiting their use.

(AQW 11969/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Trans fats have been shown to raise blood cholesterol levels and increase the risk of Coronary Heart Disease. Current average dietary intakes are lower than the recommended 2% total energy. As dietary intakes of saturated fats in the UK represent the greater heart health risk it is appropriate, and in the best interests of consumer health that the Department of Health and the Food Standard Agency's priority has been to reduce saturated fat intakes. Any food industry action to reduce trans fats should not serve to further increase saturated fat content.

This is an area led by FSA, and supported by my Department. We welcome the voluntary commitments and initiatives undertaken by manufacturers, retailers, food service organisations and their suppliers to reduce levels of both saturated fats and trans fats in their products, especially through the UK-wide Responsibility Deal.

Evidence indicates that the levels of trans fats from artificial sources have been reduced in recent years. The food industry has already voluntarily removed hydrogenated vegetable oils and reduced levels of artificial trans fats from 55% to less than 2%. My Department, through the Framework for Preventing and Addressing Overweight and Obesity in Northern Ireland 2012-2022: A Fitter Future for All, continues to support the work of the FSA to help manufacturers reformulate products to contribute to reductions in saturated and trans fat in foods and advise consumers to reduce consumption of foods high in both saturated fat and trans fat.

The Public Health Agency is also undertaking a range of initiatives in this area including implementing nutritional standards in schools, developing an accredited Healthy Catering award for Northern Ireland and nutrition training for Environmental Health Officers, and increasing the procurement of fresh, local sustainable food in health service facilities

Mental Health Provision and Suicide Prevention: Funding

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the level of funding allocated to (i) mental health provision; and (ii) suicide prevention in each of the last three years, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 11979/11-15)

Mr Poots: The level of funding allocated to mental health provision and suicide prevention in each of the last three years is contained in the following table:

	2009/10 £m	2010/11 £m	2011/12 £m
(i) Mental health provision (including Suicide Prevention)	235.9	237.2	240.1
(ii) Suicide prevention (Protect Life Strategy and Lifeline)	6.8	6.9	6.9

Figures for 2012/13 are not yet available.

The information requested is not available by constituency.

Public Health Agency's Protect Life Strategy

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the level of funding allocated to date through the Public Health Agency's Protect Life Strategy, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 11980/11-15)

Mr Poots: Since 2010-11, the Public Health Agency has provided funding of £3.3m per annum for its Protect Life strategy. A further £3.6m per annum was allocated to support Lifeline.

The information requested is not available by constituency.

Health and Social Care Trusts: Events or Seminars

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people employed by the Health and Social Care Trusts attended events or seminars in 2011, not under the auspices of their employment with the Trusts, to speak about their field of expertise at (i) locations in Northern Ireland; (ii) locations in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland; and (iii) any other location.

(AQW 11988/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department does not hold this information centrally. The information requested could only be obtained by asking each HSC Organisation to undertake a special manual exercise and this could only be done at a disproportionate cost.

Early Years Strategy: Implementation

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what collaboration his Department has had with the Department of Education in relation to the implementation of an early years strategy.

(AQW 12045/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department is committed to working collaboratively with DE on areas of common interest. A liaison group on Early Years and Childcare, jointly chaired by DHSSPS/DE has been set up and acts as the conduit for this work.

In addition to this, both DHSSPS and DE are represented on the Programme Board that has been established to oversee the projects that will deliver the outcomes set out in Delivering Social Change.

Arm's-length Bodies: Invoices

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what percentage of invoices was paid by each of his Department's arm's-length bodies within 30 days, in the last 12 months.

(AQW 12052/11-15)

Mr Poots: The percentage of invoices paid by my Department's arms length bodies within 30 days only in the 2011/12 financial year is contained in the table below.

The reporting of payment within 30 days only is not in accordance with extant Departmental guidance, which requires HSC organisations to report performance within 30 days or other agreed terms. Details of the percentage of invoices paid under this requirement are therefore also included for comparison purposes.

Prompt Payment Performance

Arms Length Body	2011/2012	
	% of bills paid within 30 days only	% of bills paid within 30 days or other agreed terms
Northern Trust	87.74	93.88
Belfast Trust	86.75	92.00
Western Trust	92.74	96.20
South Eastern Trust	86.10	92.60
NIAS Trust	92.33	97.50
Southern Trust	81.70	91.20
HSCB	81.65	91.70
BSO	92.30	95.70
NIBTS	96.20	96.20
NIFRS	95.40	95.40
NIGALA	95.91	98.70
NIMDTA	97.60	97.60
NIPEC	94.01	98.70
NISCC	80.32	86.00
PCC	92.17	96.80
PHA	76.29	92.32
RQIA	92.62	96.20

Antrim Area Hospital: Complaints

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, for each of the last three years, to detail what representations or complaints were made to his Department on staff shortages, waiting times and other clinical problems at the Antrim Area Hospital, broken down by representations or complaints made by (i) senior management in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust; (ii) staff at the Antrim Area Hospital; and (iii) members of the public.

(AQW 12054/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information is not available in the format requested and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost to the Department.

Northern Health and Social Care Trust: Management Structure

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what reviews have been carried out, in the last year, in relation to the management structure of the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, including how management communicates with medical staff in hospitals.

(AQW 12055/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust's Senior Management Team was restructured in July 2011.

There are various forums used to communicate with medical staff on corporate, directorate and service level information. Whilst many of these forums are cross directorate/ cross professional, there are also arrangements in place for specific professions. For medical staff, this includes Chief Executive briefings every two months attended by senior medical staff, including Clinical Directors and the Chief Executive is invited to attend meetings of Medical Staff Committees on a regular basis.

The Northern Trust's Acute Hospital Services Directorate has participated in a number of audits to test the effectiveness of engagement within the directorate and this includes communications with medical staff. Most recently, the Trust has adopted a "road show" type approach within acute services to talk about key challenges on a multi disciplinary basis.

Arm's-length Bodies: Board Members

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many former senior civil servants, from deputy secretary grade to permanent secretary grade, serve on the boards of his Department's arm's length bodies in a (i) paid; and (ii) unpaid capacity.

(AQW 12096/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department is aware of one former senior civil servant, a former deputy secretary in DHSSPS, currently serving on one of its arm's length bodies and in a paid capacity.

In accordance with the Code of Practice issued by the Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland my Department does not ask applicants for their full employment history, as this plays no part in the selection process.

Occupational Therapy: Referrals

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the average waiting time for a referral to an occupational therapist in each Health and Social Care Trust area.

(AQW 12119/11-15)

Mr Poots: Table 1 below details the number of people waiting from referral to treatment by an occupational therapist, by aggregate time band, in each HSC Trust at 30 April 2012.

Table 1

HSC Trust	Waiting time from referral to treatment for Occupational Therapy (by weeks waiting) ¹					Total
	0-3	>3 to 6	>6 to 9	> 9 to 13	> 13	
Belfast	561	528	470	242	19	1,820
Northern	695	494	286	46	0	1,521
South Eastern	381	312	194	102	19	1,008
Southern	319	320	192	101	68	1,000
Western	268	332	212	44	0	856
Northern Ireland	2,224	1,986	1,354	535	106	6,205

1 Figures detailed in reply to this question were provided on request by the HSC Board and have not been validated by the DHSSPS.

The median waiting time from referral to treatment in each HSC Trust was ">3 to 6" weeks.

The information collected cannot be disaggregated by geographical areas smaller than HSC Trust.

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service: Scrap Cars for Training

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, for each of the last five years, to detail (i) how much it has cost the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service to (a) purchase scrap cars to be used in training; and (b) buy missing parts for the scrap cars; and (ii) all suppliers of scrap cars and missing parts, broken down by command area.

(AQW 12121/11-15)

Mr Poots:

(i) (a) Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service expenditure for scrap cars from 2007-2012.

Area	2007/08 £	2008/09 £	2009/10 £	2010/11 £	2011/12 £
Northern	-	21,000	28,450	19,880	22,535
Southern	-	15,900	33,160	17,255	23,240
Eastern	12,650	10,310	21,530	15,300	10,790
Western	-	24,335	35,680	22,020	19,230
Training Centre	-	12,830	9,690	17,190	13,060
Community Development	-	990	1,890	2,960	2,175
Driving Change Project	-	-	-	-	700
Yearly expenditure	12,650	85,365	130,400	94,605	91,730

(b) NIFRS does not purchase missing parts for scrap vehicles.

(ii) The table below outlines the suppliers of scrap cars for the period September 2005 to October 2012, broken down by Command Area.

SUPPLIERS OF SCRAP CARS BY COMMAND AREA

September 2005 – October 2012

Eastern	Western	Northern	Southern	Training Centre
Agnew Recovery Service	Alcorn Recovery	Agnew Recovery Service	Agnew Recovery Service	Agnew Recovery Service
Beatties Recycling	Hilltop Garage	Beatties Recycling	Beatties Recycling	Beatties Recycling
John Beers	Lakeland Recovery	John Beers	John Beers	John Beers
B & C McKeown	Robert McDaid Car Breakers	Hilltop Garage	Gavins Recovery	B & C McKeown
Ruddel Metyals	Morrow Recovery	B & C McKeown	B & C McKeown	R R Recovery
Temple Auto Salvage	Temple Auto Salvage	R R Recovery	R R Recovery	Temple Auto Salvage
T-Met	T-Met	Temple Auto Salvage	Ruddell Metals	T-Met
Two Trees	Two Trees		Temple Auto Salvage	Two Trees
			John Tinnelly & Sons	
			T-Met	
			Two Trees	
			Watson 24 Hour Recovery	

Population Plans for Trust Areas

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) how many groups are involved in the production of the population plans for the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area; (ii) the names and professions of members of the Professional Advisory Groups; and (iii) the groups working on the Compton Report.

(AQW 12122/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust has set up fifteen Professional Advisory Groups to support the development of the population plan for the Northern Trust area, as set out below:

- 1 Acute and General Medicine
- 2 Anaesthetics, Transport and Critical Care
- 3 Cardiology
- 4 Care of the Elderly and Stroke Medicine
- 5 Diabetes and Endocrinology
- 6 Emergency Medicine, Urgent Care and Minor Injuries
- 7 Gastroenterology and Nutrition
- 8 General Surgery
- 9 Medical Diagnostics
- 10 Medical Specialties (Renal, Neurology, Dermatology, Rheumatology, Haematology)
- 11 Obstetrics and Gynaecology
- 12 Paediatrics
- 13 Palliative Care
- 14 Respiratory Medicine
- 15 Pain Relief

The Professional Advisory Groups have been supported by the NHSCT Chief Executive, Medical Director, Nursing Director, Director of Acute Hospital Services and Director of Planning, Performance Management and Support Services and Local Commissioning Group representatives.

The groups consist of a cross section of staff including clinical, nursing and primary care representatives. The names and professions of the members of each group are provided on the table below. The General Practitioners involved move between different groups and their names are therefore not recorded against any specific Professional Advisory Group.

Member Name	Title	Professional Advisory Group
Dr Abraham Varghese	Consultant Physician	Acute & General Medicine
Dr Anil Xavier	Consultant - AGE team	Acute & General Medicine
Dr Charles Jack	Consultant Physician	Acute & General Medicine
Dr Ian Carl	Consultant Physician	Acute & General Medicine
Dr Naila Satti	Consultant Acute Physician	Acute & General Medicine
Dr Alexander Abraham	Consultant Anaesthetist	Anaesthetics, Transport & Critical Care
Dr Geoff Wright	Consultant Anaesthetist	Anaesthetics, Transport & Critical Care
Dr George Gardiner	Lead Clinician, Critical Care Network in Northern Ireland	Anaesthetics, Transport & Critical Care
Dr Gregory Furness	Clinical Director ATICS	Anaesthetics, Transport & Critical Care
Dr Ronald Bailie	Consultant Anaesthetist	Anaesthetics, Transport & Critical Care
Kate McCusker	Ward Manager, ICU	Anaesthetics, Transport & Critical Care
Kay Johnston	Lead Nurse, Anaesthetics	Anaesthetics, Transport & Critical Care
Ms Linda Mulholland	Network Manager, Critical Care Network in Northern Ireland	Anaesthetics, Transport & Critical Care
Wanda Love	Physiotherapist	Anaesthetics, Transport & Critical Care
Dr E Hunter	Consultant Physician	Cardiology
Dr John Riddell	Consultant Cardiologist	Cardiology

Member Name	Title	Professional Advisory Group
Dr Tom Trouton	Consultant Cardiologist	Cardiology
Karen McMaster	Physiotherapy Services Manager	Cardiology
Alison Friel	Orthoptics	Care of the Elderly & Stroke Medicine
Dr David Craig	Consultant Geriatrician	Care of the Elderly & Stroke Medicine
Dr Fergal Tracey	Consultant Physician	Care of the Elderly & Stroke Medicine
Dr James Gilmore	Clinical Lead Care of Elderly and Stroke	Care of the Elderly & Stroke Medicine
Dr Marina Lupari	Assistant Director Nursing Research & Development	Care of the Elderly & Stroke Medicine
Mrs Janice Russell	Physiotherapy Lead, Antrim Area	Care of the Elderly & Stroke Medicine
Ms Roisin Doyle	General Manager Acute Rehabilitation and SW	Care of the Elderly & Stroke Medicine
Paula Ford Hutchinson	Stroke Specialist Nurse	Care of the Elderly & Stroke Medicine
Alison Campbell Smyth	Podiatry Services Manager	Diabetes and Endocrinology
Dr Adele Kennedy	Consultant in Community Diabetes & Endocrinology	Diabetes and Endocrinology
Dr Rebecca Houghton	Consultant Clinical Psychologist	Diabetes and Endocrinology
Dr S Kassim	Consultant Physician	Diabetes and Endocrinology
Dr S Starzynski	Consultant Physician	Diabetes and Endocrinology
Jill Curry	Dietetics Services Manager	Diabetes and Endocrinology
Rosemary Megaw	Diabetic Nurse Specialist	Diabetes and Endocrinology
David McManus	NIAS representative	Emergency Medicine, Urgent Care & Minor Injuries
Denise Quinn	OT Lead	Emergency Medicine, Urgent Care & Minor Injuries
Dr Brendan Lavery	Consultant in Emergency Medicine	Emergency Medicine, Urgent Care & Minor Injuries
Dr Fergal Dunn	Consultant in Emergency Medicine	Emergency Medicine, Urgent Care & Minor Injuries
Dr Mark Jenkins	Consultant in Emergency Medicine	Emergency Medicine, Urgent Care & Minor Injuries
Heather McKeown	Emergency Nurse Practitioner	Emergency Medicine, Urgent Care & Minor Injuries
Dr George Jacob	GI Consultant	Gastroenterology & Nutrition
Dr Gerard Rafferty	Consultant Gastroenterologist	Gastroenterology & Nutrition
Margaret Kyle	Endoscopy Lead Nurse	Gastroenterology & Nutrition
Mary Kane	Stoma Care Nurse Specialist	Gastroenterology & Nutrition
Oonagh Moffett	Dietitian	Gastroenterology & Nutrition
Patrick Allen	GI Consultant	Gastroenterology & Nutrition
Pearse McDonald	Ward Manager, C4	Gastroenterology & Nutrition
Hazel Winning	OT Services Manager	General Surgery
Mr Colman Byrnes	Consultant Surgeon	General Surgery

Member Name	Title	Professional Advisory Group
Mr James Patterson	Consultant Surgeon	General Surgery
Mr M Whiteside	Consultant Surgeon	General Surgery
Mr Stephen Dace	Consultant Surgeon	General Surgery
Dr Barry Patterson	Consultant Radiologist	Medical Diagnostics
Dr Dianne Kirkpatrick	Consultant Radiologist	Medical Diagnostics
Dr Myles Nelson	Clinical Director Medical Diagnostic Specialities	Medical Diagnostics
Dr Paul Horan	Consultant Cardiologist	Medical Diagnostics
Dr Scott McCloskey	Consultant Haematologist	Medical Diagnostics
Mr David Wallace	GM in Radiology	Medical Diagnostics
Mr Geoff Kennedy	General Manager, Laboratory	Medical Diagnostics
Ms Geraldine McCafferty	Trust Clinical Lead Radiographer	Medical Diagnostics
Ms Virginia Anderson	Service Manager, Cardio-Respiratory Investigations	Medical Diagnostics
Prof Michael Scott	Head of Pharmacy	Medical Diagnostics
Dr Camille Harron	Clinical Lead Medical Specialities	Medical Specialties (Renal, Neurology, Dermatology, Rheum, Haem)
Dr Claire Riddell	Consultant Rheumatologist	Medical Specialties (Renal, Neurology, Dermatology, Rheum, Haem)
Dr Nabla McLoone	Consultant Dermatologist	Medical Specialties (Renal, Neurology, Dermatology, Rheum, Haem)
Dr Philip Windrum	Consultant Haematologist	Medical Specialties (Renal, Neurology, Dermatology, Rheum, Haem)
Dr Tom Esmonde	Consultant Neurologist	Medical Specialties (Renal, Neurology, Dermatology, Rheum, Haem)
Gerry Totten	Charge Nurse, Renal Unit	Medical Specialties (Renal, Neurology, Dermatology, Rheum, Haem)
Linda Millar	GM Surgery, Endoscopy and Gastroenterology	Medical Specialties (Renal, Neurology, Dermatology, Rheum, Haem)
Linda Patton	Gm Medical Services	Medical Specialties (Renal, Neurology, Dermatology, Rheum, Haem)
Lyn Gordon	Rheumatology Physiotherapist	Medical Specialties (Renal, Neurology, Dermatology, Rheum, Haem)
Dr B Marshall	Consultant in Obstetrics and Gynaecology	Obstetrics & Gynaecology
Dr Robert McMillen	Consultant Gynaecologist	Obstetrics & Gynaecology
Dr Shahnaz Nawaz	Consultant in Obstetrics and Gynaecology	Obstetrics & Gynaecology
Dr Shona Hamilton	Consultant Midwife	Obstetrics & Gynaecology
Janice Allen	Specialist Physiotherapist	Obstetrics & Gynaecology
Mrs Caroline Diamond	Lead Midwife	Obstetrics & Gynaecology
Mrs Margaret Gordon	Assistant Director - Acute Hospital Services (Obs/Gynae)	Obstetrics & Gynaecology

Member Name	Title	Professional Advisory Group
Mrs Sinead O'Kane	Head of Midwifery	Obstetrics & Gynaecology
Dr Michael Ledwith	Clinical Director Paediatrics	Paediatrics
Fiona Brown	Head of Children's Nursing	Paediatrics
Joy Peters	Orthoptic Service Manager	Paediatrics
Mildred Bell	Head of SLT & Associated Services	Paediatrics
Mrs Bernie Hartley	Project Manager - Paediatric Reform	Paediatrics
Ron Cooper	Consultant Anaesthesiologist	Pain Management
Bernie McGreevy	Specialist Physiotherapist	Palliative Care
Dr Alan McPherson	Consultant in Palliative Care	Palliative Care
Dr Yvonne Duff	MacMillan Consultant in Palliative Medicine	Palliative Care
Fiona Gilmour	Palliative Care Services Improvement Lead	Palliative Care
Sue Patchett	Macmillan Education Facilitator	Palliative Care
Christine Gamble	Respiratory Specialist Physiotherapist	Respiratory Medicine
Dr Julian Leggett	Consultant Respiratory Physician	Respiratory Medicine
Dr Liam Polley	Consultant in Respiratory Medicine	Respiratory Medicine
Dr Ronan Donnelly	Consultant in Respiratory Medicine	Respiratory Medicine
Dr Wendy Anderson	Consultant in Respiratory Medicine	Respiratory Medicine
Heather Gilmore	Respiratory Nurse	Respiratory Medicine
Pamela Armstrong	Physiotherapist	Respiratory Medicine
Sheila McGuckian	Clinical Physiologist	Respiratory Medicine
Siobhan Bradley	Respiratory Nurse Specialist	Respiratory Medicine
Tracey Norris	Clinical Services Lead	Respiratory Medicine
Dr L Beck	GP	
Dr B Bonnar	GP	
Dr T Brown	GP	
Dr Ian Buchanan	GP	
Dr K Caldwell	GP	
Dr B Connor	GP	
Dr Gillian Crooks	GP	
Dr Brian Dunn	GP	
Dr S Fannin	GP	
Dr Jan Ferguson	GP	
Dr Kathy Ferguson	GP	
Dr S Gallagher	GP	
Dr Hasson	GP	
Dr Brian Hunter	GP	

Member Name	Title	Professional Advisory Group
Dr David Johnston	GP	
Dr I Lalsingh	GP	
Dr T Lennox	GP	
Dr T Magowan	GP	
Dr Reginald McAuley	GP	
Dr K McConkey	GP	
Dr Bernard McCoy	GP	
Dr A McIlroy	GP	
Dr John McSparron	GP	
Dr Martin O'Kane	GP	
Dr Brian Patterson	GP	
Dr Barbara Savage	HSCB Medical Advisor	
Dr Colin Spence	GP	
Dr Turlough Tracey	GP	
Dr D White	GP	

Antrim Area Hospital: Hinds and Rutter Reports

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the Hinds and Rutter reports into the Antrim Area Hospital, what action he intends to take, particularly in relation to the finding of a failure to meet the 'fundamental human needs' of patients.

(AQW 12128/11-15)

Mr Poots: Both the Hinds and Rutter reviews were commissioned by the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) as part of their performance management strategy to improve patient waiting times and the overall patient experience at Antrim Area Hospital. This aligns with the work of the Emergency Department Improvement Action Group which I requested be established by the HSCB, in liaison with the Public Health Agency, to secure significant improvements in the performance of A&E Departments across Northern Ireland and the patient experience.

The HSCB will be reporting to the Department on the totality of the work on improving Emergency Department quality and performance and these reports make a helpful and important contribution to this work. As required by the Department, the Board is examining and applying the best available, evidence based, good practice in whole system, not just Emergency Department, management.

Erne Hospital, Enniskillen: Consultant Posts

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) how many consultant posts are currently vacant at the Erne Hospital, Enniskillen, broken down by post; and (ii) whether all the posts will be filled prior to the opening of the South West Acute Hospital, Enniskillen.

(AQW 12139/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Western Health and Social Care Trust advised that there are currently 11 vacancies for Consultants at Erne Hospital, Enniskillen.

The Trust further advised that one Consultant Cardiology post and one Consultant Radiologist post have been offered and accepted with the successful applicants taking up post in August 2012. Funding for a second Consultant Radiologist has been confirmed and the post will be advertised in June, but may be filled by a locum in the interim. Interviews are due to be held on 15 June for three Emergency Medicine Consultant posts (these posts are currently filled by two Trust locums and one agency locum). Two temporary locum Anaesthetic Consultant posts have been appointed to fill short term requirements with the successful applicants taking up post in August 2012. An agency locum is currently in situ for a vacant Elderly Care and Stroke Medicine post which will be re-advertised. A Trust locum is currently in situ for a vacant Obstetrics and Gynaecology post. Adverts for a Consultant Physician have been unsuccessful and the post will be re-advertised.

Information for this question was obtained directly from the Western Health and Social Care Trust and has not been validated by the Department.

Health and Social Care Trusts: Invoices

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) which Health and Social Care Trusts submitted their 10-day prompt payment performance figures in line with Annex 4.6.3 of Managing Public Money, prior to the issue of the departmental guidance contained in HSC(f)27/2012; and (ii) which Trusts have decided to change their reporting period from calendar days to working days.

(AQW 12151/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) In responding to AQW 7723/11 (13 February 2012), it became apparent that only the Southern HSC Trust had submitted 10-day prompt payment performance figures in line with Annex 4.6.3 of Managing Public Money Northern Ireland.
- (ii) HSC (F) 27/2012 requires all trusts to use working days as a basis for their 10 day prompt payment calculations.

Health and Social Care Bodies: Prompt Payment

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 7723/11-15, whether existing departmental guidance states that all Health and Social Care bodies, that report prompt payment performance figures, are expected to count the days elapsed from the date an invoice is first received.

(AQW 12153/11-15)

Mr Poots: The current Departmental guidance on this issue is contained in Circular HSS (F) 54/2008, which states that all possible steps should be taken to ensure that suppliers are paid in respect of valid invoices or from the receipt of goods/services (whichever is the later) as promptly as possible. In practice, this means the date on which an invoice is received by an organisation.

Paediatric Physiotherapists

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why paediatric physiotherapists are rated at Band 6 in the Western Health and Social Care Trust, and at Band 7 in the Northern, Southern, and South Eastern Health and Social Care Trusts **(AQW 12202/11-15)**

Mr Poots: I am advised that there is a combination of Band 6 and Band 7 paediatric physiotherapists in the Western HSC Trust; this is similar to the skill-mix in the Northern, Southern, and South Eastern Health and Social Care Trusts.

Arm's-length Bodies and Quangos

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current number of arm's-length bodies and quangos that are attached to his Department; and how this figure compares with the number in (i) 2008; (ii) 2009; (iii) 2010; and (iv) 2011.

(AQW 12231/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety currently has 17 Arms Length Bodies which are:

- Belfast Health and Social Care Trust;
- Southern Health and Social Care Trust;
- South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust;
- Western Health and Social Care Trust;
- Northern Health and Social Care Trust;
- NI Ambulance Service Trust;
- The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) ;
- The Public Health Agency (PHA);
- The Business Services Organization (BSO);
- The Patient and Client Council (PCC);
- NI Blood Transfusion Service (NIBTS);
- NI Guardian Ad Litem Agency (NIGALA);
- NI Medical & Dental Training Agency (NIMDTA);
- NI Social Care Council (NISCC);
- NI Practice & Education Council for Nursing & Midwifery (NIPEC);
- Regulation & Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA); and,
- NI Fire & Rescue Service (NIFRS)

The figures for the years (i) 2008; (ii) 2009; (iii)2010; and (iv) 2011 are shown in the table below:

	Year			
	2008	2009	2010	2011
Number of Arm's Length Bodies	22	17	17	17

Unemployment and Suicide

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether there is any research which suggests a relationship between increasing unemployment and a corresponding increase in the rate of suicide.

(AQW 12247/11-15)

Mr Poots: There have been a number of research studies undertaken on the relationship between increased unemployment and suicide rates.

In particular, studies indicate that unemployed people are at 2-3 times more risk of suicide (Platt S, Hawton K. Suicidal behaviour and the labour market. In: Hawton K, van Heeringen K, eds. The international handbook of suicide and attempted suicide. New York: Wiley, 2000: 310-84), and that every 1% increase in unemployment is associated with a 0.79% rise in suicides amongst people under 65 years of age (David Stuckler, Sanjay Basu, Marc Suhrcke, Adam Coutts, Martin McKee. The public health effect of economic crises and alternative policy responses in Europe: an empirical analysis. outline goes here

The Lancet, Volume 378, Issue 9786, Pages 124 - 125, 9 July 2011).

Bowel Cancer: Awareness

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of advertisements relating to bowel cancer that have been published in the printed media, by his Department and its arm's-length bodies, from 31 March 2011 to 31 March 2012, broken by the distribution in each council area.

(AQW 12273/11-15)

Mr Poots: A total of 32 advertisements relating to bowel cancer were published in the printed media from 31 March 2011 to 31 March 2012 by the Public Health Agency. This information cannot be broken by the distribution in each council area.

Bowel Cancer

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people diagnosed with bowel cancer in each of the last five years, broken down by council area.

(AQW 12274/11-15)

Mr Poots: The following table includes information regarding the number of new cases of colorectal cancer (ICD-10* C18-21) diagnosed in each year between 2005 and 2009 in N. Ireland, by Local Government District.

Local Government District	Number of cases				
	Year of diagnosis				
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Antrim	20	24	31	29	20
Ards	53	39	62	51	54
Armagh	26	31	44	29	34
Ballymena	29	42	34	44	35
Ballymoney	17	25	27	25	26
Banbridge	21	17	26	23	31
Belfast	167	187	206	183	183
Carrickfergus	31	23	29	26	29
Castlereagh	41	34	43	46	42
Coleraine	40	37	35	39	43
Cookstown	19	11	28	21	20

Local Government District	Number of cases				
	Year of diagnosis				
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Craigavon	44	50	54	49	46
Derry	51	61	73	50	56
Down	44	59	36	47	46
Dungannon	29	24	38	29	36
Fermanagh	36	35	43	45	40
Larne	24	26	20	19	19
Limavady	14	10	15	19	18
Lisburn	71	82	63	75	72
Magherafelt	23	22	20	23	32
Moyle	10	8	16	13	8
Newry & Mourne	53	54	44	61	60
Newtownabbey	40	54	62	52	39
North Down	50	52	57	49	47
Omagh	25	25	31	33	22
Strabane	22	21	18	21	26
Unknown	10	11	13	14	8

* For a listing and explanation of ICD-10 codes see International Classification of Diseases for Oncology, 3rd Edition, World Health Organisation, Geneva, 2000. For an explanation of ICD-10 codes see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ICD-10_codes.

Condition Management Programme

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussions his Department has had with the Department for Employment and Learning about the Condition Management Programme and its future after March 2013. **(AQW 12276/11-15)**

Mr Poots: My Department has had no discussions with the Department for Employment and Learning about the Condition Management Programme and its future after March 2013.

Social Workers: Sick Absence

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, for each of the last two years, how many social workers have been on sick leave for a period of more than a week in (i) Co Fermanagh; and (ii) the rest of Northern Ireland. **(AQW 12315/11-15)**

Mr Poots: Information on sick leave among social workers within Northern Ireland Health and Social Care is not available at county level, but by Health and Social Care Trust.

The number of social workers who have been on sick leave for a period of more than a week was provided by the HSC Trusts and is set out below:

Trust Name	April 2010-March 2011	April 2011- March 2012
Belfast	234	230
South Eastern	170	172
Southern	197	147
Northern	133	193

Trust Name	April 2010-March 2011	April 2011- March 2012
Western	198	192

Generic Drugs

Mr Kinahan asked Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the process of approving the use and distribution of generic drugs, including who determines the efficacy of generic versus proprietary drugs.

(AQW 12318/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) is the UK government agency that is responsible for ensuring that medicines work effectively and are acceptably safe. Whether it is a medicine that can be bought, or one prescribed as part of a course of treatment, medicines which are placed on the UK market legitimately are subject to scrutiny by the MHRA before they can be used by patients. This ensures that medicines, whether they are generic or proprietary, meet acceptable standards on safety, quality and efficacy.

The use of generic medicines in favour of branded equivalents is a central strand in my Department's overall strategy to improve quality in medicines management for all patients through cost effective prescribing. However it remains for the clinician, in consultation with their patient, to decide on an appropriate course of treatment for the patient and to prescribe the medication to best support that treatment. Clear guidelines are issued to prescribers and dispensers outlining situations where it is appropriate that medicines are prescribed and dispensed in the proprietary form.

Medical Personnel from the Indian Subcontinent

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action is being taken to recruit qualified medical personnel from the Indian sub-continent to help fill vacancies which are likely to occur, particularly at the Causeway Hospital, Coleraine.

(AQW 12321/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency (NIMDTA) attempted to recruit junior doctors from the Indian sub continent in 2009, and again in 2010. However these recruitment drives met with only modest success. Changes to the immigration rules in 2008 have made it more difficult to recruit doctors from outside the EEA. NIMDTA is currently undertaking a recruitment round of junior doctors for August 2012 and anticipates that most, if not all, vacancies in Emergency Medicine at Causeway hospital will be filled.

Private Sector Healthcare: Referrals

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to referrals to private sector providers for outpatient surgical specialities such as general surgery or gynaecology, what proportion of referrals, compared with referrals to Health Service outpatients, generate complex investigations such as CT or MRI scans, or surgical interventions.

(AQW 12361/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information on the proportion of outpatients assessed by private sector providers in the general surgery and gynaecology specialties that required complex investigations such as CT or MRI scans, or surgical interventions, compared to that for outpatients assessed in these specialties within the Health Service, is not available in the format requested. Provision of this information by Health and Social Care Trusts would incur a disproportionate cost.

Civil Servants

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQ 11848/11-15, whether he can confirm that no staff currently employed in his Department have been re-employed after receiving a redundancy package from the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

(AQW 12385/11-15)

Mr Poots: I can confirm that my Department has no record of any staff currently employed, who have been re-employed after receiving a redundancy package from the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Occupational Therapists

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many sensory occupational therapists are employed in each Health and Social Care Trust area; and what is the average waiting time to see one of these therapists in each area.

(AQW 12386/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Trusts have informed the Department that they do not employ dedicated Sensory Occupational Therapists. Occupational Therapists use the Sensory Profile assessment and Sensory Processing Measure as tools in conjunction with other assessments to assist in determining sensory issues. A number of Occupational Therapists in all Trusts have completed some modules of Sensory Integration Training.

The Occupational Therapy Service has a waiting list of clients who require an assessment. Some of these clients may require an element of sensory intervention but until assessment is completed this will not be confirmed.

Therefore information on waiting lists for specific interventions such as sensory is not available.

Health Service: Dental Treatment

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the average waiting time for patients, who have special needs, to receive Health Service dental treatment.

(AQW 12394/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information on the average waiting time for patients, who have special needs, to receive Health Service dental treatment, is not available in the format requested.

Appointments: Text Messages

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether there are any legislative or data protection issues preventing General Practitioners from sending text messages to remind patients of scheduled appointments.

(AQW 12404/11-15)

Mr Poots: Under the General Medical Services Contract there are no legislative issues preventing practices from sending text messages to remind patients of scheduled appointments. The supply of a mobile phone number would suggest that a patient had given consent to be contacted using that number. Provided the message issued did not include any personal or identifiable information there are unlikely to be any Data Protection issues.

Missed appointments represent a substantial cost to the health service and an unacceptable waste of scarce public resources. All options that can help to reduce the numbers of missed appointments and ensure better use of taxpayers' money should be explored.

Treehouse Kindergarten Crèche, Dungannon

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the closure of Treehouse Kindergarten Crèche, Dungannon, to detail (i) the monitoring role carried out by his Department and the Southern Health and Social Care Trust; (ii) what compensation will be made available to (a) parents who paid in advance for a place for their children; and (b) staff for unpaid wages; and (iii) what measures will be taken to provide extra childcare facilities for the families who used this facility.

(AQW 12471/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 (the Order) requires day care settings to be registered and inspected to protect children, to provide reassurance to persons using independent services who are arranging for their child to be looked after by someone who is not a relation and may be a stranger, to ensure services meet acceptable standards and to ensure that people wishing to provide services for children do so within an agreed framework. No assessment is made of the financial viability of any day care setting that is registered and inspected.

The last inspection of Treehouse Kindergarten Crèche, Dungannon, was carried out by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust on 28th September 2011 and all statutory requirements were in place.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has no role in compensating the staff or customers of a failed private enterprise.

Under the provisions of the Order, the Department has a statutory requirement to provide day care for children in need. It is not the Department's role to provide or support private enterprises to carry out commercial activity. However, the Southern Health and Social Care Trust is working with the appropriate parties to identify a Registered Person who could take over management of the facility.

Antrim Area Hospital: Rheumatology Department

Mr Girvan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are on the waiting list for the Rheumatology Department at the Antrim Area Hospital; and how this figure compares with other hospitals.

(AQW 12500/11-15)

Mr Poots: Waiting times for a first outpatient appointment are collected on a Health and Social Care Trust, not hospital, basis.

The number of patients waiting and the length of time they were waiting in weeks, for a first outpatient appointment in the Rheumatology specialty, at each HSC Trust, at 31st March 2012, the latest quarter for which official statistics are available, are outlined in the table below.

HSC Trust	Waiting time (in weeks)						Total waiting
	0 - 6	6 - 9	9 - 13	13 - 21	21 - 26	26 and over	
Belfast	423	169	141	276	189	237	1,435
Northern	284	123	79	74	11	0	571
South Eastern	385	156	132	113	4	1	791
Southern	240	85	65	42	0	0	432
Western	240	49	0	0	0	0	289
Northern Ireland	1,572	582	417	505	204	238	3,518

Source: Departmental Return CH3

There were no patients waiting at 31st March 2012 for inpatient admission to the Northern HSC Trust in the Rheumatology specialty. Inpatient admissions in the Rheumatology specialty at the Northern HSC Trust are predominantly planned admissions. These are patients waiting to be admitted at a 'planned' or 'clinically appropriate' time, and are therefore not included on the inpatient waiting list.

Northern Health and Social Care Trust: Statutory Residential Homes

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the need to implement recommendation 18 of the Northern Health and Social Care Trust's revised proposal on statutory residential homes which was published in March 2009, what progress has been made in securing capital commitments and obtaining planning permission for new accommodation and services on the site of Greenisland House.

(AQW 12518/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust has been working with colleagues in the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) to identify the priorities for development of Supported Housing within its locale and Greenisland House has been prioritised for replacement within this programme. The Trust has had regular meetings with a local stakeholder group regarding the proposal to develop a supported housing scheme on this site.

I can advise that the Trust is currently awaiting the appointment, by NIHE, of a housing provider to progress the planning of the build and application for planning permission with the expectation that will be completed during the financial year 2013/2014.

Sexually Transmitted Infections

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have been treated for sexually transmitted infections, in each GUM clinic, in each of the last ten years.

(AQW 12524/11-15)

Mr Poots: The total number of attendances¹ at consultant led outpatient clinics within the Genito Urinary Medicine (GUM) specialty, at each hospital providing this service for each of the last ten years is outlined in the table below.

Financial Year	Hospital			Total
	Altnagelvin	Daisy Hill	Royal Victoria ²	
2002/03	6,454	1,426	17,750	25,630
2003/04	7,222	1,615	16,762	25,599
2004/05	7,201	1,731	16,905	25,837
2005/06	7,008	1,650	17,335	25,993
2006/07	6,532	1,522	14,844	22,898
2007/08	6,434	1,830	14,504	22,768
2008/09	4,354	2,034	15,057	21,445
2009/10	4,859	2,003	19,065	25,927
2010/11	4,983	1,840	19,185	26,008
2011/12 ^P	6,191	1,371	16,168	23,730

Source: Departmental Return KH09 Part 1 (2002/03 to 2007/08) and Departmental Return QOAR (2008/09 to 2011/12) PData are currently provisional

- 1 These data relate to total number of attendances at outpatient clinics within the GUM specialty and does not equate exactly to the total number of patients that attended these services each year, as a single patient may have had multiple attendances.
- 2 The Belfast HSC Trust also provides GUM services at the Causeway hospital. Attendances at this service are included within the figures for the Royal Victoria hospital.

Internship Programmes

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many internships are available in his Department; and if none, what plans he has to introduce an internship scheme.

(AQW 12551/11-15)

Mr Poots: Northern Ireland Civil Service internships are managed centrally by Corporate HR within DFP. In the 2012/13 academic year, DHSSPS will be providing one internship opportunity.

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service: Pensions

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 12166/11-15, when he intends to make a decision on this matter.

(AQW 12554/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Executive is committed to a policy of parity in public sector pensions. I will consider this issue fully once decisions have been taken at national level.

Department of Justice

Ardoyne Protest: Costs

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in light of the failure to overturn convictions at the Court of Appeal for the illegal protest in Ardoyne, Belfast, in July 2012, to detail (i) the cost of Legal Aid to date, broken down by (a) solicitor; and (b) counsel; (ii) the estimated final cost of Legal Aid; and (iii) how many law firms and counsel were instructed.

(AQW 11862/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): To date, the Legal Aid costs in respect of the illegal protest in Ardoyne, Belfast, in July 2011 are as follows:

Solicitors - £48,444.56 (inc. VAT and Disbursements)

Counsel - £6,989.35 (inc. VAT and Disbursements)

In addition, a further £5378.08 (inc. VAT and Disbursements) has been paid under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE) to solicitors, (PACE fees are not payable to Counsel)

It is not possible to provide a final estimate of costs as twenty three claims for legal fees are still outstanding in relation to the cases heard in the Crown Court.

A total of 30 solicitors firms were instructed in relation to this incident. It is not possible to provide a figure in respect of the number of counsel instructed until all of the claims have been received.

Colin Bell and John Deery: Investigation into Death of

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 11411/11-15, whether it was appropriate for two members of Prison Service staff, who were involved in the investigation or disciplinary process following the death in custody of Colin Bell, to be involved in the investigation or disciplinary process following the death in custody of John Deery.

(AQW 12016/11-15)

Mr Ford: Both members of staff were carrying out their respective duties following both deaths, in accordance with the current Prison Service Code of Conduct and Discipline.

Prisons: Signage

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Justice whether there has been any change in the format and design used for internal or external signage to designate HM Prisons in Northern Ireland in the last 12 months.

(AQW 12019/11-15)

Mr Ford: In the last twelve months, a number of new signs have been erected at Maghaberry Prison which include the Department of Justice logo and therefore reflect the corporate identity of NIPS as an agency of the Department of Justice. No new signs have been erected at either Magilligan Prison or Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre and Prison in the last twelve months.

Magilligan Prison

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Justice when the main block of Magilligan Prison was built.
(AQW 12021/11-15)

Mr Ford: There is no designated 'main' accommodation block on the Magilligan site. The prison houses several accommodation blocks. The build dates for these blocks are listed below:

H Blocks x 3 – built in 1979

Foyleview – built in 1990

Sperrin House – built in 2001

Alpha – built in 2007

Halward House – built in 2008

Magilligan Prison: Staff

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Justice how many staff are employed in Magilligan Prison, broken down by post.
(AQW 12023/11-15)

Mr Ford: The breakdown of NIPS staff currently employed in Magilligan Prison is summarised in the tables below.

Discipline Staff

Post / Grade	No of Staff
Governor (G1, G3, G4 and 4 x G5)	7
Principal Officer (PO)	11
Senior Officer (SO)	46
Main Grade Officer (MGO)	197
Night Custody Officer (NCO)	53
Operational Support Grade (OSG)	55
Total	369

Civilian Staff

Post / Grade	No of Staff
Principal Psychologist (Grade 7)	1
Deputy Principal (DP)	5
Staff Officer (SO)	13
Executive Officer 1 (E01)	8
Executive Officer 2 (E02)	5
Administrative Officer (AO)	26
Administrative Assistant (AA)	4
Civilian Driver	1
Kitchen Porter / Driver	7
Part time organist (Sundays)	1
Total	71

Youth Justice Review

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice when he will report to the Committee for Justice on the recommendations that he intends to take forward from the Review of the Youth Justice System.

(AQW 12030/11-15)

Mr Ford: The consultation on the Youth Justice Review received 77 inputs, comprising 63 written responses, the reports of three specially commissioned targeted consultations, seven public events and four HCN meetings. Each of these documents is now available on the Department of Justice website. Copies of the response documents, a briefing paper and the summary of responses document were supplied to the Committee for Justice in advance of the oral briefing given by my officials to the Committee on 31 May.

I will attend the Justice Committee meeting on 28 June to set out how I am minded to proceed and to give members a further opportunity to offer advice before final decisions are made. I will then make an announcement in the Assembly early in the new session on the way forward.

Youth Justice Review

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice when he will publish the analysis of the consultation responses to the Review of the Youth Justice System.

(AQW 12031/11-15)

Mr Ford: The consultation on the Youth Justice Review received 77 inputs, comprising 63 written responses, the reports of three specially commissioned targeted consultations, seven public events and four HCN meetings. Each of these documents is now available on the Department of Justice website. Copies of the response documents, a briefing paper and the summary of responses document were supplied to the Committee for Justice in advance of the oral briefing given by my officials to the Committee on 31 May.

I will attend the Justice Committee meeting on 28 June to set out how I am minded to proceed and to give members a further opportunity to offer advice before final decisions are made. I will then make an announcement in the Assembly early in the new session on the way forward.

Youth Justice Review

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice whether the Youth Justice Review will have an oversight body or commissioner to ensure its proper implementation.

(AQW 12110/11-15)

Mr Ford: I will be appearing before the Justice Committee on 28 June to set out my proposed approach to the implementation of the Youth Justice Review and will be interested to hear members' views at that time. In terms of oversight of the implementation process, I have already clearly indicated that reform in this area is a priority and I will be taking a direct and personal interest in its progress against a published implementation plan.

At this stage, I am not persuaded that a new or additional oversight mechanism is necessary, given the roles that Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland and the Justice Committee already play. However, I recognise the importance of being able to objectively validate the extent to which implementation has been completed and am considering how best to achieve that outcome.

Youth Justice Review

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice to list the responses that have been received to the consultation on the Youth Justice Review.

(AQW 12112/11-15)

Mr Ford: The consultation on the Youth Justice Review received 77 inputs, comprising 63 written responses, the reports of three specially commissioned targeted consultations, seven public events and four Housing Community Network meetings. Each of these documents is now available on the Department of Justice website, along with the Summary of Responses document which also contains a list of respondents.

Prisoner Assessment Unit: Closure

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether HM Inspector of Prisons has been furnished with the report into the Prisoner Assessment Unit closure and details of issues which have followed.

(AQW 12157/11-15)

Mr Ford: HM Inspector of Prisons has responsibility for arranging inspections of prison establishments in England and Wales. He has no direct responsibility for inspections of prison establishments in Northern Ireland but does so at the invitation of Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI). The Northern Ireland Prison Service has therefore not furnished HM Inspector of Prisons with a copy of the report into the Prisoner Assessment Unit closure.

However a copy of the Report of the Investigation into the Prisoner Assessment Unit was shared with Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) for information purposes in relation to the ongoing CJINI thematic inspection into the management of life

sentence prisoners. The report was not retained by CJINI and no further updates have been provided to CJINI regarding any follow up action being taken or under consideration.

Diamond Jubilee: Medals

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Justice why civilian members of the PSNI are not eligible for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal. (AQW 12187/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Diamond Jubilee medal is awarded to recognise and reward the service and dedication of key frontline services and, in particular, to those who are exposed regularly to difficult, often emergency situations and who potentially risk their lives. Eligibility is not extended to police staff in any part of the UK, and this is consistent with previous Jubilee medals.

Child Sex Offender Disclosure Scheme in England and Wales

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the Child Sex Offender Disclosure Scheme in England and Wales; and whether he intends to introduce, or pilot, a similar scheme.

(AQW 12208/11-15)

Mr Ford: Child sex offender disclosure schemes operate in the other UK jurisdictions. Although the number of disclosures has been low, the evaluation report of the pilot schemes suggests the schemes are successful additional child protection measures.

I intend to consult on whether a similar scheme should be introduced in Northern Ireland. The PSNI is considering its position. I await the result of that, prior to taking decisions on the issue of a consultation paper.

Court Case 05/064502 and 06/052489

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the reasons for the dismissal of the case against the defendant at East Tyrone Magistrates Court on Wednesday 23 May 2012, after he was arrested on foot of warrants issued in cases 05/064502 and 06/052489.

(AQW 12232/11-15)

Mr Ford: On 23 May 2012 at Dungannon Magistrates' Court the District Judge (Magistrates' Court) ordered that the charges in case numbers 05/064502 and 06/052489 be withdrawn.

This is a judicial decision and the reasons underpinning it are not recorded.

Forensic Science Northern Ireland: Cases

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many cases are (i) currently being analysed; and (ii) waiting to be analysed by Forensic Services Northern Ireland.

(AQW 12268/11-15)

Mr Ford: At 31 May 2012, there were 1,132 cases at various stages of the analysis or reporting process in Forensic Science Northern Ireland (FSNI) relating to approximately 4,700 items submitted for examination. 172 cases were pending analysis.

Police Officers: Injury on Duty Pension

Mr Givan asked Minister of Justice to outline the process for appealing the decision by the Independent Medical Referee to the Medical Appeal Tribunal, in respect of decisions taken for the non-award of a retrospective Injury on Duty pension for police officers.

(AQW 12277/11-15)

Mr Ford: The decision of an Independent Medical Referee (IMR) cannot be appealed to a medical appeal tribunal. It can be challenged either by approaching the Policing Board and seeking their agreement to a reconsideration or by Judicial Review.

The decision of the Policing Board as to the award of an Injury on Duty pension – which would be based upon the medical opinion of the IMR – can be appealed to a medical appeal tribunal. The appeal should be made in writing to the Policing Board.

Compensation Claims for Criminal Injuries

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many compensation claims for criminal injuries sustained by victims of crime have been received in each of the last five years; and how many of these were (i) successful; and (ii) unsuccessful.

(AQW 12302/11-15)

Mr Ford: The information requested is outlined in the tables overleaf.

Criminal Injuries 1988 Order

Financial Year	Claims Received under the Criminal Injuries 1988 Order	Successful	Unsuccessful	Live Claims Remaining
2007/08	39	27	11	1
2008/09	15	9	5	1
2009/10	26	8	8	10
2010/11	21	3	8	10
2011/12	16	0	1	15

Tariff Scheme

Financial Year	Claims Received under the Tariff Scheme (Introduced in 2002)	Successful	Unsuccessful	Live Claims Remaining
2007/08	4,922	1,941	2,808	173
2008/09	5,294	2,106	2,963	225
2009/10	5,059	1,833	2,795	431
2010/11	5,403	1,471	2,691	1,241
2011/12	5,260	323	1,236	3,701

Note:

From the live claims remaining no confirmation can be given of how many of these will ultimately be successful.

Forensic Science Northern Ireland: Waiting Times

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice what is the current average waiting time for forensic reports from Forensic Services Northern Ireland.

(AQW 12309/11-15)

Mr Ford: Calculating an average waiting time for forensic reports involves combining data across a number of different examination types and processes within a diverse range of science specialisms, each with their own timescales for examination, analysis and reporting.

Whilst urgent reports are often turned around in hours or days, other formal reports may, for operational reasons, take several months or longer, although interim findings may be given informally at an early stage.

FSNI manages its work on a work allocation basis, each allocation generating a report. Cases vary considerably in the nature and volume of the allocations assigned to them.

The length of time between original allocation and the associated final report may be as short as one to five days for some reports whilst, overall, 90% are within 150 days. There are however, some historical allocations remaining open for several years, as part of ongoing police investigations.

The average time for reporting the approximately 9000 allocations per year - not including DNA Criminal Justice (CJ) samples, but including the historical cases - is 72 days.

With the 8000 DNA CJ samples included, the overall Agency average is 44 days.

Human Trafficking

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Justice what measures are being taken in the North Antrim constituency to (i) prevent human trafficking; (ii) convict the perpetrators; and (iii) raise local awareness of human trafficking.

(AQW 12327/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Organised Crime Task Force's Immigration and Human Trafficking sub group shares intelligence and works in partnership to tackle human trafficking. Membership is drawn from a broad range of law enforcement agencies including Police Service of Northern Ireland, United Kingdom Border Agency, Serious and Organised Crime Agency and An Garda Síochána so that issues relevant to Northern Ireland as a whole are taken into account along with the cross border and wider aspects of human

trafficking. Law enforcement investigations into human trafficking are focused on the criminals involved and not on specific areas. PSNI and others will follow the evidence, wherever it leads, and pursue convictions where evidence is available.

There have been two convictions for human trafficking recently in separate cases and others are being prosecuted by the Public Prosecution Service.

The OCTF has run awareness campaigns across Northern Ireland. It has also commissioned research into "changing the mindset" to inform its strategy to change attitudes and behaviours towards organised crime, including human trafficking. The results of the latest phase of the research are expected shortly.

There is significant interest in human trafficking and I know from the conferences and events that I attend that the Non Governmental Sector in Northern Ireland is keen to engage, as is the Assembly All Party Group on Human Trafficking.

I am currently consulting on how the Department of Justice can enhance its engagement with this sector. I hope those with an interest will respond to this.

Dispersal Orders

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Justice (i) why Dispersal Orders were not introduced when Anti-Social Behaviour Orders came into effect in 2004; and (ii) for his assessment of the value of Dispersal Orders in aiding the PSNI in tackling anti-social behaviour.

(AQW 12368/11-15)

Mr Ford: The decision to introduce the Anti-Social Behaviour (Northern Ireland) Order 2004 was taken prior to the devolution of policing and justice powers to the Northern Ireland Executive. I am therefore not privy to the reasoning as to why the then Justice Minister, Paul Goggins MP, did not introduce Dispersal Orders at that time.

The recent public consultation on a new Community Strategy provided an opportunity for consideration of the current approach to tackle anti-social behaviour, which is based on a graduated response of prevention, intervention and enforcement, and which has contributed to a reduction of over 20% in anti-social behaviour incidents since 2008. Respondents to the consultation on the Community Safety Strategy endorsed a preventive approach to anti-social behaviour, with enforcement seen as a last resort. There were no compelling arguments in support of Dispersal Orders.

Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland has recently undertaken an inspection of the criminal justice system's approach to addressing anti-social behaviour. The purpose of this inspection was to assess the approach to anti-social behaviour across the criminal system, including the Police Service for Northern Ireland. It considered Strategy and Governance, Delivery, and Outcomes as well as how the approach to anti-social behaviour in Northern Ireland aligns with existing good practice. The outcome of the inspection is due in the coming months and I will consider any recommendations arising from it.

Claims Management Companies: Convictions

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice how many convictions have been secured against claims management companies, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 12369/11-15)

Mr Ford: The information requested is not available. Court conviction datasets do not hold the information required to identify companies and their business sector(s).

Claims Management Companies: Regulation

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice whether his Department has had any discussions with the Ministry of Justice in England and Wales regarding the better regulation of claims management companies.

(AQW 12370/11-15)

Mr Ford: Whilst the responsibility for the regulation of Claims Management Companies in England and Wales rests with the Ministry of Justice, my Department does not have a similar remit in Northern Ireland. I have therefore recently written to the Minister for Finance and Personnel to ask that the Minister considers the matter. I have also drawn this to the attention of the First and deputy First Minister.

Sentencing Statistics

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice why his Department's latest statistics on sentencing do not go beyond 2006.

(AQW 12371/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Department's Statistics and Research Branch had previously encountered technical difficulties in translating files from criminal justice organisations' legacy systems; however, an alternative source to access the information required has now been secured.

Provisional data on convictions for 2007 and 2008 has been available for answering Assembly Questions since October 2011. Conviction data for 2009 will be available after the summer recess.

Work is currently progressing in parallel to verify all of the information and provide data from 2010 onwards.

Car Insurance Cases: Referral Fees

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice whether he has any plans to outlaw referral fees in car insurance cases.
(AQW 12372/11-15)

Mr Ford: As I said in AQW11491/11-15 at present solicitors in Northern Ireland are prohibited from paying or receiving referral fees in respect of personal injury (or indeed any) claims.

It is a matter for the Department of Finance and Personnel whether any further regulation of the solicitors' profession is required.

RUC George Cross Foundation: Trustee

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Justice how many applications were received for the position of Trustee of the RUC George Cross Foundation; and how many were rejected at the sift stage.
(AQW 12392/11-15)

Mr Ford: A total of nine applications were received for the position of Trustee of the RUC George Cross Foundation. During the sift exercise the Competition Selection Panel deemed three applications as not successful.

Offender Levy

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Justice when he plans to bring into force the offenders levy as provided for under the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.
(AQW 12405/11-15)

Mr Ford: Provisions of the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 which allow for the introduction of the offender levy to immediate custody, court fines and penalty notices commenced on 6 June 2012.

Department for Regional Development

Translink: Consultants

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development how much Translink has spent on consultants in each of the last three years; and for what purpose were the consultants engaged.
(AQW 11978/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): The Translink expenditure on the use of external consultants in each of the last three financial years is set out in the table below:

Financial Year	Expenditure £k
2009/10	97
2010/11	112
2011/12	139*

* 2011/12 Provisional Outturn

The majority of this expenditure (£74k / £99k / £139k over the three years) was on consultants engaged by Translink to provide specialist services to carry out inspections and structural assessments of bridges. The other consultancy costs relate to the provision of advice on organisational and change management issues.

All-Ireland Freight Forum

Mr McMullan asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the remit of the All-Ireland Freight Forum and whether it includes road transport; and what actions were agreed by the Steering Group on 7 November 2011.
(AQW 12013/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The All Island Freight Forum brings government and industry together with the aim of enhancing the competitiveness, connectivity and sustainability of the freight sector in Ireland. There are working groups looking at five priority areas which are

- Being Competitive in a Sustainable Manner
- Safer, Compliant, Eco Efficient Road Freight Transport
- Rail Freight and other alternatives
- International Connectivity
- Network Management

The Forum had a plenary meeting on 7 November 2011 in Belfast that was attended by representatives from government, the freight sector and the wider business community. This meeting looked at the work done by the working groups and the major issues facing the freight sector on a local and international scale. A subsequent administrative steering group met on 13 March 2012 and agreed that the work of the forum will need to focus on new areas in order to remain relevant to the needs of the freight sector.

Rural Community Transport

Mr McMullan asked the Minister for Regional Development what action has been taken to restore community transport for people in rural areas who have to attend hospital appointments.

(AQW 12014/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My response to AQW 9282/11-15 dated 15 March 2012 sets out my Department's position in regard to this matter. There has been no change to my Department's approach to funding services under the Rural Transport Fund (RTF) and provided by Rural Community Transport Partnerships.

Portadown Town Plaza

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 11326/11-15, to list the cases, in the last three years, where a road or sewer bond was not adequate to fund the outstanding work required to bring a development up to standard; and the cost to the public purse of the additional work.

(AQW 12026/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's officials have advised that within the past three years, six developments where the bonds in place were not sufficient to cover all outstanding works have been completed following enforcement proceedings to bring them up to adoptable standards. The six developments are:

- Westlands Development, Portavogie
- Oakfields, Craigavon
- Broomhill, Magheralin
- Brookvale, Aghory
- Clonabay, Coalisland
- Bramblewood, Crumlin.

At this time, it is not possible to say what the final cost to the public purse will be for these sites. That is because my Department is still pursuing recovery of costs over and above the bond values, under civil debt procedures as provided for in the Private Streets (Northern Ireland) Order 1980. Recovery is sought from the developers or, where they have ceased trading, from the administrator, liquidator, or other legally responsible party.

Final costs to the public purse will only be known when these debt recovery proceedings have been concluded.

Apprenticeship Programmes

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the apprenticeship programmes available within his Department; (ii) the apprenticeship programmes provided by his Department; (iii) the number of people currently enrolled in these programmes; and (iv) the number of places available on the programmes.

(AQW 12090/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department, along with other Departments, contributes to the Programme-Led Apprenticeship (PLA) programme which was introduced by the Department for Employment and Learning in September 2009. This programme assists young people who have been unable to find employment as apprentices during the economic downturn.

Under the PLA programme, DRD has made a total of 12 work placements available, all within its Roads Service workshops. Of these placements, 10 are currently filled.

Warrenpoint Port

Mr Rogers asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 10097/11-15, to detail the figures in the feasibility report findings which related to the number of HGV lorries, with trailers attached, that (i) enter; and (ii) exit Warrenpoint Port each week.

(AQW 12120/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that there was a comprehensive programme of traffic surveys undertaken to inform the feasibility study into the proposed Newry Southern Relief Road, the specific details requested by the Member are not available. The purpose of these surveys was to determine the traffic conditions prevailing on the road network likely to be affected by the proposed road and to assess how much traffic might transfer to the proposed new road.

However, Roads Service has further advised that a Manual Classification Count survey was also undertaken on the A2 Newry Road, Warrenpoint, at the entrance to Warrenpoint Harbour, at that time. While the range of vehicle classifications does not include the specific category requested, it does include a classification covering the larger Heavy Goods Vehicles. This

classification, "Other Goods Vehicles 2" (OGV2), includes 3-axle articulated vehicles and vehicles with 4 or more axles, which includes 4-axle rigid vehicles.

Roads Service has advised that the survey data indicated that during the period of the survey, from 7:00am to 7:00 pm on Thursday 3 May 2007, a total of 240 OGV2 vehicles entered Warrenpoint Harbour and 183 OGV2 vehicles exited from the port.

Rail Service: Donegal

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has had any discussions with the Minister of Transport, Tourism and Sport in the Republic of Ireland about restoring the rail service to Donegal.

(AQW 12191/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have not had any discussions on this matter with the Irish Minister of Transport, Tourism and Sport.

During the development of the Northern Railways Corridor Study, my officials met with members of Donegal County Council to explore the possibility of a feasibility study in relation to constructing rail links to and through Donegal. It was noted that progress of a feasibility study would require the agreement of the Irish Government.

Since then, Irish Rail has published its "2030 Rail Network Strategy Review". This report carried out a preliminary appraisal of proposals for rail links between Londonderry and Letterkenny and between Londonderry and Strabane/Lifford. Neither proposal performed sufficiently well in the appraisal to be considered further. I understand that, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport is not prepared to support a further feasibility study at this time.

If, in the longer term, proposals come forward from the Irish authorities for a rail connection between Londonderry and Donegal, these could be considered further in the forthcoming investment prioritisation framework to be established under the new approach to Regional Transportation Strategy.

Arm's-length Bodies and Quangos

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the current number of arm's-length bodies and quangos that are attached to his Department; and how this figure compares with the number in (i) 2008; (ii) 2009; (iii) 2010; and (iv) 2011.

(AQW 12289/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department currently has two Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs). This is the same number of ALBs as in 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011.

Rural Community Transport: Fermanagh and South Tyrone

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the reduction in his Department's funding for Easylink and Fermanagh Community Transport in the last twelve months; and for his assessment of the impact of these reductions on rural dwellers depending on the service.

(AQW 12395/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Easylink received £549,454 for the 2011/12 financial year and Rural Lift and Fermanagh and South Tyrone (FAST) Rural Community Transport Partnerships (these two companies propose to merge into one company, Fermanagh Community Transport (FCT) later this year) received £529,164 funding for the same period. Included in these figures were additional support of (£30,600 and £29,281) which was provided towards the end of year and which reflected overall resources in the Department following in year monitoring rounds.

For 2012/13 the level of funding available to Easylink will be £483,207 and for Rural Lift/Fast (FCT) will be £446,454. It is not possible to anticipate at this stage if this will be supplemented in-year.

The baseline level of funding from the Rural Transport Fund which is administered by my Department was not reduced during the last budget exercise. In year monitoring rounds may be helpful in supplementing funding available but this is not guaranteed.

The increase in demand for services and the rising cost in providing these should lead all the partnerships to consider how efficiently they are running their organisations, make changes where necessary to prioritise front line services.

Department for Social Development

Housing Executive and Housing Association Properties

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of (i) major; and (ii) minor adaptations carried out on (a) Housing Executive; and (b) housing association properties in each of the last five years, broken down by district office area.

(AQW 11636/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): The information cannot be provided in the format requested because figures for minor adaptations for 2009/10 are only available by Housing Executive Area, as the database which held those details was replaced by an alternative computer system.

In relation to Housing Associations, it is not possible to report separately on the number of major and minor adaptations nor can this figure be provided by Housing Executive District Office or Area.

Tables 1 to 5 below details the major and minor adaptations to Housing Executive properties in each of the last five years, and Table 6 details the number of grants approved by the Housing Executive for disabled adaptations to Housing Association properties in each of the last five years.

Table 1 – 2007/08

NIHE District	Major	Minor	Total
Belfast West	25	231	256
Belfast East	41	200	241
Belfast South	29	179	208
Belfast North	43	357	400
Shankill	51	264	315
Belfast Area	189	1231	1420
Bangor	47	182	229
Ards	49	245	294
Castlereagh	37	180	217
Lisburn	51	276	327
Dairyfarm	18	115	133
Downpatrick	62	182	244
S. East Area	264	1180	1444
Banbridge	22	112	134
Newry	56	199	255
Armagh	21	121	142
Craigavon	32	121	153
Portadown	17	69	86
Dungannon	26	58	84
Fermanagh	30	165	195
South Area	204	845	1049
Ballymena	21	217	238
Antrim	19	135	154
N'abbey1	14	80	94
N'abbey2	16	200	216
Carrick	11	157	168
Larne	3	90	93
Ballycastle	13	51	64
Ballymoney	21	217	238
Coleraine	20	195	215
N. East	138	1342	1480
Waterloo	38	77	115
Waterside	23	115	138
Collon Tce	39	58	97

NIHE District	Major	Minor	Total
Limavady	23	64	87
Magherafelt	11	57	68
Strabane	29	75	104
Omagh	9	81	90
Cookstown	17	23	40
West Area	189	550	739
Northern Ireland	984	5148	6132

Table 2 – 2008/09

NIHE DISTRICT	Major	Minor	Total
Belfast West	27	240	267
Belfast East	23	183	206
Belfast South	31	200	231
Belfast North	33	308	341
Shankill	29	261	290
Belfast Area	143	1192	1335
Bangor	18	155	173
Ards	32	312	344
Castlereagh	22	215	237
Lisburn	52	217	269
Dairyfarm	8	92	100
Downpatrick	28	129	157
South East Area	160	1120	1280
Banbridge	20	129	149
Newry	38	165	203
Armagh	18	113	131
Craigavon	23	145	168
Portadown	21	74	95
Dungannon	20	82	102
Fermanagh	16	127	143
South Area	156	835	991
Ballymena	17	201	218
Antrim	10	116	126
N'abbey1	10	84	94
N'abbey2	16	152	168
Carrick	10	155	165
Larne	6	71	77
Ballycastle	5	36	41

NIHE DISTRICT	Major	Minor	Total
Ballymoney	10	94	104
Coleraine	18	160	178
North East	102	1069	1171
Waterloo	36	60	96
Waterside	24	136	160
Collon Tce	38	74	112
Limavady	20	33	53
Magherafelt	15	65	80
Strabane	24	84	108
Omagh	11	65	76
Cookstown	16	56	72
West Area	184	573	757
Northern Ireland	745	4789	5534

Table 3a Major Adaptations– 2009/10

NIHE DISTRICT	Major	Total
Belfast West	35	35
Belfast East	26	26
Belfast South	20	20
Belfast North	40	40
Shankill	37	37
Belfast Area	158	158
Bangor	31	31
Ards	44	44
Castlereagh	35	35
Lisburn	42	42
Dairyfarm	12	12
Downpatrick	43	43
South East Area	207	207
Banbridge	26	26
Newry	47	47
Armagh	19	19
Craigavon	33	33
Portadown	22	22
Dungannon	17	17
Fermanagh	18	18
South Area	182	182
Ballymena	29	29

NIHE DISTRICT	Major	Total
Antrim	7	7
N'abbey1	11	11
N'abbey2	9	9
Carrick	11	11
Larne	4	4
Ballycastle	11	11
Ballymoney	15	15
Coleraine	18	18
North East	115	115
Waterloo	33	33
Waterside	26	26
Collon Tce	32	32
Limavady	27	27
Magherafelt	22	22
Strabane	14	14
Omagh	15	15
Cookstown	15	15
West Area	184	184
Northern Ireland	846	846

Table 3b – Minor Adaptations 2009/10

NIHE AREA	2009/10
Belfast Area	1104
North East Area	1005
South Area	784
South-East Area	1019
West Area	564

Table 4 -2010/11

DISTRICT	Major	Minor	Total
Belfast West	40	225	265
Belfast East	26	*	26
Belfast South	26	162	188
Belfast North	39	379	418
Shankill	34	243	277
Belfast Area	165	1009	1174
Bangor	31	*	31
Ards	36	175	211
Castlereagh	27	176	203

DISTRICT	Major	Minor	Total
Lisburn	40	172	212
Dairyfarm	9	49	58
Downpatrick	14	138	152
South East Area	157	710	867
Banbridge	22	108	130
Newry	41	159	200
Armagh	18	122	140
Craigavon	33	126	159
Portadown	5	87	92
Dungannon	32	66	98
Fermanagh	17	81	98
South Area	168	749	917
Ballymena	25	115	140
Antrim	11	101	112
N'abbey1	11	75	86
N'abbey2	17	87	104
Carrick	13	68	81
Larne	7	44	51
Ballycastle	6	18	24
Ballymoney	5	45	50
Coleraine	27	89	116
North East	122	642	764
Waterloo	18	87	105
Waterside	19	133	152
Collon Tce	20	91	111
Limavady	8	67	75
Magherafelt	12	69	81
Strabane	21	26	47
Omagh	15	90	105
Cookstown	20	57	77
West Area	133	620	753
Northern Ireland	745	3730	4475

Table 5 – 2011/12

NIHE DISTRICT	Major	Minor	Total
Belfast West	29	311	340
Belfast East	20	179	199
Belfast South	16	169	185
Belfast North	28	344	372

NIHE DISTRICT	Major	Minor	Total
Shankill	18	192	210
Belfast Area	111	1195	1306
Bangor	40	146	186
Ards	34	285	319
Castlereagh	39	200	239
Lisburn	40	376	416
Dairyfarm	12	46	58
Downpatrick	16	209	225
South East Area	181	1262	1443
Banbridge	11	102	113
Newry	30	181	211
Armagh	13	134	147
Craigavon	36	196	232
Portadown	6	103	109
Dungannon	10	64	74
Fermanagh	8	96	104
South Area	114	876	990
Ballymena	15	172	187
Antrim	16	160	176
N'abbey1	10	152	162
N'abbey2	10	180	190
Carrick	12	151	163
Larne	1	54	55
Ballycastle	7	72	79
Ballymoney	9	98	107
Coleraine	20	183	203
North East	100	1222	1322
Waterloo	19	68	87
Waterside	20	126	146
Collon Tce	24	87	111
Limavady	12	86	98
Magherafelt	14	76	90
Strabane	12	67	79
Omagh	12	74	86
Cookstown	15	62	77
West Area	128	646	774
Northern Ireland	634	5201	5835

Table 6 - Housing Association Disabled Adaptation Approvals

Year	Number of Approvals
2007/08	1,200
2008/09	1,211
2009/10	1,472
2010/11	1,430
2011/12	767*
Total	6,080

* The number of Approvals decreased from 2010/11 to 2011/12 because they exclude: -

- applications made by Housing Associations for Disabled Adaptation Grants which have not yet been approved.
- applications made by Housing Associations for Disabled Adaptation Grants which have expired / been withdrawn / ineligible.
- adaptations carried out by Housing Associations for which Disabled Adaptation Grants have not been claimed.

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Arm's-length Bodies: Composition

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the (i) religious; and (ii) gender composition of the employees in each of his Department's arm's-length bodies in each of the last ten years.

(AQW 11801/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Department sponsors three arm's length bodies: the Northern Ireland Housing Executive; ILEX (jointly sponsored with OFMDFM); and the Charities Commission for Northern Ireland (CCNI).

The religion of staff within these bodies is not held, but, as required by the Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998 (FETO), information is collected by them on the perceived community background of staff and applicants. Each body is responsible for the recruitment of its staff, and for complying with equality of opportunity legislation.

The table at Annex 1 provides details of the religion and gender details of staff in the NIHE for each year in the last ten years. The Department cannot provide details on the religion of staff in ILEX and CCNI, as the Equality Commission guidance on the release of community background information provides that an organisation must have a minimum number of 25 employees for this information to be released. This guidance is to protect identifying the religion of staff. Both ILEX and the CCNI employ less than 25 staff respectively. The table at Annex 2 provides the gender breakdown for both ILEX and CCNI.

Annex 1

Community Background Profile: NIHE (2003 – 2012)

Year	Religion			Gender		Total*
	Protestant	Roman Catholic	Not Determined	Male	Female	
Jan 2012	1408 44.6%	1696 53.7%	54 1.7%	1578 50.0%	1580 50.0%	3158
Jan 2011	1426 44.6%	1717 53.7%	55 1.7%	1591 49.7%	1607 50.3%	3198
Jan 2010	1466 44.5%	1771 53.8%	55 1.7%	1655 50.3%	1637 49.7%	3292
Jan 2009	1532 45.6%	1767 52.7%	57 1.7%	1732 51.6%	1624 48.4%	3356
Jan 2008	1589 45.2%	1866 53.1%	60 1.7%	1800 51.2%	1715 48.8%	3515

Year	Religion			Gender		Total*
	Protestant	Roman Catholic	Not Determined	Male	Female	
Jan 2007	1599 45.9%	1828 52.5%	57 1.6%	1803 51.8%	1681 48.2%	3484
Jan 2006	1643 46.6%	1828 51.9%	51 1.5%	1833 52.0%	1689 48.0%	3522
Jan 2005	1661 47.0%	1826 51.6%	49 1.4%	1848 52.3%	1688 47.7%	3536
Jan 2004	1632 47.1%	1776 51.3%	54 1.6%	1793 51.8%	1669 48.2%	3462
Jan 2003	1610 48.2%	1693 50.7%	36 1.1%	1762 52.8%	1577 47.2%	3339

Notes

* Figures are representative of permanent and temporary staff and includes staff on Career Break and Seconded Out staff.

Source: Northern Ireland Housing Executive

.Annex 2**Gender Breakdown for ILEX**

Year	Male	Female	Total
2004	-	2	2
2005	-	3	3
2006	-	3	3
2007	2	5	7
2008	6	7	13
2009	6	7	13
2010	8	10	18
2011	10	13	23

Notes: Figures are based on the calendar year end

Gender Breakdown for CCNI

Year	Male	Female	Total
2010		1	1
2011	4	9	13

Notes: Figures are based on the calendar year end

Public Bodies: Board Members

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Social Development how many former civil and public servants are employed as (i) paid; and (ii) unpaid board members of public bodies which are sponsored by his Department; and what this figure is as a proportion of the total number of board members.

(AQW 11948/11-15)

Mr McCausland: There are six paid and one unpaid former civil and public servants serving as board members on public bodies sponsored by my Department. This represents 26% of the total number of board members.

Social Security Agency: Relocation of

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the relocation of Social Security Agency posts, which deal with state pension, to Londonderry.

(AQW 11956/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The relocation of State Pension services from Windsor House in Belfast to Carlisle House, Londonderry is progressing as scheduled. The necessary numbers of staff required for the new Pension Centre have been recruited and trained resulting in over 80 staff who worked in other locations across Northern Ireland being able to work in a location close to home. The staff who previously worked in State Pension have been redeployed to fill vacant posts across my department in the Belfast area. The accommodation work and associated IT and telephony changes required at the existing Pension Centre at Carlisle House to effect the transfer of services is close to finalisation and, subject to this being completed as planned, the relocation will take place in July this year. The transfer of services is also designed in such a way that customers are not required to undertake any additional or new activities when contacting the State Pension service.

Pavement Extensions: Licensing Legislation

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the timescale for the introduction of legislation on the licensing of pavement extensions for cafés and restaurants.

(AQW 11957/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Subject to Executive agreement, I plan to introduce a Licensing of Pavement Cafes Bill into the Assembly during autumn 2012.

Pavement Extensions: Licensing

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development whether the proposed pavement extensions to cafés and restaurants will be regulated by licence; and whether they will be subject to additional rating.

(AQW 11959/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Subject to Assembly approval to the proposed Licensing of Pavement Cafes Bill, cafe, restaurant, bar owners etc wishing to place tables and chairs on the pavement will require a licence issued by their district council.

As regards additional rates the Minister for Finance and Personnel has advised that in relation to pavement cafes an increase in rates is by no means automatic and in the majority of cases such a marginal and seasonal increase in seating areas would be disregarded as trivial under rating law. There will, however, be occasions where it will be substantial enough add to the rental value of the premises and in these case it may lead to a small increase in rates payable. In deciding the matter the District Valuer will need to decide if a 'typical tenant' would pay any more rent for the right to put tables outside and if so, by how much. It is worth noting this has not been a major issue in the rest of the UK where these sorts of licences have been operating for many years under a similar business rates regime that exists in NI. Should any business be concerned and wish to consider before entering into a licence agreement they should contact the District Valuer, LPS for advice.

Pavement Extensions: Threshold

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to the proposed pavement extensions for cafés and restaurants, what is the minimum threshold in terms of the pavement area to be used; and if it will be subject to additional rates.

(AQW 11960/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The proposed Licensing of Pavement Cafes Bill will introduce a legal framework through which district councils will be able to grant a licence to an occupier of relevant premises to extend his or her business onto a public area. It is not intended to specify in the Bill a minimum threshold for the area of a proposed pavement café as individual applications will be decided on their own merit. The Bill will require a council to consult with DRD Roads Service before deciding on initial applications.

As regards additional rates the Minister for Finance and Personnel has advised that in relation to pavement cafes an increase in rates is by no means automatic and in the majority of cases such a marginal and seasonal increase in seating areas would be disregarded as trivial under rating law. There will, however, be occasions where it will be substantial enough add to the rental value of the premises and in these case it may lead to a small increase in rates payable. In deciding the matter the District Valuer will need to decide if a 'typical tenant' would pay any more rent for the right to put tables outside and if so, by how much. It is worth noting this has not been a major issue in the rest of the UK where these sorts of licences have been operating for many years under a similar business rates regime that exists in NI. Should any business be concerned and wish to consider before entering into a licence agreement they should contact the District Valuer, LPS for advice.

Letting Agents: Regulations

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) what regulations exist in relation to letting agents; and (ii) whether his Department has any plans to make the regulations more stringent.

(AQW 11976/11-15)

Mr McCausland: There are no regulations which exist in relation to letting agents. However, it is proposed to introduce to the Assembly by November 2012, the Landlord Registration Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012. This Scheme will not regulate letting agents, however, it will require a landlord to name any agent (including a letting agent) acting on his behalf.

Replacement Dwelling Grants

Ms Boyle asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of successful applications for Replacement Dwelling Grants under 'exceptional circumstances', broken down by district council area.

(AQW 12050/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The table below details the number of successful applications to the Housing Executive's Exceptional Circumstances Committee for which Replacement Grant was recommended, broken down by District Council, since the introduction of the Exceptional Circumstances Committee in 2009.

Council Area	Number
Ards Borough Council	2
Armagh City and District Council	4
Banbridge District Council	3
Ballymena Borough Council	1
Belfast City Council	1
Cookstown District Council	4
Down District Council	3
Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council	4
Fermanagh District Council	14
Limavady Borough Council	4
Lisburn City Council	1
Magherafelt District Council	1
Newry and Mourne District Council	9
Omagh District Council	2
Strabane District Council	1
Total	54

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Housing Executive: Double-glazing Scheme

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development whether he can offer an assurance that the review of the Housing Executive double-glazing scheme, which is aimed at reducing the cost of the scheme, will not impact on tenants in terms of the quality of installation or the redecoration grants received.

(AQW 12076/11-15)

Mr McCausland: For some time I have been concerned that the Housing Executive's specification for the supply and fitting of double glazing did not offer value for money and I therefore asked my officials to research the specifications used. I am particularly concerned about the requirement to remove and replaster around frames, which necessitates the payment of redecoration grants and causes inconvenience to tenants and also the specification for hinges and handles, as these are much higher than industry standards for domestic properties. I am advised that there is potential for significant savings to be made. I therefore wrote to the Housing Executive's Chief Executive asking him to rigorously and urgently review this specification.

I intend to ensure that we meet the Programme for Government target whilst ensuring best value for money, meeting industry standards in terms of quality of installation and reducing any disturbance to tenants, which in turn will reduce the amount required for redecoration grants.

Social Housing Tenancies

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Social Development (i) how many social housing tenancies have been agreed during this financial year to date; (ii) for an estimate of how many of the homes may be deemed to be under-occupied under new Housing Benefit legislation; and (iii) how prospective tenants are advised of the implications of the changes to Housing Benefit.

(AQW 12108/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In relation to (i) – a total of 914 social housing allocations were made in April 2012. The information for May 2012 is not yet available.

In relation to (ii) - from April 2013, for working age tenants in the social rented sector, a restriction on the Housing Benefit award of 14% applies where claimants are one bedroom below full occupancy and 25% where claimants are two or more bedrooms below full occupancy. The table below details the number of Housing Executive tenants that will be affected by the under-occupation rule: -

Under-occupation level	Singles	Couples	Family	Totals
1 bedrooms	9,215	601	9,034	18,850
2 or more bedrooms	5,415	1,047	856	7,318
Totals	14,630	1,648	9,890	26,168

In relation to (iii) - the Housing Executive has formed an internal working group in order to address the issues that will be raised in relation to the introduction of the new Welfare Reform agenda. The group has identified a range of actions including the need to inform all applicants being offered accommodation of the pending changes to Housing Benefit regulations.

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Fuel Poverty

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development (i) for his assessment of the criticisms of Northern Ireland's approach to tackling fuel poverty in Lord Whitty's report for the Consumer Council 'Energising Northern Ireland'; and (ii) whether he intends to move towards an area-based approach to tackle energy inefficiency.

(AQW 12111/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I have noted the comments made by Lord Whitty in his report however, I do not feel that they accurately reflect the huge amount of work on going, not just within my own department, but between a number of government departments to tackle fuel poverty. I believe we are now all too aware of the extent of the problem in Northern Ireland and that just talking about the problem doesn't resolve it. My department is clearly focused on delivering practical solutions to help the thousands of households struggling to pay their energy bills.

Officials from my department are working with the University of Ulster and District Councils to pilot an area based approach to tackling fuel poverty. Working in partnership with the University of Ulster, other Departments such as OFMdFM and DARD and with councils we will target areas most affected by fuel poverty and provide appropriate solutions to improve the energy efficiency of homes in the area. The pilot will run during the current financial year.

Employment and Support Allowance: Appeals

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development how many Employment and Support Allowance appeals are pending from claimants who have been deemed fit for work.

(AQW 12127/11-15)

Mr McCausland: At the end of April 2012, 3,326 appeals were pending from Employment and Support Allowance customers appealing against the decision to disallow them Employment and Support Allowance on the basis that they did not have limited capability for work.

Employment and Support Allowance: Work Capability Assessment

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development, in light of the unanimous vote at the British Medical Association's Local Medical Committee Conference 2012 in favour of a proposal to end the Work Capability Assessment for Employment and Support Allowance, what action will be taken to address the problems associated with it.

(AQW 12142/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I am aware of the vote that was taken recently at the British Medical Association's Local Medical Committee Conference and that the Department for Work and Pension's Chief Medical Adviser also recently met with representatives from the National British Medical Association and advised them that his Department is committed to continuously improving the Work Capability Assessment to ensure that it is as fair and accurate as possible.

Whilst I myself have some concerns regarding the Work Capability Assessment based on representation made to me by constituents and Assembly members, I recognise that the Work Capability Assessment is subject to review in accordance with the legislative requirement set out in Section 10 of the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2007.

Professor Malcolm Harrington conducts independent annual reviews on my behalf into all areas of the Work Capability Assessment and his first two reports were laid before the Assembly in September 2011 and November 2011. Professor Harrington's third review is already underway and the report is expected in November / December 2012.

One example of how concerns have been taken on board is how the Department, in conjunction with the Department for Work and Pensions, undertook an informal consultation on proposals for making the Work Capability Assessment work better for cancer patients, recognising the challenges for this particular group.

In addition the Social Security Agency has appointed a Health Assessment Adviser who is responsible for monitoring and reporting to the Agency on the quality and standards of the current process and how they are being applied.

Apprenticeship Programmes

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the apprenticeship programmes available within his Department; (ii) the apprenticeship programmes provided by his Department; (iii) the number of people currently enrolled in these programmes; and (iv) the number of places available on the programmes.

(AQW 12155/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Programme Led Apprenticeship (PLA) programme was introduced by the Department for Employment and Learning in September 2009. This is an intervention measure to assist young people who have been unable to find employment as apprentices during the economic downturn. The Department of Employment and Learning, along with other Northern Ireland departments (including my department), contributes to this programme by providing work placements for participants on the PLA programme. There are currently 3 people enrolled on this Programme within my Department.

Furthermore contracts awarded by my Department are inclusive of social clauses where appropriate, and dependent on labour value, which include work placement opportunities; provided by the contractor rather than the Department.

Income Support: Claimants

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the proportion of people who have been claiming Income Support for a period of over (i) 1; (ii) 2; (iii) 5; and (iv) 10 years.

(AQW 12217/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information requested is set out in the table below.

Time Period	Claimants	Proportion of Income Support Customers
(i) Over 1 year	67,910	88%
(ii) Over 2 years	61,390	79%
(iii) Over 5 years	44,020	57%
(iv) Over 10 years	24,540	32%

Data Source: Income Support Midas Scans – March 2012

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.

Universal Credit: Introduction

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development how the introduction of Universal Credit will reduce the financial risks for people moving into work or increasing their working hours.

(AQW 12218/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Universal Credit will be a simple, integrated benefit which will replace income based Jobseekers Allowance, income related Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support, Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit, Housing Benefit and elements of the Social Fund. By reducing the complexity of the current system and removing the distinction between in work and out of work benefits the risks associated with moves into employment will be reduced.

Universal Credit will improve work incentives by allowing individuals to keep more of their income as they move into work and ensuring that support is reduced at a consistent and predictable rate. This will be achieved by simplifying the interaction between entitlement and earnings. The amount of earnings that people can have without losing benefits will be increased and the rate at which benefit is withdrawn as earnings rise will be reduced. This approach will help ensure that work always pays and also provide strong incentives for workless households to take up jobs for a small number of hours, which is important in helping people who have spent long periods unemployed into the labour market.

In addition, additional funding has been made available to extend support for childcare costs which will be available to all lone parents and couples, where both members are in work, regardless of the number of hours they work. Removing the current requirement to work 16 hours per week will provide an important financial incentive to those taking their first steps into paid employment.

Universal Credit: Introduction

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development whether the introduction of Universal Credit will change his departmental accommodation requirements.

(AQW 12248/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The introduction of Universal Credit will change how we engage with our customers. I am however committed to maintaining a strong network of front-line offices to ensure that customers have the necessary advice and support channels they will need as Universal Credit and other changes are introduced.

Work is underway to consider the organisational and staffing considerations for Universal Credit, which will include accommodation. Although it is too soon to be more specific, my officials will continue to work closely with the Department for Employment and Learning to better understand the accommodation requirements for Universal Credit as plans develop.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive: Assistance Grant

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Social Development whether he has any plans to restore the Northern Ireland Housing Executive Assistance Grant to enable home-owners to make necessary repairs.

(AQW 12250/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Due to the reduction in funding for Private Sector Grants since May 2009 the Housing Executive has been unable to accept any new Discretionary Grant enquiries. Disabled Facility Grants, Mandatory Repair Grants and all approved grant applications continued as normal and payments were made when work was completed. However, Discretionary Renovation, Replacement and Home Repair Assistance Grants can only be approved in exceptional circumstances where the Housing Executive's Exceptional Circumstances committee has considered all the information presented to it by the Grants Manager, and the Committee agrees that the Exceptional Circumstances Criteria have been met. The current position is that the budget allocated by the Housing Executive for Private Sector Grants is £15.95m, with a significant part of this required to fund the mandatory disabled facilities and repair grants. While I intend to reallocate available funding into the Private Sector Grants budget in the June Monitoring Round, which will increase the budget to £18.45m, funding for all capital programmes has reduced and the allocation for private sector grants decreases in each of the next three years. Unfortunately therefore there is no scope to reintroduce grants on a wider basis within the current capital funding available as this would probably require additional funding of £20m - £25m each year.

Pensioner Bungalows

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the criteria used by the Housing Executives to allocate the tenancy of pensioner bungalows for people who are not of pension age.

(AQW 12258/11-15)

Mr McCausland: All Housing Executive accommodation, including bungalows, is deemed to be general needs accommodation and is allocated in accordance with the Rules of the Housing Selection Scheme. Rules 46 and 47 of the Housing Selection Scheme apply in relation to the allocation of social housing and there are no age restrictions per se in relation to the allocation of general needs accommodation. Rules 46 and 47 are as follows:

Rule 46 All applicants will be assessed and placed on a Waiting List which is used by all participating landlords. As a general rule each dwelling will be offered to the relevant Applicant with the highest points.

Rule 47 In the present context an Applicant is a "relevant applicant" if

- 1 He/she has applied for, or is deemed to have applied for accommodation with the locational and other characteristics of the dwelling in question and
- 2 The Landlord is satisfied, on reasonable grounds, that the non-locational characteristics of the dwelling meet the Applicant's needs and having regard to all of the circumstances, do not substantially surpass those needs.

Offers are made in accordance with Rule 57 of the Selection Scheme as detailed below: -

Rule 57 In considering whether a particular offer is reasonable, the Designated Officer must consider the reasonable needs of the Applicant, including the Applicant's household, having particular regard to the following factors:

- 1 Size of accommodation – the dwelling must be of a suitable size for the Applicant's household. The minimum size of accommodation normally deemed as reasonable for the household is outlined in Schedule 3.
- 2 Suitability of location – the offer of accommodation shall as far as possible be in an area corresponding with the Applicant's choice. The location shall take into consideration the place of work, schools and essential support requirements of the Applicant or a member of his/her household.
- 3 Suitability of features – the dwelling must be reasonably suitable having regard to the particular needs of the Applicant or a member of the Applicant's household.
- 4 Condition of accommodation – the dwelling must not be statutorily unfit and it must be in reasonable condition of repair and safe for occupation at the commencement of tenancy.

In summary, accommodation which may be considered suitable for pensioners may be allocated to persons of non pensionable age subject to the above Rules of the Housing Selection Scheme.

Review of Public Administration

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development what powers or functions he plans to devolve to local councils under the Review of Public Administration; and whether this represents a change to his previous commitments.

(AQW 12263/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Under the previous Reform of Public Administration proposals, the following DSD functions had been earmarked to transfer to councils from May 2011:

Urban Regeneration and Community Development Functions

- Tackling town and city regeneration (operational delivery of physical development projects including Comprehensive Development, Public Realm and Environmental Improvement Schemes;
- Area-based regeneration including Neighbourhood Renewal; and
- Support for the voluntary and community sectors at local level e.g. the Community Support Programme and Community Investment Fund.

Housing Functions

- Regulation of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO)
- Housing Unfitness including repair and demolition notices;
- Living Over the Shops (LOTs); and
- Local Energy Conservation

As the overall list of functions to transfer from central government to councils was decided upon over 3 years ago, it is now being subjected to review. Ultimately, the Executive will decide the way forward and the package of functions to transfer.

Employment and Support Allowance: Appeal Panels

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what is the payment, per case, to panel members who sit on Employment and Support Allowance appeal panels.

(AQW 12301/11-15)

Mr McCausland: An ESA tribunal panel consists of a legally qualified chairperson and a registered medical practitioner who may be a general practitioner. The fee for a medical member is £155 per session (each session has three ESA appeal hearings). This fee increases to £185.50 per session when the member has attended over 40 sessions in the year. The fee for a legally qualified chairperson is £218.

John Gallagher

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development whether John Gallagher was in receipt of any state benefits, whilst he resided in Strabane, after absconding from the Central Mental Hospital, Dublin.

(AQW 12415/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Department for Social Development does not provide data on an individual customer basis.

Housing Executive's Current Specification to Contractors for Double-Glazing Installation

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 11510/11-15, to list the local companies that are members of the Glass and Glazing Federation; and to list any meetings he has had with these companies since May 2011.

(AQW 12420/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information requested cannot be provided as my Department does not hold a list of local companies that are members of the Glass and Glazing Federation.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

MLAs/Assembly Commission: Payroll

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission whether any (i) MLAs; or (ii) employees of the Assembly Commission are working 'off payroll' so that their salaries are paid in such a way that they pay corporation tax rather than income tax.

(AQW 12241/11-15)

Mr Weir (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Assembly Commission requires that (i) MLAs and (ii) the Commission's employees are remunerated through the payroll system and subject to the Pay As You Earn (PAYE) tax regime. This requirement also extends to independent appointments made by the Assembly Commission such as members of the Independent Financial Review Panel or the Secretariat Audit and Risk Committee. The Commission has entered into a contract for the supply of "agency" workers. This contract stipulates that agency workers placed within the Assembly should be employed by the contracting party and subject to PAYE.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 15 June 2012

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Children and Young People's Strategy

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) for an update on the review of the structures and processes to implement the 10-Year Children and Young People's Strategy, which includes the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People; (ii) when the review will be completed; (iii) when the outcome will be presented to the Executive; and (iv) when the review findings will be published.

(AQW 10797/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): Implementation of the Children and Young People's Strategy is being driven forward as a major project within the context of the Delivering Social Change (DSC) framework that we announced in the Programme for Government. A key aim of DSC is to improve the outcomes for children and young people.

Implementation of the Strategy will continue to be led by a Ministerial Sub-Committee (MSC) which is jointly chaired by the Junior Ministers, with all Executive Ministers as members. The MSC and the Executive Sub-Committee will meet on alternate quarters with four scheduled meetings per year.

The Delivering Social Change Programme Board, which is made up of senior officials from across Departments, is currently focusing on children and young people and will be bringing forward proposals in the coming months on implementing structures, including the involvement of stakeholders, to the Ministerial Sub-Committee for approval. Decisions will be made at that stage on how any changes will be disseminated.

Delivering Social Change

Mrs Overend asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how the Delivering Social Change Programme will contribute to a reduction in the level of child poverty.

(AQW 11383/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Delivering Social Change is the Executive's new delivery framework for social policy and our approach to reducing poverty and tackling social exclusion. It will bring together short and long term measures to improve the opportunities for young people.

Delivering Social Change aims to deliver a sustained reduction in poverty and associated issues across all ages, including an improvement in children's and young people's health, well-being and life opportunities.

We are committed to driving forward new actions that reflect more collaborative and more integrated delivery of services. Through the Delivering Social Change programme board, we are working to deliver new cross-departmental cross-disciplinary approaches in which the services we prioritise for children will be those which deliver the greatest impact in promoting their opportunities throughout their lives.

Historical Institutional Abuse

Mrs D Kelly asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the public consultation on the draft Terms of Reference for the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Child Abuse will be published.

(AQO 1877/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The terms of reference for the Investigation and Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse were published on 31 May. Prior to publication they were discussed with representatives of victims and survivors and agreed with the Inquiry's Chairman, Sir Anthony Hart.

Children and Young People: Bilateral Meetings

Mr Moutray asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the bi-lateral meetings with Ministerial colleagues, which were arranged by the junior Ministers, to discuss issues affecting children and young people.

(AQW 11563/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Junior Ministers recently met with Ministerial colleagues from DARD, DE, DSD, DRD, DHSSPS, DEL and DOJ to consider further how to progress the work on addressing child poverty.

Further meetings have been scheduled to allow all Ministers to be involved in plans to eradicate child poverty.

Much of what has been developed has been assimilated into the Delivering Social Change (DSC) framework. Within this framework, an action plan, comprising a small number of high level strategic actions, will be developed. The bi-laterals have been the first opportunity Junior Ministers have had to promote DSC to other Ministers and to secure their active commitment and participation.

As a result of earlier work, a significant number of actions have also been included in the Programme for Government which will also contribute towards the reduction in child poverty both in the short-term and across generations.

Child Poverty Strategy

Mr Cree asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on an action or delivery plan for the Child Poverty Strategy.

(AQO 1936/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We are driving forward action to tackle child poverty through our Delivering Social Change framework announced in the Programme for Government.

Delivering Social Change aims to deliver a sustained reduction in poverty and associated issues across all ages; and an improvement in children's and young people's health, wellbeing and life opportunities thereby breaking the long-term cycle of multi-generational problems.

Within the Delivering Social Change framework, an action plan comprising a small number of high level strategic actions is being developed. This will supersede existing and intended Action Plans in relation to the Children and Young People's Strategy and the Child Poverty Strategy.

Junior Ministers are holding discussions with each Executive Minister around the development of this plan.

A significant number of actions which will contribute to the reduction of child poverty are included in the Programme for Government.

Shared Future Proofing

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 10866/11-15, whether 'Shared Future Proofing' is an approved common approach across Government, and from when; and whether it was included in the Programme for Government.

(AQW 11684/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The policy to carry out "Shared Future Proofing" is unique to the Department for Employment and Learning.

The process has not been included in the Programme for Government.

Social Investment Fund

Mr Spratt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the Social Investment Fund will start to have a real impact on local communities.

(AQW 11883/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: On 17 May 2012 Executive Ministers agreed the operation of the Social Investment Fund (SIF), details of which are available on the OFMDFM website (<http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/index/equality/social-investment-fund.htm>)

Our officials can now commence the delivery phase of SIF and have begun the process of establishing Steering Groups to engage with the wider community, identify and prioritise objective evidenced need and propose relevant interventions for inclusion in a strategic area plan.

Whilst we therefore intend to have funding hit the ground over the next few months and gaining momentum over the Budget period, it is important that we acknowledge the complexity of the historically difficult issues we are trying to address.

The Social Investment Fund is aimed at tackling poverty and deprivation and many of the systemic issues associated require a longer term approach. Whilst we expect to see progress over the next few months and into the next 2 years, in that targeted interventions will begin to be delivered, it will take longer to measure the direct impact these will have on communities.

Our officials are working closely with colleagues in the Northern Ireland Statistical Research Agency (NISRA) to ensure a full monitoring and evaluation framework is in place so we can monitor and measure progress and identify where interventions are having an impact.

We will also be establishing a Learning and Advisory Forum to ensure examples of best practice and key learning points can be shared across zones as we progress through implementation.

Central to the success of SIF and to ensure maximum impact on the ground, it is imperative that communities and statutory bodies work together, in a truly integrated way. The success of this programme therefore relies on us all to play our part and make the most of this welcomed £80 million investment.

North-West Gateway Initiative

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 11158/11-15, how the response sits with the content of the North-South Ministerial Council Institutional Joint Communiqué of 27 April 2012.

(AQW 12199/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: There is no inconsistency between our response to AQW 11158/11-15 and the Communiqué issued following the meeting of the NSMC in institutional format on 27 April. The North West Gateway Initiative provides a framework for relevant projects being delivered and planned by departments within existing resources; it does not itself directly fund those projects.

Ministerial Subcommittee on Children and Young People

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail how the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People has increased the integration of (i) policy; (ii) funding; and (iii) service delivery for children and young people.

(AQW 12236/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Ministerial Sub-Committee plays a crucial role in ensuring that the needs of children and young people remain at the heart of the Executive's priorities.

It has led on the implementation of the Executive's Ten Year Strategy on Children and Young People through the agreement and delivery of the Executive's 2007-08 and 2008-11 Children and Young People's Action Plans. In addition, it has identified and agreed a number of priorities where departments are working together on sub-groups to tackle specific issues around the delivery of children's services such as safeguarding, vulnerable young people, road safety and transitions for children with special educational needs. The Ministerial Sub-Committee will have a critical role under the Delivering Social Change (DSC) arrangements in ensuring that the Executive delivers on its commitments under the Ten-year Strategy and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Under the new DSC arrangements, the Executive's Ministerial Sub-Committee on Poverty and Social Inclusion and its Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People will meet quarterly on alternate rotation – this will mean four scheduled meetings per year (two for each Sub-Committee). Both Committees will be chaired by Junior Ministers, with all Executive Ministers as members. Once a year we will chair a joint meeting of the Sub-Committees.

By integrating efforts across all government departments in this way we can ensure maximum impact on the priority issues in relation to children and young people.

Arm's-length Bodies: Pension Schemes

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether all the pension schemes that are in place across their Department's arm's-length bodies are exclusively Consumer Price Indexed, including the benefits that were earned by contributions before the change from the Retail Price Index; and to detail any exceptions.

(AQW 12304/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Most of the pension schemes in use across our Department's public bodies are Consumer Price Indexed, including the benefits that were earned by contributions made before the change from the Retail Price Index, with the exception of the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPSNI) to which some of our public bodies belong, and the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) which operates a defined contribution (money purchase) scheme which enables staff to take their pension entitlement with them when their contract ends and ultimately to purchase their own annuity.

We understand that for active members of the LGPSNI and those who left the Scheme after 1 April 2011, all accrued benefits will be increased in line with the Consumer Price Index. For deferred pensions and those who left the Scheme before 1 April 2011, the increase to their benefits will be measured by the Retail Price Index up to the beginning of April 2011 and Consumer Price Index thereafter.

Arm's-length Bodies and Quangos: Remuneration

Mr Gardiner asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the current total annual cost of remuneration for board members at their Department's arm's-length bodies and quangos.

(AQW 12312/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The total cost of remuneration for Board members for OFMDFM sponsored bodies for the 2011/12 financial year is £599,850. The details are as follows:

Strategic Investment Board	£71,000
NI Judicial Appointments Commission	£35,794
Community Relations Council	£18,000
Equality Commission	£175,192
Commission for Victims & Survivors	£203,250
Ilex Urban Regeneration Co Ltd	£96,614
Total	£599,850

Historical Institutional Abuse: Terms of Reference

Mrs D Kelly asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the public consultation on the draft Terms of Reference for the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Child Abuse will be published.

(AQW 12397/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Terms of Reference for the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse were published in a written statement to the Assembly on 31 May 2012. Prior to their publication, they were discussed with victims and survivors and agreed with the Chair of the Inquiry.

Minority Ethnic Development Fund

Mr D McIlveen asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Minority Ethnic Development Fund, including when the proposed report on its implementation will be published.

(AQW 12401/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We expect to publish the evaluation of the Minority Ethnic Development Fund in the next few weeks.

Alongside it, we will publish a paper containing proposals for the revised fund which is intended to stimulate discussion with the minority ethnic sector and other key stakeholders about the future shape of the fund.

The Department will stage a number of open meetings to discuss the proposals.

Quangos

Mr Gardiner asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans they have to reduce (i) the number of QUANGOs; and (ii) the operational cost of QUANGOs.

(AQW 12456/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Department is participating in the review of arm's-length bodies across all departments, led centrally by the Budget Review Group, to establish whether individual bodies might be abolished, absorbed into their parent Department or merged with another body, with resultant efficiencies and savings.

In Budget 2010, all OFMDFM sponsored bodies are required to find savings of 3% of their administration costs. This will deliver savings of £0.49m, £0.99m, £1.48m and £1.97m respectively across the Budget period.

Efficiency measures already put in place by our Department include the co-location within Equality House of the Commissioner for Older People, the Commissioner for Children and Young People and the Equality Commission. This will deliver better value for money in terms of both accommodation costs and the sharing of a number of back office administration costs.

Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what contribution the Executive will be making to the Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust.

(AQW 12487/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: No decision has been made about a contribution from the Executive to The Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Agri-Food Strategy Board: Action Plan

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when the Agri-Food Strategy Board's Action Plan will be published.

(AQW 12149/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): As outlined in the Executive's Programme for Government 2011-15, the aim is to have an agreed strategic vision for the agri-food sector by the end of this financial year.

However it would be my hope that the Board would publish its action plans as quickly as possible.

Planning Applications

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the information, including the map scales, provided by the Rivers Agency to parties who are making planning applications that might fall within an area designated as a flood plain.

(AQW 12182/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: On receipt of information request from parties interested in making a planning application, officials from my Rivers Agency will review the available information for the particular site with a view to providing the most accurate and up-to-date information. This may include the Strategic Flood Map at 1:25,000 scale, extracts from local studies and reports as well as historical flood records and maps, at a range of scales, indicating watercourses and infrastructure for which Rivers Agency has a responsibility.

Planning Applications

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the information, including the map scales, used by the Rivers Agency to respond to consultation requests from the Planning Service, in relation to planning applications which might fall within an area designated as a flood plain.

(AQW 12185/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: On receipt of a consultation request from Planning NI, officials from my Rivers Agency will review available information for the particular site with a view to obtaining the most accurate and up-to-date information on which to base advice. This may include the Strategic Flood Map, local studies and reports as well as historical flood records which may provide a range of mapping information from the Strategic Map at 1:25000 scale, to more detailed maps, if available, down to perhaps 1:500 scale. Rivers Agency officials will usually visit the site to familiarise themselves with the site layout, location and the consistency of the information available.

Where it is evident that there is a flood risk issue at this site or as a consequence of the proposal, Planning NI will be advised to request the applicant to carry out a Flood Risk Assessment. This may require the applicant or their professional advisor to carry out further detailed surveys and river modelling, to enable a more definitive outline of the flood risk area and to identify all flooding sources and submit proposals to be taken to mitigate flood risk. Rivers Agency officials will appraise the flood risk assessment in the light of the available information and advise Planning NI on the suitability of the assessment.

Arm's-length Bodies: Pension Schemes

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether all the pension schemes that are in place across her Department's arm's-length bodies are exclusively Consumer Price Indexed, including the benefits that were earned by contributions before the change from the Retail Price Index; and to detail any exceptions.

(AQW 12305/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Pension schemes are in place in three of my Department's arms length bodies – the Agri-Food Biosciences Institute (AFBI), the Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) and the NI Fishery Harbour Authority (NIFHA).

AFBI provides pension benefits to staff through the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (NI). Pensions in payment and preserved pensions in this Scheme are Consumer Price Indexed. This includes pension benefits that were earned by contributions before the change of indexation from the Retail Price Index which took effect in April 2011.

Staff in the LMC and NIFHA are members of the NI Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee (NILGOSC) pension scheme. Prior to April 2011, pension indexation was based on the increase in the Retail Price Index. From April 2011, indexation is based on the Consumer Price Index. In relation to standard scheme benefits, for active members of the scheme and those who left after 1 April 2011, all accrued benefits will be increased in line with the Consumer Price Index. For deferred and pensioner members who left prior to 1 April 2011, the increase to their benefits will be based on the Retail Price Index up to April 2011 and the Consumer Price Index thereafter. In relation to additional pension benefits, for contracts that commenced after 1 April 2012, the pre and post retirement increase to benefits is based on the Consumer Price Index. For contracts that commenced prior to 1 April 2012, the current guidance applies a pre and post retirement increase based on the Retail Price Index. However, this guidance is currently under review.

Wind Turbines

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether funding is still available for the provision of wind turbines.

(AQW 12308/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Under Axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme grant assistance may be provided for standalone renewable initiatives including the erection of wind turbines or for projects where renewable energy technology is planned as part of the larger project. None of the energy produced may be used to reduce the running costs of the farm business or farm home.

Private Promoters, including farmers, farm family members and rural micro businesses (less than 10 employees) may be offered financial assistance at a rate of up to 50% of eligible costs up to a maximum grant amount of £50,000. Social Economy Enterprises and Community Groups seeking to introduce renewable technologies can be funded at a rate of up to 75% of eligible costs subject to a maximum grant amount of £170,000 depending on the measure applied to. A feasibility study is a programme requirement and as an eligible cost may be supported through technical assistance at similar grant rates up to a maximum grant amount of £5,000.

Single Farm Payments

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she has had any discussions, with local farmers and MEPs, regarding the effect of the weakening Euro on Single Farm Payments; and whether her Department has considered the need to support farmers, at this time, with additional funding.

(AQW 12323/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am concerned about recent movements in the sterling/euro exchange rate given the negative impact this could have on the amount of Single Farm Payment (SFP) received by farmers. The exchange rate used since 2005 to convert SFP to sterling has ranged from €1 = £0.6777 to €1 = £0.9093. The current market rate is around €1 = £0.80, although for the purposes of SFP in 2012, it is the market rate on 30 September 2012 that will be applied.

Movements in the exchange rate are outside the control of my Department and it is not possible to make additional payments to offset their impact. Some banks and other financial institutions offer hedging arrangements in order to mitigate the exchange rate risk which farmers may wish to explore further.

Bovine TB

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what measures are in place (i) for the DNA testing of pedigree cattle for Tuberculosis; and (ii) to prevent traders from making fraudulent claims on the pedigree of an animal.

(AQW 12325/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: All TB reactor cattle, including pedigree animals, are uniquely tagged at valuation by a Departmental official. Tissue samples are collected during this tagging. Random comparison of the retained tissues are made with other samples to ensure they are from the same animal.

This type of sampling provides a very high degree of confidence that samples can be confirmed as being from the same animal and therefore assures DARD that the animal valued has been slaughtered.

Plans for the testing vet to apply these tags at the earlier time of the TB test are well advanced.

If there are any concerns raised as to the authenticity of the breeding history of the valued cattle, Veterinary Service Enforcement Branch (VSEB) will investigate. As part of their investigation, VSEB will submit the DNA sample taken, at the test or valuation, for analysis and compare this with any DNA held by DARD or pedigree societies from the reactor or its registered parents.

Arm's-length Bodies and Quangos: Remuneration

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the current total annual cost of remuneration for board members at her Department's arm's-length bodies and quangos.

(AQW 12355/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The current total annual cost of remuneration for board members at my Department's 4 Executive and 1 Advisory Non Departmental Public Bodies is £181,656.12.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development: Headquarters

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the relocation of her departmental headquarters, and whether Limavady is still a contender for the site of the relocation.

(AQW 12381/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: As you will be aware the advancement of the relocation of the Headquarters of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) is one of the commitments set out in the Executive's Programme for Government 2011-2015. Work on delivering this important commitment is progressing. I am currently considering potential locations and hope to reach a decision soon.

Woodland Cover

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on her Department's strategy to increase the amount of woodland cover.

(AQW 12428/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department continues to develop strategy to deliver an increase in woodland cover. This development is closely linked to the Commission's proposals under the Rural Development Regulation.

Within the last reporting year, Forest Service achieved both targets associated with the key strategic objective to extend the area of woodland. The new woodland creation target of 200ha was exceeded and 313ha of new woodland was planted by private landowners with support from the Woodland Grant Scheme. It is acknowledged that this rate of planting is insufficient to meet our aim to increase woodland cover to 12% of land cover by the middle of this century.

To support increased planting Forest Service also developed proposals for new mechanisms to support woodland creation. These proposals focus on integrating forestry and farming activities by exploring the scope for forestry to support farmers in retaining their single farm payment (SFP) where land has, since 2008, become ineligible for agricultural support, or is in danger of breaching the conditions for land to be in Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition (GAEC). We will explore the potential of this land with stakeholders in advance of the 2013 planting season and carry out further work to inform negotiations on the Rural Development Regulation.

Aujeszky's Disease

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many confirmed cases of Aujeszky's Disease in pigs have been recorded; and to detail the date and circumstances of the last confirmed case.

(AQW 12452/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: An industry-led initiative with support from my Department was formed in 2004 with the objective of eradicating Aujeszky's Disease (AD) from the north and achieving EU recognition of AD freedom. The number of confirmed cases of disease since then is shown below.

Year	Number of Infected Herds
2004 (31 Dec)	4
2005 (31 Dec)	9
2006 (31 Dec)	16
2007 (31 Dec)	4
2008 (31 Dec)	2
2009 (31 Dec)*	0
2010	0
2011	0
2011	0

* zero new cases, one pig tested positive from previous case.

The last confirmed case of AD was in 2008, however serological evidence of AD was recorded in 2009. This case related to a herd which had previously tested positive and therefore was not a new case. A serological test on 28 May 2009 gave a positive result for one animal which had been kept in isolation. That animal was subsequently culled in September 2009.

As a result my Department has now formally submitted an application for recognition of our AD freedom to the EU Commission and I am anticipating formal approval within the next few months.

Aujeszky's Disease

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) how her Department tackles incidences of Aujeszky's Disease in pigs; (ii) for her assessment of this approach; (iii) whether she will promote the case for Aujeszky's Disease free status for Northern Ireland, independent of the position in the Republic of Ireland; and (iv) for her assessment of the benefits to the pig and pork industry should disease-free status be granted.

(AQW 12453/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: (i) Currently the north is free from Aujeszky's Disease (AD) and my Department is in the process of seeking official EU recognition of our disease free status. In order to protect our disease freedom in the event of a suspect or confirmed case of AD in the future, a number of control measures would be implemented. These include the application of restrictions on the suspect or confirmed pig holding, strict biosecurity measures and a requirement that movements on and off the holding must be licensed. Testing and slaughter options would be considered and a full disease investigation will be initiated in order to trace

the source of the outbreak. Control measures would also be applied to any pig premises within at least 5 km of the confirmed holding.

- (ii) All of the measures that I have outlined are the minimum required by the European Commission in order to maintain our future AD Free Status and are in line with recognised disease control measures for a non-endemic disease. The powers to implement the measures are contained within the Aujeszky's Disease Order (NI) 2012. I consider that this approach would be proportionate in order to maintain or protect current and potential trade markets for pigs.
- (iii) Like us, the south is in the process of applying to the EU for official recognition of AD free status. Both jurisdictions have now submitted applications for disease freedom to the Commission with the aim of moving towards disease free status in a similar timeframe, therefore reducing potential trade barriers on the island. I am hopeful that our application will be approved at a forthcoming meeting of the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health (SCOFCAH) but the timing is dependent on the Commission.
- (iv) Formal recognition of the north's Aujeszky's Disease free status will ease trading restrictions with Britain and other Member States who have disease free status as well as increasing trade opportunities with potential new markets in, for example, India, China and Korea, which may ultimately help improve the profitability of the pig sector here.

Central Investigation Service

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what changes her Department has made to the Central Investigation Service (CIS) following the Deloitte report into the CIS on 28 July 2010.

(AQW 12661/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Department considered the findings and recommendations of the Deloitte report into the CIS in detail. All of the recommendations were accepted and an Action Plan was put in place immediately to address the specific recommendations. There were, as a result of this review, a number of changes to internal policies and procedures and these have now been implemented in full.

As a consequence of implementing the action plan CIS now have a more comprehensive manual documenting the various policies and procedures associated with the investigative process; including an updated prosecutions policy. Case closure procedures were also refined to include referral to the Branch Head as and when appropriate.

In addition, changes have been made to the process of reporting fraud cases. This includes more regular and timely updates to the Northern Ireland Audit Office, as well as a refreshed version of the annual fraud report that clearly details CIS achievements over the previous 12 months.

Bovine TB

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she will set a target date for the eradication of Bovine Tuberculosis.

(AQO 2118/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am committed to the eradication of TB and tackling TB in cattle is a key priority. We have a rigorous TB eradication programme in place and we have made good progress with this disease over the past decade. We have achieved EU Commission approval for our programme for 2010, 2011 and 2012, which is vital in safeguarding our annual £1,000 million plus export-dependent trade in livestock and livestock products. Having EU Commission approval also enables DARD to draw down €5 million co-funding from Europe each year to offset a proportion of the costs of the eradication programme.

However, as is supported by the evidence to the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee's Thematic Review, bovine TB is a very complex, multi-factorial and challenging disease that is difficult to eradicate. There is no simple, cost-effective, solution or 'quick-fix' and eradication is not something that could be achieved within the immediate future.

We know that to eradicate TB we will need to deal effectively with all the factors, but all the steps needed to get to eradication and the tools that we would need to use are not yet all known. Therefore I intend to build a sound evidence base to underpin further interventions in cattle and/or wildlife that could help to reduce TB as part of our eradication programme.

As is indicated as a "building block" in the Programme for Government, funding of around £4 million has been allocated in my Department's budget to conduct 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 will use the evidence produced by this research and studies to guide our TB eradication strategy in the future.

Crossmaglen Monument: Funding

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 11474/11-15, to outline the content of the correspondence from the European Commission regarding the proposal to use Rural Development Funding to refurbish the republican monument in Crossmaglen.

(AQW 12692/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: In their correspondence the European Commission rehearsed the rules of the Rural Development Programme and Regulation, of which the Department is fully aware

As I have advised you previously this advice has been passed to SOAR and confirmation of their decision in relation to the Crossmaglen Memorial Heritage Project is awaited

Forest Service: Fires

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the total losses to the Forest Service, as a result of fires, in the last three years.

(AQO 2111/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Around the beginning of May 2011 we witnessed some of the worst wild fires in recent memory. During 2011-12 the Forest Service Annual Report and Accounts reported a loss of 704 hectares of planted land with an associated timber valuation loss of £981,000. An additional 1096 hectares of unplanted land was also damaged.

In the previous year 2010-2011, seventy five hectares of planted land was destroyed with a timber valuation loss of £48,000.

In 2009-2010 no damage was reported.

Dairy Industry

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what measures are being taken to encourage the dairy farming industry to grow its potential and become a key driver in our economic recovery.

(AQO 2112/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: First of all, I want to say that I value highly the important contribution which the dairy industry makes to the economy and life in rural areas.

My Department, working alongside industry partners and other Government Departments, has a role in supporting the whole agri-food sector, including the dairy industry, to grow its potential by becoming more market-led. In practice this means that, especially when EU milk quotas end in 2015, decisions both on milk production and the products produced should be taken by milk producers and processors in the context of their input costs, market requirements and market returns.

For too long, our dairy industry has been reliant on the processing of commodity products which normally generate the lowest returns. However, I am pleased to see that steps have been taken in recent years to move away from the processing of milk powders to higher added value products. But more needs to be done. That is why Arlene Foster and my predecessor provided support to Dairy UK (NI) to undertake an industry-led competitiveness study. The aim was to help it plan for the future and representatives from the dairy industry are now taking forward the report's recommendations.

The sector also receives significant assistance from Government through AFBI and CAFRE. In particular, CAFRE's Loughry Campus supports the processing sector in the key area of product innovation. Additionally, my Department has provided support under the Regional Food Programme and Axis 1 of the Rural Development Programme.

I believe that the dairy sector has the potential to grow further and to exploit opportunities arising from the expanding world population. The key is to grasp these opportunities and I would encourage the dairy sector to engage positively with the Agri-Food Strategy Board to articulate its views on the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Youth Unemployment: Rural Areas

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the Rural Youth Employability Programme, as part of her Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Framework.

(AQO 2113/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: With your permission Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 8 and 12 together as they both relate to youth unemployment in rural areas, which is a key priority for me as Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development.

Through the Tackling Poverty and Social Isolation framework, my department is supporting two rural youth initiatives aimed at increasing employability and promoting entrepreneurship.

Through the Youth Employability Programme – marketed as BOOST - unemployed rural young people will have an opportunity to develop skills to increase their employability and improve their chances of securing a job. The Programme includes: face to face workshops, an interactive support package, access to a network of 'Employment Mentors' and the provision of industry endorsed certification (from the Federation of Small Businesses - FSB) on completion. BOOST will target almost 1,500 unemployed young people by working with partner agencies such as the job centre networks, libraries, the Rural Development Council, the Rural Support Networks, Local Action Groups, Local Councils, Local Enterprise Agencies, Rural Colleges and sports centres.

I am also supporting the Rural Youth Entrepreneurship (RYE) Programme which aims to develop business potential among vulnerable young people in rural areas. These areas will be identified using multiple deprivation criteria and will recruit 600 vulnerable young people onto the Programme by undertaking various outreach events and workshops in the areas identified. The RYE programme will create the foundations for the development of future rural businesses through upskilling, networking, mentoring and sharing of ideas to stimulate business creation.

I am confident that these innovative initiatives will help to address the problem of youth unemployment in rural areas and in doing so will also help reduce rural youth migration and increase the sustainability of rural communities.

Animal Welfare: Enforcement Powers

Mr F McCann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the transfer of powers, to local councils, in relation to animal welfare enforcement.

(AQO 2114/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Councils have had responsibility for enforcement of the powers in the Welfare of Animals Act 2011 in respect of other animals, i.e. domestic pets and horses since 2 April 2012.

Councils have decided to deliver this enforcement role on a regional basis. They have appointed and trained 5 Animal Welfare Officers, who have been fully operational since 2 April. Up to 18 May 2012, Councils had received 795 animal welfare complaints, which have resulted in 478 investigatory visits. Forty improvement notices have been served on owners detailing the improvements which must be made to improve the conditions in which their animals are kept. In addition, one animal was seized during this period.

I have been very encouraged by the positive approach taken by Councils to their new responsibilities and by the close and effective partnership working between Councils and my Departmental officials in putting the necessary arrangements in place. Councils have worked exceptionally hard to implement the new powers and must be commended for this and all their enforcement work to date. For the first time in the north we have resources dedicated to animal welfare enforcement in respect of domestic pets and horses and the initial feedback on the ground is that these new arrangements are working well.

My officials will continue to liaise with Councils as they implement these new powers. I know Councils intend to review their delivery structure at the end of 2012, by which time they will have built up experience and good information about the volume and type of welfare complaints relating to domestic pets and horses.

Rural White Paper Action Plan

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the Rural White Paper Action Plan.

(AQO 2115/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am delighted to announce that the Executive approved the Rural White Paper Action Plan on 31 May 2012.

The Rural White Paper Action Plan is an Executive initiative led by me which includes commitments by each Department in relation to rural areas. It is a first in that it is the first initiative in the North to focus entirely on rural issues and to include commitments by all government Departments. As Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development I am committed to working with my Ministerial colleagues in seeking to improve the quality of life of those living in rural areas and the Rural White Paper Action Plan sets out actions which the Executive proposes to take to achieve this.

The development of the Action Plan was commenced by my predecessor, Michelle Gildernew, and I would like to place on record the valuable work undertaken by Michelle during the previous Assembly. This has been a very intensive process involving extensive consultation with stakeholders and government departments and I would like to thank my Ministerial colleagues for their support and contributions during the process. I would also like to thank members of the Rural White Paper Stakeholder Advisory Group for their valuable work and commitment during the stakeholder process.

I am currently arranging for the document to be formally published and will be officially launching the Action Plan shortly.

Common Agricultural Policy

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy.

(AQO 2116/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The EU Commission published its formal CAP reform proposals on 19 October 2011. The central features of the farm support arrangements within this package include a move to a flat rate payment per hectare at a regional level by 2019 and the introduction of new environmental requirements (greening). There are also proposals for a number of additional compulsory and optional direct support payments. The reform proposals relating to farm support have attracted considerable criticism across Europe, not least due to the complexity surrounding greening and the fact that the current single support payment would be replaced by up to six (and in some cases more) separate payments. The other elements of the reform package, notably around rural development, have proven less controversial.

Following the publication of the Commission's proposals, I launched a full public consultation and received significant and valuable feedback from stakeholders. Taking due account of this input, I prepared and presented a response to the EU Commission proposals to Georg Haeusler, Head of Cabinet for Agriculture Commissioner Dacian Cioloș, on 19 April 2012. In this response, I sought to be constructive and offered various suggestions aimed at improving the focus of the Commission's proposals as well as achieving significant simplification. This was a very positive meeting and I followed it up a week later in a further meeting with Gwilym Jones, member of Commissioner Cioloș' Cabinet.

Apart from the Commission, I have been engaging directly with Defra Ministers and my Devolved Administration colleagues on the reform proposals, as well as with Simon Coveney TD, Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine in the south. I have also discussed CAP reform with our local MEPs and hosted a briefing of MEPs in Brussels in May 2012. My officials are very closely involved with Defra and Devolved Administration counterparts in feeding into the Brussels working groups and discussions and keep in regular contact with officials in Dublin.

Although there has been very considerable discussion and debate in Brussels since the reform proposals were published last autumn, to date there has been fairly limited progress in the negotiations, with the EU Commission unwilling so far to concede many Member States' suggestions for change. The European Parliament is currently in the process of preparing its response to the proposals. I expect the negotiations to intensify in the latter part of 2012 and continue into 2013. At this stage, it is not possible to state exactly when an overall agreement will be reached. However, agreement on the EU budget for 2014-20 will be an important and necessary precursor to a deal on CAP reform.

Throughout the negotiations, I will continue my approach of engaging directly with the Commission, with Defra and the Devolved Administrations, with MEPs and with the Irish Agriculture Minister, (including through the North/South Ministerial Council). My goal remains a well funded, flexible and simplified CAP that meets our local needs.

Youth Unemployment: Rural Areas

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she has taken any steps to address the problem of youth unemployment in rural areas.

(AQO 2117/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: With your permission Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 8 and 12 together as they both relate to youth unemployment in rural areas, which is a key priority for me as Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development.

Through the Tackling Poverty and Social Isolation framework, my department is supporting two rural youth initiatives aimed at increasing employability and promoting entrepreneurship.

Through the Youth Employability Programme – marketed as BOOST - unemployed rural young people will have an opportunity to develop skills to increase their employability and improve their chances of securing a job. The Programme includes: face to face workshops, an interactive support package, access to a network of 'Employment Mentors' and the provision of industry endorsed certification (from the Federation of Small Businesses - FSB) on completion. BOOST will target almost 1,500 unemployed young people by working with partner agencies such as the job centre networks, libraries, the Rural Development Council, the Rural Support Networks, Local Action Groups, Local Councils, Local Enterprise Agencies, Rural Colleges and sports centres.

I am also supporting the Rural Youth Entrepreneurship (RYE) Programme which aims to develop business potential among vulnerable young people in rural areas. These areas will be identified using multiple deprivation criteria and will recruit 600 vulnerable young people onto the Programme by undertaking various outreach events and workshops in the areas identified. The RYE programme will create the foundations for the development of future rural businesses through upskilling, networking, mentoring and sharing of ideas to stimulate business creation.

I am confident that these innovative initiatives will help to address the problem of youth unemployment in rural areas and in doing so will also help reduce rural youth migration and increase the sustainability of rural communities.

Balmoral Show

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the benefits that the Balmoral Show brings to the agricultural sector.

(AQO 2119/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Balmoral Show is the largest agriculture and food show in the North of Ireland, attracting around 70,000 visitors each year. As such, the show provides a platform for local livestock breeders to showcase the high quality of livestock in Ireland and it is an excellent place for agricultural businesses to promote their products and services, develop new market opportunities and engage with a considerable and diverse audience. In 2012 there were almost 500 trade stands, with over 80% of these exhibitors returning year after year. This I believe highlights the commercial benefits of the show to the agricultural sector.

Increasingly the Show is becoming an important place to showcase the best of food and drink produced in the north and there has been a steady increase over the years to almost 60 exhibitors from this sector in 2012. A number of these are diversifying farm businesses exhibiting their products for the first time to the large number of local and international buyers who attend the show.

The show brings together exhibitors from across a wide spectrum of fields including livestock and livestock services, farm machinery, food and drink, equestrianism, horticulture and a wide range of business support services, including the government departments' exhibition. It provides visitors from the agricultural sector the opportunity to see and learn more about a wide range of products and services all in the one venue.

There are also key social aspects involved in attending Balmoral show. For many it is a good day out and an opportunity to meet and network with people from different farming backgrounds. It also allows urban dwellers an opportunity to experience all that is good about our industry.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Arm's-length Bodies and Quangos

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the current number of arm's-length bodies and quangos that are attached to her Department; and how this figure compares with the number in (i) 2008; (ii) 2009; (iii) 2010; and (iv) 2011. **(AQW 12181/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure):

- i) There are currently (as at 31 May 2012) 10 arm's length bodies/ quangos attached to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure.
- ii) This compares with:
 - (i) 10 in May 2008
 - (ii) 10 in May 2009
 - (iii) 10 in May 2010
 - (iv) 10 in May 2011

Sickness Absence

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the percentage of sickness absence in her Department in each of the last three years; and the agreed target rate of sickness as set out in any memoranda of understanding between her Department and the trade unions.

(AQW 12220/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Percentage Absence Rate for Sickness Absence

Financial Year	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Absence Rate	3.1%	3.4%	*

* 2011/12 absence statistics are not yet available, and will be published by the Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency (NISRA) in September-October 2012.

My Department does not have an agreed target rate of sickness set out in any memoranda of understanding with the trade unions.

Arm's-length Bodies: Pension Schemes

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether all the pension schemes that are in place across her Department's arm's-length bodies are exclusively Consumer Price Indexed, including the benefits that were earned by contributions before the change from the Retail Price Index; and to detail any exceptions.

(AQW 12306/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme

Employment by the Board of Trustees of the National Museums NI and Employment in the NI Museums Council are listed at Schedule 1 to the Superannuation (NI) Order 1972 as eligible employments covered for pension purposes by the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (NI).

Pensions in payment and preserved pensions in the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (NI) are Consumer Price Indexed. This includes pension benefits that were earned by contributions before the change of indexation from the Retail Price Index which took effect in April 2011.

NI Local Government Officers Superannuation Committee

The following Arms Length Bodies are members of the NI Local Government Officers Superannuation Committee (NILGOSC) pension scheme:

- Arts Council NI
- Libraries NI
- Sport NI
- Armagh Observatory and Planetarium

Prior to April 2011, Pensions Increase was based on the increase in the Retail Prices Index (RPI). From April 2011, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) replaced RPI as the measure of inflation used to apply cost of living increases.

Standard scheme benefits

For active members of the scheme and those who left after 1 April 2011, all accrued benefits will be increased in line with the Consumer Price Index (CPI).

For deferred and pensioner members who left prior to 1 April 2011, the increase to their benefits will be measured by RPI up to April 2011 and then CPI thereafter.

Additional pension benefits

For contracts that commenced after 1 April 2012, the pre and post retirement increase to benefits is CPI.

For contracts that commenced prior to 1 April 2012, the current guidance applies a pre and post retirement increase of RPI. However, this guidance is currently under review.

North/South Pension Scheme

The staff within the following North/South bodies are eligible for the North/South Pension scheme:

- Waterways Ireland
- Foras na Gaeilge
- Ulster-Scots Agency

Waterways Ireland

Retired members of the scheme who were based in NI have, to date, had their benefits based on Retail Price Index.

Foras na Gaeilge and Ulster-Scots Agency have no retired members of the scheme based in NI.

Other**NI Screen**

NI Screen are currently outside of the above mentioned schemes and are not linked to either the Consumer or Retail Price Indexes.

Arm's-length Bodies and Quangos: Remuneration

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the current total annual cost of remuneration for board members at her Department's arm's-length bodies and quangos.

(AQW 12356/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The current total annual cost is £172,118.75. This figure is based on the assumption that all appointed Board members serve for a full year.

Fracking Impact on Waterways

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she has raised, or plans to raise, with her Executive colleagues, any concerns she has about the impact that fracking will have on waterways, fish stocks and fisheries in Co Fermanagh.

(AQW 12445/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I currently have no plans to raise any concerns about the impact of fracking with my Executive colleagues.

DETI has established a Shale Gas Forum to address concerns about hydraulic fracturing. Inland Fisheries Group officials will represent the interests of the DCAL at the Forum.

Funding for North West 200

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much funding her Department has allocated to the North West 200 in each of the last three years; and for what purpose was the funding used.

(AQW 12449/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In the last three financial years my Department, through Sport NI, has provided £162,654 exchequer funding to the organisers of the North West 200, the Coleraine and District Motor Club for safety purposes. Details are set out below:

Date	Purpose	Amount
2009	Tarmac Surfacing of NW200 Paddock	£99,500.00
2010	Work at Station Corner on NW200 circuit	£18,992.80
2010	New chicane built at Mather's Cross on NW200 circuit	£19,168.37

Date	Purpose	Amount
2011	Recticel safety bales	£12,355.20
2011	Metal crowd control barriers for paddock area	£12,637.72
Total		£162,654.09

Department of Education

Nursery Provision in the Lurgan Area

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education for an update on proposals to deal with the shortage of nursery provision in the Lurgan area.

(AQW 11166/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): My Department has worked closely with the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) throughout the pre-school admissions process. The SELB Pre-School Education Advisory Group (PEAG) is satisfied that sufficient places are available in the Lurgan area to meet demand from children in their final pre-school year.

Nursery Provision in the Portadown Area

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister of Education whether his Department is considering a number of development proposals for the establishment of additional statutory nursery provision in the Portadown area.

(AQW 11555/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In 2011 the Southern Education and Library Board published four Development Proposals for new/additional statutory nursery provision in the Portadown area at Bocombra Primary School, Edenderry Nursery School, Portadown Integrated Primary School and Seagoe Primary School.

I have now considered each of the proposals and I am pleased to inform you that I have recently approved the provision of a new/additional 26 place part-time unit at each of the four schools from 1 September 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter.

Apprenticeship Programmes

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the apprenticeship programmes available within his Department; (ii) the apprenticeship programmes provided by his Department; (iii) the number of people currently enrolled in these programmes; and (iv) the number of places available on the programmes.

(AQW 12009/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There are currently no apprenticeship programmes available within the Department of Education.

Capital Builds

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to list the approvals given by his Department to authorities to procure land for the purposes of capital builds in each of the last three years.

(AQW 12034/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Approvals given to school authorities to procure land for capital projects are detailed in the table below:

Financial Year	School Name
2009-10	Carrick Primary School, Warrenpoint
	Foyle College Ebrington Primary School/, Derry
	Magherafelt Primary School
2010-11	Colaiste Feirste, Belfast
	Bangor Grammar School
	Strathearn Grammar School , Belfast
	St Mary's Primary School, Newcastle
2011-12	St Columba's Primary School, Straw

Nursery Provision in North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education for an update on the proposals to address the shortage of nursery provision in the North Down area.

(AQW 12256/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Funded pre-school places are available in statutory nursery schools and units and in voluntary/private settings participating in the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme.

The Pre-School Admissions Process is a 2 stage process which completed on 1 June 2012 when letters issued to those parents/guardians of children who remained unplaced having stipulated further preferences at Stage 2 of the admissions process. The letter also contained a list of pre-school settings in the Board area in which vacant places remain.

In an effort to place as many children as possible, parents whose children were unplaced at Stage 1 but who chose not to list further preferences also received a letter from their ELB advising them of where places remained available.

Across the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) area, of the children whose parents applied at Stage 2 of the process 12 remain unplaced, 9 of whom applied for places in Bangor.

The SEELB has brought new providers in to the Programme and has increased the number of places allocated to existing settings where necessary.

The SEELB is continuing to liaise with new providers and will continue to work with parents over the coming months to ensure that, as far as possible, all eligible children are able to avail of a funded pre-school place in September.

I expect the number of unplaced children to fall further in the coming weeks as there is natural movement in the system before the new school term commences.

School Absences

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education how many children in the North Antrim constituency have been identified as not going to school, broken down by Education and Library Board.

(AQW 12278/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The figures provided are based on pupils living in the North Antrim constituency as opposed to attending schools located in the North Antrim constituency.

All pupils living in the North Antrim constituency are under NEELB therefore it is not relevant to break figures down by ELB.

(i) Primary School

The absence level for primary school pupils living in the North Antrim constituency was 4.4% of the total half days in 2010/2011. Of all primary school enrolments living in the North Antrim constituency, 3.4% had less than 85% attendance.

(ii) Post Primary School

The absence level for post primary school pupils living in the North Antrim constituency was 6.7% of the total half days in 2010/2011. Of all post primary enrolments living in North Antrim constituency 10.8% had less than 85% attendance.

(iii) Special Schools

The absence level for special school pupils living in the North Antrim constituency was 7.3% of the total half days in 2010/2011. Of all special school enrolments living in the North Antrim constituency, 14.5% had less than 85% attendance.

Detailed analysis of the 2010/2011 school attendance statistics, including North of Ireland averages can be found on the DE website at:

http://www.deni.gov.uk/attendance_at_grant-aided_primary__post-primary_and_special_schools_2010_11__detailed_statistics.pdf

Irish-medium Schools

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 10780/11-15, what was the practice governing payments for the leasing or renting of premises prior to the issue of Circular 2012/01.

(AQW 12334/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Prior to the issue of Circular 2012/01, there was not a standardised approach to dealing with payments for the leasing or renting of premises. Education and Library Boards have employed differing practices in the past, which included:

- Liaison with Land & Property Services regarding rental valuations
- Liaison with the school concerned
- Confirmation via the Common Funding Formula allocations that the property referred to a grant-aided school in receipt of recurrent funding
- Consideration and certification of the Lease between the Landlord and Board of Governors

Each Education and Library Board is required to comply with appropriate payment and governance procedures.

Arm's-length Bodies: Funding and Expenditure

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the (i) initial recurrent financial allocation; and (ii) outturn recurrent expenditure for each of his Department's arm's-length bodies, in each of the last three financial years.

(AQW 12339/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Details of the initial recurrent financial allocations and the outturn recurrent expenditure for my Department's arms length bodies, in each of the last three financial years are provided in the tables below:

(i) Initial recurrent financial allocations

	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
	£'000s	£'000s	£'000s
BELB	209,363	225,768	224,419
NEELB	296,002	302,435	299,991
SEELB	256,397	263,122	261,832
SELB	317,348	327,334	324,909
WELB	298,388	304,323	295,228
Staff Commission	376	382	346
CCMS	3,626	3,482	3,431
CCEA	22,047	21,883	24,010
YCNi	3,781	4,089	4,743
Total	1,407,328	1,452,818	1,438,909

(ii) Outturn recurrent expenditure

	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
	£'000s	£'000s	£'000s
BELB	231,897	252,826	251,554
NEELB	304,284	314,560	314,848
SEELB	268,833	278,033	283,895
SELB	326,719	341,821	339,575
WELB	311,142	325,285	314,608
Staff Commission	421	553	301
CCMS	5,611	4,460	4,120
CCEA	21,043	21,231	21,327
YCNi	4,457	4,470	4,692
Total	1,474,407	1,543,239	1,534,920

Notes:

- 1 Initial allocations are taken from Initial Resource Allocation Plans.
- 2 ELB figures relate to schools recurrent budgets including Youth.
- 3 The 2010/11 figures and 2011/12 outturn figures will include allocations for voluntary severance costs approved under the Savings Delivery Plan.
- 4 2011/12 outturn is based on Provisional Outturn.

Diary Commitments

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Education to detail his diary commitments for Friday 25 May 2012.
(AQW 12365/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I spent Friday 25th May attending to constituency business.

Common Funding Formula: Proposed Review

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what discussions his Department has had with other UK jurisdictions on the proposed review of the Common Funding Formula.
(AQW 12426/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have commissioned a wide ranging independent review of the Common Funding Scheme, led by Sir Robert Salisbury. The aim of the Review is to ensure that the Common Funding Scheme is fit for purpose, sufficiently targets social needs and is consistent with, and supports, Departmental policy objectives.

The review panel will consider evidence from a wide range of sources, including practice in other jurisdictions.

GCSEs

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of children who obtained 5 or more GCSEs in English and Maths in each of the last three years, broken down by (i) religious background; and (ii) gender in each council area.
(AQW 12458/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have arranged for the information requested to be placed in the Assembly library.

GCSEs

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of children entitled to free school meals who obtained 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C, including English and Maths, in each of the last three years, broken down by (i) religious background; and (ii) gender in each council area.
(AQW 12459/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have arranged for the information requested to be placed in the Assembly library.

A Levels

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of children entitled to free school meals who obtained 2 or more A levels at grades A*-E, broken down by (i) religious background; and (ii) gender in each council area.
(AQW 12460/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have arranged for the information requested to be placed in the Assembly library.

A Levels

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of children who obtained 2 or more A levels at grades A*-E, broken down by (i) religious background; and (ii) gender in each council area.
(AQW 12461/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have arranged for the information requested to be placed in the Assembly library.

GCSEs

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of children who obtained 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C, including English and Maths, in each of the last three years in (i) Belfast; (ii) Derry; and (iii) all other areas, broken down by (a) religious background; and (b) gender.
(AQW 12465/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have arranged for the information requested to be placed in the Assembly library.

Nursery and Preschool Provision in the Lurgan Area

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of funded pre-school and nursery places currently available at each facility in the Lurgan area; and (ii) the number of children on the waiting list for each facility.
(AQW 12497/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The table below details the number of funded pre-school places available in each setting in the Lurgan area for the 2012/2013 academic year.

Name of Pre-School	Total Places Available 2012/13	No. of places available at the end of Stage 2 of the Admissions Process
Ballyoran Primary School nursery unit	52	0
Carrick Primary School(Lurgan) nursery unit	52	0
Dickson Primary School nursery unit	26	0
Donacloney Primary school nursery unit	26	0
Drumgor Primary School nursery unit	52	0
Drumnamoe Nursery School	104	0
Edenderry Nursery School	52	0
Harrison Nursery School	52	0
Hart Memorial Primary School nursery unit	52	0
King's Park Primary School nursery unit	78	0
Lurgan Model Primary School nursery unit	26	0
Maralin Village Primary School nursery unit	26	0
Millington Nursery School	78	0
Portadown Integrated Primary School nursery unit	26	0
Seagoe Primary School nursery unit	26	0
St Anthony's Primary School nursery unit	78	0
St Brendan's Primary School nursery unit	52	0
St Francis' (Lurgan) Primary School nursery unit	78	0
St John the Baptist Nursery School	52	0
St Patrick's (Aghacommon) Primary School nursery unit	26	0
Tullygally Primary School nursery unit	52	0
Aghagallon Playgroup	19	1
Derrytrasna Playgroup	10	0
Little Acorns Playgroup, Derrymore	25	5
Little Oaks Pre-School Playgroup	45	0
Loughshore Playgroup, Maghery	14	4
Naiscoil Chois Locha	24	0
Naiscoil na Banna	11	0
Peatlands Playgroup	24	0
Trinity Park Pre-School Nursery	52	8

At the end of Stage 2 of the Pre-School Admissions Process, the letter to those parents/guardians whose application for a funded place for their child had been unsuccessful detailed those settings where places may remain available. The letter did not specify the actual number of places in each setting as changes may have occurred at provider level about which the Southern Education and Library Board had not yet been informed.

The Board has advised that they do not hold details of the number of children on waiting lists. This is a matter for individual providers.

Nursery and Preschool Provision in the Lurgan Area

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) what steps he is taking to introduce funded pre-school and nursery places in the Ozanam Centre, Lurgan; and (ii) when the centre should expect the places to be available.

(AQW 12498/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The allocation of places to voluntary and private providers at local level is a matter for each education and library board's Pre-School Education Advisory Group (PEAG). The Southern Education and Library Board's PEAG considered a request from Ozanam Daycare Ltd for funded pre-school places under the Pre-school Education Expansion Programme (PSEEP) for the 2012/13 academic year in the context of the overall level of funded pre-school provision in the Lurgan area. As the PEAG was satisfied that sufficient funded provision was available to meet demand the group's request was turned down. This view was subsequently confirmed by the fact that Drumnamoe Nursery School was unable to fill all of their places with final pre-school age children, a voluntary provider already in the PSEEP had to be withdrawn as a result of insufficient applications and another voluntary provider still had places available at the end of the Admissions Process.

The SELB PEAG will continue to keep the position regarding the level of funded pre-school provision under review and if, as a result of an increase in demand between now and September, additional funded places are required, will review the position in the context of all those voluntary and private providers in the area, including Ozanam Daycare Ltd, who have expressed an interest in participating in the PSEEP

Catholic Maintained Schools: Appointment of Teachers

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Education for his Department's assessment of the statement, in section 7.6.10 of the Scheme for the Appointment of Teachers in Catholic Maintained Schools, that all relevant documentation will be retained for two years; and whether this complies with the accountability requirements of the Government's Codes of Practice on the management of records issued under section 46 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

(AQW 12537/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Lord Chancellor's Code of Practice on the management of records issued under section 46 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 provides that, as a general principle, records should be kept for as long as they are needed by the authority for reference or accountability purposes, to comply with regulatory requirements or to protect legal and other rights and interests. CCMS has determined that two years is an appropriate time for the personal records associated with recruitment and selection exercises to be retained. This complies with the recommendations in the Employment Practices Code published by the Information Commissioner's Office.

Area-based Planning

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Education what steps his Department, the Education and Library Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools have taken to explore cross-border models as part of the Area-Based Planning process to date.

(AQW 12546/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Terms of Reference for Area Planning (available to view on the DE website at: <http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/schools-and-infrastructure-2/area-planning/area-planning-terms-of-reference.htm>), specify that, in delivering an area plan, the Boards, working with CCMS and engaging extensively with other school sectors, should explore opportunities for cross border planning.

The 2 Education and Library Boards that border the south of Ireland have advised that they recognise the potential for cross-border co-operation but that there has as yet been no development work on this issue.

Within the context of an ongoing joint study of north-south education cooperation, Ministers agreed at the last North-South Ministerial Council, held on 1st February 2012, to proceed with a joint survey to inform cross-border pupil movement and school planning. The survey, which will take the form of a questionnaire, is being developed by the Department of Education in the North and the Department of Education and Skills in the South. The results will inform the process by establishing potential demand for cross-border schooling.

Post-primary Schools: Applications

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of applicants to each post-primary school using selection and the number of successful applicants for the 2012/13 academic year; and (ii) the current maximum enrolment number for Year 8 in each post-primary school.

(AQW 12547/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In accordance with my Department's policy on post-primary transfer, which is not supportive of unregulated entrance tests, no information is collected about any aspect of tests conducted in contravention of that policy. Hence it is not possible to provide information referenced to a test grade or score.

With that exception, the following tables provide the information requested for schools that are selective, partially selective and non-selective, referenced to each school's admissions number, which defines the number of permitted Year 8 admissions. The number of pupils transferring to a school that uses academic selection as a criterion equates to the number of pupils admitted to such a school.

When considering the extent to which applicants have been able to gain admission to a selective or partially selective school, it should be noted that the same pupil may appear as an applicant against more than one school due to the way in which the transfer procedure facilitates the sequential processing of applications to a number of schools until each application is successful.

Schools with a selective intake

School Name	Approved Admissions (Year 8) Number	Total Applications	Total Admitted	Total Not Admitted
Abbey Grammar School, Newry	125	200	129	71
Antrim Grammar School	105	143	105	38
Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School	110	171	110	61
Assumption Grammar School, Ballynahinch	120	169	120	49
Ballyclare High School	186	217	186	31
Ballymena Academy	176	244	176	68
Banbridge Academy	184	260	184	76
Bangor Grammar School	125	158	125	33
Belfast High School	136	167	136	31
Belfast Royal Academy	200	246	200	46
Bloomfield Collegiate School	100	127	100	27
Cambridge House Grammar	140	160	140	20
Campbell College	110	93	93	0
Carrickfergus Grammar School	116	155	116	39
Christian Brothers' Grammar School, Omagh	135	158	135	23
Coleraine Academical Institution	125	149	125	24
Coleraine High School	120	141	120	21
Collegiate Grammar School, Enniskillen	70	80	70	10
Dalriada School	125	177	125	52
Dominican College, Belfast	150	171	150	21
Dominican College, Portstewart	69	93	69	24
Down High School	128	172	128	44
Foyle College	125	159	125	34
Friends' School	140	313	140	173
Glenlola Collegiate School	157	185	157	28
Grosvenor Grammar School	155	237	155	82
Hunterhouse College	100	167	100	67
Larne Grammar School	110	126	110	16
Limavady Grammar School	130	158	130	28
Loreto College, Coleraine	120	159	120	39
Loreto Grammar School, Omagh	125	157	125	32
Lumen Christi College	120	226	120	106
Methodist College	240	301	240	61

School Name	Approved Admissions (Year 8) Number	Total Applications	Total Admitted	Total Not Admitted
Mount Lourdes Grammar School	96	145	96	49
Omagh Academy	95	100	95	5
Our Lady & St Patrick's College, Knock	180	266	180	86
Our Lady's Grammar School, Newry	120	162	120	42
Portora Royal School	70	68	68	0
Rainey Endowed School	100	116	100	16
Rathmore Grammar School	180	257	180	77
Regent House School	210	254	210	44
Royal Belfast Academical Institution	150	176	150	26
Sacred Heart Grammar School, Newry	120	162	120	42
St Colman's College, Newry	125	181	125	56
St Columb's College, Derry	220	266	220	46
St Dominic's High School, Belfast	141	204	141	63
St Joseph's Grammar School, Donaghmore	95	133	95	38
St Louis Grammar School, Ballymena	139	204	139	65
St Louis Grammar School, Kilkeel	80	97	80	17
St Malachy's College, Belfast	150	203	150	53
St Mary's Christian Brothers' Grammar School	175	172	172	0
St Mary's Grammar School, Magherafelt	153	161	153	8
St Michael's College, Enniskillen	100	131	100	31
St Patrick's Academy, Dungannon	195	243	195	48
St Patrick's Grammar School, Armagh	110	129	110	19
St Patrick's Grammar School, Downpatrick	96	96	96	0
Strathearn School	110	172	110	62
Sullivan Upper School	150	197	150	47
The Royal School, Armagh	100	114	100	14
The Royal School, Dungannon	93	98	93	5
Thornhill College, Derry	200	225	200	25
Victoria College	130	199	130	69
Wallace High School	170	291	170	121
Wellington College	110	170	110	60

Notes:

- 1 Figures relate to the position at the conclusion of the transfer procedure on 28 May 2012.
- 2 The transfer procedure involves parents expressing a number of preferences on the Transfer Form, which equates to multiple applications to schools. It follows therefore that an applicant may appear within the total applications figure of more than one school within this table.

- 3 St Joseph's Grammar School's approved admissions number includes admission to the school's Irish Medium Unit which has a non-selective intake.
- 4 Four additional places were approved by the Department of Education in respect of Abbey Grammar School, Newry, which permitted that school to lawfully admit pupils in excess of its admissions number.

Schools with a partially selective intake

School Name	Approved Admissions (Year 8) Number	Total Applications	Total Admitted	Total Not Admitted
Lagan College (35% selective intake)	200	284	200	84
Slemish Integrated College (35% selective intake)	120	231	120	111
Strabane Academy (50% selective intake)	110	98	98	0

Notes:

- 1 Figures relate to the position at the conclusion of the transfer procedure on 28 May 2012.
- 2 The transfer procedure involves parents expressing a number of preferences on the Transfer Form, which equates to multiple applications to schools. It follows therefore that an applicant may appear within the total applications figure of more than one school within this table.
- 3 Although these schools only admit a proportion of their intake with reference to a test, the total applications figure refers to both the school's selective and non-selective intake. The Department is unable to provide a breakdown of these figures.

Schools with a non-selective intake

School Name	Approved Admissions (Year 8) Number
Ashfield Boys' High School, Belfast	110
Ashfield Girls' High School, Belfast	113
Aughnacloy College	46
Ballee Community High School	100
Ballycastle High School	92
Ballyclare Secondary School	180
Ballymoney High School	130
Banbridge High School	136
Bangor Academy and Sixth Form College	242
Belfast Boys' Model School	151
Belfast Model School for Girls	160
Blackwater Integrated College	80
Brownlow College	90
Carrickfergus College	160
Castleberg High School	90
Christian Brothers' Secondary School, Belfast	100
City of Armagh High School	115
Clounagh Junior High School	220
Colaiste Feirste, Belfast	100
Coleraine College	103
Cookstown High School	180

School Name	Approved Admissions (Year 8) Number
Corpus Christi College, Belfast	100
Craigavon Senior High School	310
Cross & Passion College, Ballycastle	130
Crumlin Integrated College	75
Cullybackey High School	130
De La Salle College, Belfast	163
De La Salle Secondary School, Downpatrick	86
Dean Maguirc College, Carrickmore	80
Devenish College, Enniskillen	120
Downshire School	160
Dromore High School	148
Drumcree College	150
Drumglass High School	90
Drumragh Integrated College, Omagh	96
Dunclug College, Ballymena	110
Dundonald High School	120
Dunluce School	110
Dunmurry High School	80
Edmund Rice College	120
Erne Integrated College, Enniskillen	70
Fivemiletown High School	69
Fort Hill College, Lisburn	160
Garvagh High School	70
Glastry College	110
Glengormley High School	210
Hazelwood Integrated College, Belfast	140
Holy Cross College, Strabane	300
Holy Trinity College, Cookstown	160
Immaculate Conception College	105
Integrated College Dungannon	90
Kilkeel High School	145
Killicomaine Junior High School	227
Knockbreda High School	120
Larne High School	135
Laurelhill Community College, Lisburn	175
Limavady High School	140
Lismore Comprehensive School	210

School Name	Approved Admissions (Year 8) Number
Lisnagarvey High School	100
Lisnaskea High School	60
Lisneal College, Derry	178
Little Flower Girls' School, Belfast	107
Lurgan Junior High School	250
Magherafelt High School	100
Malone College, Belfast	130
Markethill High School	93
Monkstown Community School	164
Movilla High School, Newtownards	180
Nendrum College, Comber	80
New-Bridge Integrated College, Loughbrickland	80
Newry High School	92
Newtownabbey Community High School	130
Newtownbreda High School	170
Newtownhamilton High School	35
North-Coast Integrated College, Coleraine	80
Oakgrove Integrated College, Derry	130
Omagh High School	100
Orangefield High School, Belfast	100
Our Lady of Lourdes High School, Ballymoney	80
Our Lady of Mercy Girls' School, Belfast	110
Parkhall Integrated College, Antrim	150
Priory College, Holywood	85
Rathfriland High School	66
Sacred Heart College, Omagh	170
Saintfield High School	68
Shimna Integrated College, Newcastle	80
Sperrin Integrated College, Magherafelt	80
St Aidan's High School, Derrylin	66
St Benedict's College, Randalstown	100
St Brigid's College, Derry	125
St Brigid's High School, Armagh	90
St Catherine's College, Armagh	155
St Cecilia's College, Londonderry	129
St Ciaran's High School, Ballygawley	125
St Colman's High School, Ballynahinch	95

School Name	Approved Admissions (Year 8) Number
St Colmcille's High School, Crossgar	90
St Colm's High School, Draperstown	68
St Colm's High School, Twinbrook	132
St Columban's College, Kilkeel	105
St Columbanus' College, Bangor	90
St Columba's High School, Portaferry	104
St Comhghall's College, Lisnaskea	86
St Eugene's College, Roslea	54
St Eugene's High School, Castleberg	62
St Fanchea's College, Enniskillen	60
St Gemma's High School, Belfast	84
St Genevieve's High School, Belfast	160
St John's High School, Dromore	90
St Joseph's Boys' High School, Newry	100
St Joseph's College, Belfast	120
St Joseph's College, Coalisland	135
St Joseph's College, Coleraine	98
St Joseph's College, Enniskillen	74
St Joseph's High School, Crossmaglen	120
St Joseph's Secondary School, Derry	140
St Killian's College	140
St Louise's Comprehensive College, Belfast	356
St Malachy's High School, Castlewellan	164
St Mark's High School, Warrenpoint	150
St Mary's College, Irvinestown	62
St Mary's College, Derry	135
St Mary's College, Portglenone	70
St Mary's High School, Belleek	46
St Mary's High School, Downpatrick	125
St Mary's High School, Lurgan	155
St Mary's High School, Newry	100
St Mary's, Limavady	170
St Patrick's & St Brigid's College, Claudy	100
St Patrick's College Banbridge	125
St Patrick's College, Ballymena	150
St Patrick's College, Bearnageeha, Belfast	135
St Patrick's College, Dungannon	100

School Name	Approved Admissions (Year 8) Number
St Patrick's College, Maghera	190
St Patrick's High School, Dungiven	90
St Patrick's High School, Keady	160
St Patrick's High School, Lisburn	106
St Paul's College, Kilrea	54
St Paul's High School, Bessbrook	207
St Paul's Junior High School, Lurgan	150
St Peter's High School, Derry	120
St Pius X College, Magherafelt	140
St Rose's Dominican College, Belfast	108
Strangford Integrated College	80
Tandragee Junior High School	105
The High School, Ballynahinch	76
Ulidia Integrated College, Carrickfergus	80

Academic Selection

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) number of pupils transferring into post-primary schools, which used selection, in the 2012/13 academic year as an enrolment criterion; and (ii) the number of pupils who were (a) successful; and (b) unsuccessful in obtaining a place, broken down by the grade achieved in the selection tests.

(AQW 12548/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In accordance with my Department's policy on post-primary transfer, which is not supportive of unregulated entrance tests, no information is collected about any aspect of tests conducted in contravention of that policy. Hence it is not possible to provide information referenced to a test grade or score.

With that exception, the following tables provide the information requested for schools that are selective, partially selective and non-selective, referenced to each school's admissions number, which defines the number of permitted Year 8 admissions. The number of pupils transferring to a school that uses academic selection as a criterion equates to the number of pupils admitted to such a school.

When considering the extent to which applicants have been able to gain admission to a selective or partially selective school, it should be noted that the same pupil may appear as an applicant against more than one school due to the way in which the transfer procedure facilitates the sequential processing of applications to a number of schools until each application is successful.

Schools with a selective intake

School Name	Approved Admissions (Year 8) Number	Total Applications	Total Admitted	Total Not Admitted
Abbey Grammar School, Newry	125	200	129	71
Antrim Grammar School	105	143	105	38
Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School	110	171	110	61
Assumption Grammar School, Ballynahinch	120	169	120	49
Ballyclare High School	186	217	186	31
Ballymena Academy	176	244	176	68
Banbridge Academy	184	260	184	76
Bangor Grammar School	125	158	125	33

School Name	Approved Admissions (Year 8) Number	Total Applications	Total Admitted	Total Not Admitted
Belfast High School	136	167	136	31
Belfast Royal Academy	200	246	200	46
Bloomfield Collegiate School	100	127	100	27
Cambridge House Grammar	140	160	140	20
Campbell College	110	93	93	0
Carrickfergus Grammar School	116	155	116	39
Christian Brothers' Grammar School, Omagh	135	158	135	23
Coleraine Academical Institution	125	149	125	24
Coleraine High School	120	141	120	21
Collegiate Grammar School, Enniskillen	70	80	70	10
Dalriada School	125	177	125	52
Dominican College, Belfast	150	171	150	21
Dominican College, Portstewart	69	93	69	24
Down High School	128	172	128	44
Foyle College	125	159	125	34
Friends' School	140	313	140	173
Glenlola Collegiate School	157	185	157	28
Grosvenor Grammar School	155	237	155	82
Hunterhouse College	100	167	100	67
Larne Grammar School	110	126	110	16
Limavady Grammar School	130	158	130	28
Loreto College, Coleraine	120	159	120	39
Loreto Grammar School, Omagh	125	157	125	32
Lumen Christi College	120	226	120	106
Methodist College	240	301	240	61
Mount Lourdes Grammar School	96	145	96	49
Omagh Academy	95	100	95	5
Our Lady & St Patrick's College, Knock	180	266	180	86
Our Lady's Grammar School, Newry	120	162	120	42
Portora Royal School	70	68	68	0
Rainey Endowed School	100	116	100	16
Rathmore Grammar School	180	257	180	77
Regent House School	210	254	210	44
Royal Belfast Academical Institution	150	176	150	26
Sacred Heart Grammar School, Newry	120	162	120	42
St Colman's College, Newry	125	181	125	56

School Name	Approved Admissions (Year 8) Number	Total Applications	Total Admitted	Total Not Admitted
St Columb's College, Derry	220	266	220	46
St Dominic's High School, Belfast	141	204	141	63
St Joseph's Grammar School, Donaghmore	95	133	95	38
St Louis Grammar School, Ballymena	139	204	139	65
St Louis Grammar School, Kilkeel	80	97	80	17
St Malachy's College, Belfast	150	203	150	53
St Mary's Christian Brothers' Grammar School	175	172	172	0
St Mary's Grammar School, Magherafelt	153	161	153	8
St Michael's College, Enniskillen	100	131	100	31
St Patrick's Academy, Dungannon	195	243	195	48
St Patrick's Grammar School, Armagh	110	129	110	19
St Patrick's Grammar School, Downpatrick	96	96	96	0
Strathearn School	110	172	110	62
Sullivan Upper School	150	197	150	47
The Royal School, Armagh	100	114	100	14
The Royal School, Dungannon	93	98	93	5
Thornhill College, Derry	200	225	200	25
Victoria College	130	199	130	69
Wallace High School	170	291	170	121
Wellington College	110	170	110	60

Notes:

- 5 Figures relate to the position at the conclusion of the transfer procedure on 28 May 2012.
- 6 The transfer procedure involves parents expressing a number of preferences on the Transfer Form, which equates to multiple applications to schools. It follows therefore that an applicant may appear within the total applications figure of more than one school within this table.
- 7 St Joseph's Grammar School's approved admissions number includes admission to the school's Irish Medium Unit which has a non-selective intake.
- 8 Four additional places were approved by the Department of Education in respect of Abbey Grammar School, Newry, which permitted that school to lawfully admit pupils in excess of its admissions number.

Schools with a partially selective intake

School Name	Approved Admissions (Year 8) Number	Total Applications	Total Admitted	Total Not Admitted
Lagan College (35% selective intake)	200	284	200	84
Slemish Integrated College (35% selective intake)	120	231	120	111
Strabane Academy (50% selective intake)	110	98	98	0

Notes:

- 4 Figures relate to the position at the conclusion of the transfer procedure on 28 May 2012.

- 5 The transfer procedure involves parents expressing a number of preferences on the Transfer Form, which equates to multiple applications to schools. It follows therefore that an applicant may appear within the total applications figure of more than one school within this table.
- 6 Although these schools only admit a proportion of their intake with reference to a test, the total applications figure refers to both the school's selective and non-selective intake. The Department is unable to provide a breakdown of these figures.

Schools with a non-selective intake

School Name	Approved Admissions (Year 8) Number
Ashfield Boys' High School, Belfast	110
Ashfield Girls' High School, Belfast	113
Aughnacloy College	46
Ballee Community High School	100
Ballycastle High School	92
Ballyclare Secondary School	180
Ballymoney High School	130
Banbridge High School	136
Bangor Academy and Sixth Form College	242
Belfast Boys' Model School	151
Belfast Model School for Girls	160
Blackwater Integrated College	80
Brownlow College	90
Carrickfergus College	160
Castleberg High School	90
Christian Brothers' Secondary School, Belfast	100
City of Armagh High School	115
Clounagh Junior High School	220
Colaiste Feirste, Belfast	100
Coleraine College	103
Cookstown High School	180
Corpus Christi College, Belfast	100
Craigavon Senior High School	310
Cross & Passion College, Ballycastle	130
Crumlin Integrated College	75
Cullybackey High School	130
De La Salle College, Belfast	163
De La Salle Secondary School, Downpatrick	86
Dean Maguirc College, Carrickmore	80
Devenish College, Enniskillen	120
Downshire School	160
Dromore High School	148
Drumcree College	150

School Name	Approved Admissions (Year 8) Number
Drumglass High School	90
Drumragh Integrated College, Omagh	96
Dunclug College, Ballymena	110
Dundonald High School	120
Dunluce School	110
Dunmurry High School	80
Edmund Rice College	120
Erne Integrated College, Enniskillen	70
Fivemiletown High School	69
Fort Hill College, Lisburn	160
Garvagh High School	70
Glastry College	110
Glengormley High School	210
Hazelwood Integrated College, Belfast	140
Holy Cross College, Strabane	300
Holy Trinity College, Cookstown	160
Immaculate Conception College	105
Integrated College Dungannon	90
Kilkeel High School	145
Killicomaine Junior High School	227
Knockbreda High School	120
Larne High School	135
Laurelhill Community College, Lisburn	175
Limavady High School	140
Lismore Comprehensive School	210
Lisnagarvey High School	100
Lisnaskea High School	60
Lisneal College, Derry	178
Little Flower Girls' School, Belfast	107
Lurgan Junior High School	250
Magherafelt High School	100
Malone College, Belfast	130
Markethill High School	93
Monkstown Community School	164
Movilla High School, Newtownards	180
Nendrum College, Comber	80
New-Bridge Integrated College, Loughbrickland	80

School Name	Approved Admissions (Year 8) Number
Newry High School	92
Newtownabbey Community High School	130
Newtownbreda High School	170
Newtownhamilton High School	35
North-Coast Integrated College, Coleraine	80
Oakgrove Integrated College, Derry	130
Omagh High School	100
Orangefield High School, Belfast	100
Our Lady of Lourdes High School, Ballymoney	80
Our Lady of Mercy Girls' School, Belfast	110
Parkhall Integrated College, Antrim	150
Priory College, Holywood	85
Rathfriland High School	66
Sacred Heart College, Omagh	170
Saintfield High School	68
Shimna Integrated College, Newcastle	80
Sperrin Integrated College, Magherafelt	80
St Aidan's High School, Derrylin	66
St Benedict's College, Randalstown	100
St Brigid's College, Derry	125
St Brigid's High School, Armagh	90
St Catherine's College, Armagh	155
St Cecilia's College, Londonderry	129
St Ciaran's High School, Ballygawley	125
St Colman's High School, Ballynahinch	95
St Colmcille's High School, Crossgar	90
St Colm's High School, Draperstown	68
St Colm's High School, Twinbrook	132
St Columban's College, Kilkeel	105
St Columbanus' College, Bangor	90
St Columba's High School, Portaferry	104
St Comhghall's College, Lisnaskea	86
St Eugene's College, Roslea	54
St Eugene's High School, Castlederg	62
St Fanchea's College, Enniskillen	60
St Gemma's High School, Belfast	84
St Genevieve's High School, Belfast	160

School Name	Approved Admissions (Year 8) Number
St John's High School, Dromore	90
St Joseph's Boys' High School, Newry	100
St Joseph's College, Belfast	120
St Joseph's College, Coalisland	135
St Joseph's College, Coleraine	98
St Joseph's College, Enniskillen	74
St Joseph's High School, Crossmaglen	120
St Joseph's Secondary School, Derry	140
St Killian's College	140
St Louise's Comprehensive College, Belfast	356
St Malachy's High School, Castlewellan	164
St Mark's High School, Warrenpoint	150
St Mary's College, Irvinestown	62
St Mary's College, Derry	135
St Mary's College, Portglenone	70
St Mary's High School, Belleek	46
St Mary's High School, Downpatrick	125
St Mary's High School, Lurgan	155
St Mary's High School, Newry	100
St Mary's, Limavady	170
St Patrick's & St Brigid's College, Claudy	100
St Patrick's College Banbridge	125
St Patrick's College, Ballymena	150
St Patrick's College, Bearnagee, Belfast	135
St Patrick's College, Dungannon	100
St Patrick's College, Maghera	190
St Patrick's High School, Dungiven	90
St Patrick's High School, Keady	160
St Patrick's High School, Lisburn	106
St Paul's College, Kilrea	54
St Paul's High School, Bessbrook	207
St Paul's Junior High School, Lurgan	150
St Peter's High School, Derry	120
St Pius X College, Magherafelt	140
St Rose's Dominican College, Belfast	108
Strangford Integrated College	80
Tandragee Junior High School	105

School Name	Approved Admissions (Year 8) Number
The High School, Ballynahinch	76
Ulidia Integrated College, Carrickfergus	80

Internships

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education how many internships are available in his Department; and if none, what plans he has to introduce an internship scheme.

(AQW 12550/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Corporate Human Resources (CHR), Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) is responsible for facilitating a placement programme for interns within NICS Departments. CHR currently works with Queen's University Belfast (QUB), School of Politics, International Studies and Philosophy, and individual Departments are invited to submit bids for interns. Department of Education (DE) has been chosen to accommodate a successful intern for the first semester of the 2012/13 academic year.

Teacher Training Colleges

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Education what assessment is carried out, during the first year at Teacher Training Colleges, to ensure that prospective teachers are capable of performing the duties associated with teaching.

(AQO 2143/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Assessment for first year students engaged on the BEd primary and post-primary programmes at St. Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College falls into two categories: academic and college-based assessment; and school-based assessment.

Academic and college-based assessment is concerned with the students' academic and professional development and learning and is directly related to preparation for classroom-based practice. Assessment tasks are aimed at preparing students to have a sufficiently developed degree of competence to enable them to work in classroom settings during the School Experience element of the programme. The BEd programmes comprise various modules and each module is assessed by written and practical work. Students need to pass all modules before proceeding to Year 2 of the course.

School-based assessment provides for classroom practice and the development of teaching skills. This school based training is an integral part of the course and plays an important role in providing students with a real life experience of learning and teaching in classrooms and schools. First year students spend between 6 and 7 weeks in schools and are visited on at least 2 occasions by College staff who observe their teaching in the classroom. In consultation with school partners, students are then assessed on their suitability for teaching.

In addition, whilst on school-based training, students are required to prepare a school experience file each year for their period of school based work. This requires them to demonstrate high levels of planning which indicate their thorough understanding of both the Curriculum and how children learn effectively. This file emphasises not only the importance of professional development but also classroom practice.

Special Educational Needs: Cost of Transport

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education to outline the number of judicial reviews that have been established involving the Southern Education and Library Board, in relation to the cost of transport for children with special educational needs.

(AQW 12582/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Southern Education and Library Board has indicated that there have been no judicial reviews in relation to the cost of transport for pupils with a Statement of Special Educational Need.

Nursery or Preschool Provision: Applications

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education, in relation to the 1400 applicants who failed to obtain a pre-school or nursery place in the first tranche for the 2012/13 academic year, to list the locations of the pre-school or nursery facilities where they failed to obtain a place, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 12586/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information requested is not readily available and can only be obtained at a disproportionate cost.

Council for Catholic Maintained Schools

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Education whether the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools is exempt from complying with Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, from a teacher, for notes of interviews which took place between two and six years prior to the FOI request being made.

(AQW 12598/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools is a public authority for the purposes of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and, therefore, subject to the duties of the Act.

Quangos

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to reduce (i) the number of QUANGOs; and (ii) the operational cost of QUANGOs.

(AQW 12599/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education and Skills Authority will replace 8 existing bodies: 5 Education and Library Boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the Youth Council and the Staff Commission

By the end of the budget period, through the establishment of the ESA and other measures, my Department's savings delivery plan aims to achieve savings of £45 million per year.

Teacher Education Places

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to detail the criteria used to determine the reduction in initial teacher education places for each Education and Library Board.

(AQW 12604/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department determines intakes to courses of initial teacher education (ITE) on an annual basis. Intakes are not allocated for each Education and Library Board; rather, they are allocated to each of the ITE providers. In overall terms, the provision made available at the individual institutions is aimed at meeting the differing needs of our schooling system and ensuring that appropriate routes are made available.

The process of determining intakes to ITE courses is informed by a range of statistical data including information provided through the operation of a statistical model known as the Teacher Demand Statistical Model (TDSM).

The intakes are not informed purely by short-term supply and demand issues but by 4 key factors:

- the overall forecast demand for teachers;
- the forecast need for teachers in specific priority or shortage areas;
- the need to maintain and develop the capacity for local ITE providers to educate teachers in the future to meet the diverse needs of our pluralist school system; and
- the need to provide opportunities for young people.

The overall reduction of 63 places (56 post-primary Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) and 7 primary PGCE places), which have fallen to Queen's University Belfast (QUB) and the University of Ulster (UU), takes account of the need to reduce ITE numbers, given the anticipated impact of the Budget settlement for Education; the Public Account Committee's recommendation in relation to the oversupply of teachers; the current position in relation to difficulties faced by newly and recently qualified teachers in gaining permanent employment; and the anticipated level of demand for teachers in future years.

The reductions to intakes this year have focused largely on the one-year post-primary PGCE courses in order to expedite reductions in supply to the post-primary sector. 2010 School Census data have shown that post-primary enrolments have already fallen from 147,902 in 2010/11 to 146,747 in 2011/12, and will continue to fall to 136,716 in 2016/17 before rising to 137,053 in 2017/18. Primary/nursery enrolments have however started to increase over the same period, rising from 170,724 in 2011/12 to an expected level of 186,110 in 2017/18.

Whilst primary enrolments are on the rise, account has had to be taken of the number of teachers trained for this sector who are currently seeking employment on the NI Substitute Teacher Register – some 4,500 teachers as at end of March 2012. I have, therefore, cut the UU's one-year primary PGCE intake by 7 places as a means of expediting reductions in supply to the primary sector.

The Open University (OU) also provides post-primary PGCE courses. In recognition of the OU's unique distance learning flexible PGCE provision, I decided that their comparatively small allocation of 20 places should remain unchanged. In reducing QUB's and UU's intakes, I decided that the overall reduction of 63 places should be apportioned on the basis of last year's intake allocations to the Universities.

Community Schools

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the Barnardo's NI Policy and Practice Briefing No.15 on community schools.

(AQW 12606/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am supportive of the principles underpinning the community schools approach, as set out in Barnardo's Policy and Practice Briefing No. 15, and recognise the benefits and opportunities that collaborative and partnership working can bring not only for pupils, but for schools and the wider community.

In recognition of this, I have provided £0.7m to fund Full Service provision and £11.8m for the Extended Schools (ES) programme in 2012-13. The ES funding includes an additional £1.2m that I announced in the Assembly last month and underpins my commitment to this invaluable programme. The funding provided is used to help address local needs and strengthen links

between schools and the local communities they serve by establishing schools as hubs of the community, engaging effectively with statutory agencies and both voluntary and community organisations. Evaluations of both programmes have demonstrated emerging success in helping remove barriers that prevent children and young people from reaching their full potential.

Supporting a comprehensive Full Service Community School approach would require significant additional funding which would need to be considered in light of other priorities and take account of the difficult budget settlement for education.

Schools: Admissions

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education how his Department (i) supports parents throughout the process of allocation of school places, particularly where a child has not been placed in any school; and (ii) ensures that parents are made aware of the support available to them.

(AQW 12618/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: It is the responsibility of the Education and Library Boards to administer the arrangements for the placement of children in grant-aided schools. Articles 9 and 17 of the Education (NI) Order 1997 require the Education and Library Boards to administer and publicise the arrangements for admissions to schools. To this end the Education and Library Boards annually publish booklets issued to all parents setting out admissions arrangements in the case of primary schools and transfer procedure arrangements in the case of transfer from primary to post-primary school.

Where a child remains unplaced at the end of the admissions/transfer procedures the relevant Education and Library Board will provide the parent/guardian with a list of schools with places still available and ask them to nominate further preferences. The Education and Library Board will continue to liaise with the parent/guardian until the child has been placed in a school.

Schools: Amalgamation

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education whether he has received, from the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the plans for the amalgamation of St Mary's Junior High School, St Paul's Junior High School and St Michael's Grammar School in Lurgan; and to outline the timescale for the implementation of the amalgamation.

(AQW 12620/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Any significant change to the schools' estate, such as a school closure, amalgamation or establishing a new school would require the publication of a statutory Development Proposal to support that intent. To date no such proposal has been published in respect of these schools.

Potential projects such as the amalgamation of St Mary's Junior High School; St Paul's Junior High School and St Michael's Grammar School will be critically assessed as part of the area planning process which I commissioned the five Education and Library Boards (ELBs) working in close conjunction with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and other sectors to undertake.

To date I have received draft area plans for Stand Alone Special Schools and for post-primary provision. It is anticipated that the plans for post-primary provision will be published for public consultation in July 2012.

Until work on the area plans has been completed and the plans have been approved, I am not in a position to comment on any specific school or potential proposals.

Preschool Applications

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Education how many pre-school applications were received from the BT4 and BT5 areas for each of the last 3 academic years.

(AQW 12666/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information requested is not readily available and can only be obtained at a disproportionate cost.

UNICEF: Rights Respecting Schools Award

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education which schools have been awarded UNICEF's Rights Respecting Schools Award.

(AQW 12676/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department of Education is aware that a number of schools are working with UNICEF to achieve the Rights Respecting Schools Award. However the Department does not collate information on schools participating in the awards scheme.

It is matter for individual schools to decide which resources, programmes or services they consider appropriate to support their curricular provision, including whether to take part in the Rights Respecting Schools Awards.

Quangos

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education how many QUANGOS, that are attached to his Department, have been created as a result of legislation passed by the Northern Ireland Assembly since 2007.

(AQW 12689/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The only public body attached to my Department which has been created as a result of legislation passed by the Assembly since 2007 is the Exceptional Circumstances Body. This body began operating in June 2010 and was constituted under regulations passed by the Assembly in 2010. The statutory duty on my Department to make these regulations and establish this body and the Exceptional Circumstances process is contained in the Education (NI) Order 2006.

Irish-medium Education: Dungiven

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the rationale for the creation of the new controlled Irish-medium primary school in Dungiven, including the associated costs; (ii) the level of consultation was carried out in advance with parents and local Boards of Governors; and (iii) the rationale for the closure of the Irish-medium unit at St Canice's Primary School, Dungiven.

(AQW 12737/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I approved a Development Proposal (DP) for the establishment of Gaelscoil Neachtain after a careful consideration of the case presented measured against the requirements of the Sustainable Schools policy. I was satisfied that sufficient evidence was presented to demonstrate that a viable controlled Irish-medium school can be developed. For the school to qualify for funding the Western Education and Library Board must ensure that a number of standard conditions in line with the Sustainable Schools Policy are met on opening.

Consultation is an integral part of the statutory DP process - prior to publication, consultation with those directly affected by the proposal is undertaken by the proposer and consultation with schools considered likely to be affected is undertaken by the publishing Education and Library Board. Post publication, a statutory 2 month objection period ensues during which time anyone who wishes to do so may offer their views directly to the Department. In this instance, comments received were overwhelming in favour of the establishment of Gaelscoil Neachtain.

The Irish-medium unit at St Canice's Primary School has closed in light of parental support for the new Gaelscoil Neachtain.

GCSEs

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of school leavers with hearing loss/deafness who achieved at least five GCSEs at grades A* - C, broken down by Education and Library Board area, between (i) 1995-2000; (ii) 2000-2005; (iii) 2005-2010; and (iv) 2010-2012.

(AQW 12738/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The special education need type was included in the school leavers survey from the 2003/04 academic year onwards, therefore information for 1995 to 2003 is not available.

The table below contains information from 2003/04 to 2010/11.

Percentage of school leavers with hearing loss/deafness achieving at least 5 GCSEs A*-C (inc. equivalents) from 2003/04 to 2010/11 by Education and Library Board of school

	BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	NI
2003/04 to 2005/06	56.8	38.5	37.5	40.0	30.2	41.1
2006/07 to 2008/09	48.8	48.4	50.0	38.8	48.4	45.9
2009/10 to 2010/11	57.9	45.8	68.2	45.9	50.0	53.1

Source: School Leavers Survey

Data excludes special and independent schools

Nursery Provision in North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what action his Department is taking to tackle the shortage of nursery provision in the North Down area.

(AQO 2127/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Funded pre-school places are available in statutory nursery schools and units and in voluntary/private settings participating in the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme.

The Pre-School Admissions Process is a 2 stage process which completed on 1 June 2012 when letters issued to those parents/guardians of children who remained unplaced having stipulated further preferences at Stage 2 of the admissions process. The letter also contained a list of pre-school settings in the Board area in which vacant places remain.

In an effort to place as many children as possible, parents whose children were unplaced at Stage 1 but who chose not to list further preferences also received a letter from their ELB advising them of where places remain available.

Across the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) area, of the children whose parents applied at Stage 2 of the process 12 remain unplaced, 9 of whom applied for places in Bangor.

The SEELB has brought new providers in to the Programme and has increased the number of places allocated to existing settings where necessary.

The SEELB is continuing to liaise with new providers and will continue to work with parents over the coming months to ensure that, as far as possible, all eligible children are able to avail of a funded pre-school place in September.

I expect the number of unplaced children to fall further in the coming weeks as there is natural movement in the system before the new school term commences.

Schools: South Antrim

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education, following his recent funding announcement, when he will make an announcement on his capital priorities for the South Antrim area.

(AQO 2128/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Recommendations from the area planning process will in due course inform priorities for capital investment.

Potential capital projects such as those for the South Antrim area will be critically assessed as part of this to determine how they contribute to the overall infrastructure needed.

However, in the short-term I am considering an interim process to identify major school projects, consistent with and supportive of the area planning work, in which capital investment can be made in the coming period.

Until then I cannot comment on individual school proposals.

C2k: Computer Hardware

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education why C2k no longer supports the servicing of C2k network printers or the upgrade of other computer hardware.

(AQO 2129/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: C2k consulted with school and education stakeholder representatives in developing the Statement of Requirements (SoRs) for the new contract. Many schools have invested in multi-function devices for photocopying, scanning and network printing. These are maintained as part of the School's photocopying contracts. It was therefore decided that printers would not be included in the SoRs. However, at least one printer in each school will be maintained until the end of the current academic year to allow time to adjust.

C2k provides all schools with core provision equipment, including PCs.

Post primary schools had PC replacement in the academic year 2009/10 and Northgate will support or replace (if necessary) existing core PCs throughout the lifetime of the contract.

Primary schools will however receive an upgrade of their core PCs, as a much longer period of time has elapsed since their original installation.

Schools also have laptops provided by C2k, which will be supported up to April 2014 at which point C2k must decide on future arrangements.

Some schools enhanced their core C2k provision by purchasing additional PCs or laptops using their delegated budgets. All costs associated with these would always have fallen to the school. However, these machines do not need to be scrapped. Schools can purchase security software, allowing them to access all on-line elements through their browser. This software will cost in the region of £35 per PC over a 3 year period, all schools have been informed.

Vocational Education: Wolf Review

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Education what assessment his Department has made of the 'Review of Vocational Education - The Wolf Report'.

(AQO 2130/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Though it did not extend to the north, the Department has considered the Wolf report with interest. I already have in place a suite of policies designed to raise educational standards and tackle underachievement with particular emphasis on literacy and numeracy. I firmly believe that we can best serve the needs of all our young people by ensuring they have access to a broad and balanced range of courses to meet their needs, aspirations and the needs of the economy from Key Stage 4. Under

the entitlement framework at least a third of courses offered must be applied and at least a third general by 2013, be at Level 2 or 3 and have clear progression pathways. Accordingly, much of the report as it applies to school provision, is not relevant here.

Integrated Education

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education whether he will establish targets through the Shared Education initiative, Area Learning Communities and the Area-based Planning process, to facilitate and encourage integrated education as highlighted in the Good Friday Agreement.

(AQO 2131/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department has a statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education. I take that duty very seriously.

I also recognise that parental preference is central to the selection of schools for children.

The Programme for Government includes a range of commitments on advancing shared education. Integrated schools will continue to have an important role in achieving that. However, they are one of many ways of delivering shared education; such as partnerships, co-location, or shared campus projects, like Lisanelly.

I do not consider it appropriate to prescribe targets for integrated schools, or any other approach. Finding local solutions to local need is the way forward.

Nursery Provision in East Belfast

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Education how many children, in the East Belfast constituency, have not been allocated a nursery school place in the 2012/13 academic year.

(AQO 2132/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Funded pre-school places are available in statutory nursery schools and units and in voluntary/private settings participating in the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme.

Pre-School Admissions are administered in a two stage process. The Belfast Education and Library Board and South-Eastern Education and Library Board have advised that at the end of Stage 1 of the process on 30 March, 39 children who had applied to pre-school settings in the East Belfast constituency remained unplaced at that stage.

None of the parents/guardians of these children chose to state further preferences for consideration during Stage 2 of the process.

Both the BELB and SEELB will continue to liaise with new providers and to work with parents over the coming months to ensure that, as far as possible, all eligible children are able to avail of a funded pre-school place in September.

Teachers: Support

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education how he proposes to streamline the mechanism for supporting teachers, who are experiencing professional difficulties, in a way that protects the rights of both teachers and children.

(AQO 2133/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: A revised procedure, Supporting Effective Leadership in Schools, is currently being finalised by the Teacher Negotiating Committee. This procedure is designed to provide the appropriate support, advice and guidance to a Principal whose work is giving cause for concern. This will address any identified weaknesses and provide the opportunity for the Principal to become effective.

It is proposed that a Principal remains in post while he/she receives support to improve his/her practice. If there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the Principal's work is unsatisfactory to such an extent as to be seriously detrimental to the pupils' safety, welfare or educational progress, the Principal may be suspended on a precautionary basis.

It is anticipated that this procedure will be finalised by the end of June. Once finalised, this procedure will then be used as the template for the Teachers/Vice-Principals procedure. It is anticipated that agreement on this will be reached over the Summer.

Bytes Project

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the relationship between his Department and the Bytes Project.

(AQO 2134/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department does not have a direct relationship with the Bytes Project; it is one of a number of voluntary youth service organisations which is currently funded by the Youth Council.

Funding was previously provided directly to Bytes by DE. However, in line with the aims of convergence planning and in order to strengthen accountability, the funding arrangements for the organisation were passed to the Youth Council in 2010. It is, therefore, for the Youth Council to determine the level of funding for Bytes in line with DE priorities, its published funding scheme and the available budget.

Educational Standards

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Education how his Department's policies have demonstrably raised educational standards over recent years.

(AQO 2135/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The evidence shows that the policies that I and my predecessor put in place to raise educational standards have been working. These include the Every School a Good School policy for school improvement, and Count, read: succeed, the strategy for improving literacy and numeracy.

The most recent statistics available show continued improvements in pupil attainment. At Key Stage 2, 82.4% of pupils achieved the expected level in English, an increase of 4.4 percentage points from 2006. In maths 82.9% achieved the expected level, an increase of 2.9 percentage points from 2006.

Amongst school leavers 59.5% achieved 5+ GCSEs at A* - C or equivalent qualifications including GCSEs in English and maths. This was an increase of 6.9 percentage points from 2006.

The challenge now is to ensure the effective implementation of these policies by all schools so that the improvement in educational outcomes continues, with particular emphasis on how they contribute to raising standards for those pupils entitled to Free School Meals.

Department for Employment and Learning

St Mary's University College, Belfast

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQW 11514/11-15, why St Mary's University College, Belfast was not included as part of the proposed merger from the outset.

(AQW 12207/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): The merger was proposed by the Governing Body of Stranmillis University College in April 2008. St. Mary's University College was not included as part of the proposed merger from the outset as it had no wish to merge with any other institution. The proposal was subsequently put out to public consultation in March 2011.

Sickness Absence

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the percentage of sickness absence in his Department in each of the last three years; and the agreed target rate of sickness as set out in any memoranda of understanding between his Department and the trade unions.

(AQW 12223/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) corporate and individual departmental sickness absence targets were set by the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the trade union (NIPSA) was advised accordingly.

The table below sets out the targets and the actual absence rates over the last 3 years.

	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Target (days lost)	10.4	10.1	9.5
Actual (days lost)	10.7	10.6	11.4*
(% of working days lost)	(4.8%)	(4.8%)	(5.2%)

* Please note this figure is provisional and is subject to change between now and the publication of the Financial Year NICS absence report for the year 2011/2012.

Universal Credit: Introduction

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether the introduction of Universal Credit will change their departmental estate requirements.

(AQW 12233/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department's estate requirements in terms of Jobs & Benefits offices and Jobcentres will need to be assessed in light of the ongoing work of the Universal Credit Programme which is being led by the Department for Social Development. At this stage it is too early to say what the overall impact of Universal Credit will be on the estate requirements of all impacted organisations, including the impact on the existing network of local offices.

Step Ahead Programme

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he intends to bid for money for the Step Ahead Programme in the June Monitoring Round.

(AQW 12281/11-15)

Dr Farry: I did not submit any bid for money in the June Monitoring round in relation to a Step Ahead initiative within the Steps to Work programme.

Student Loans

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Employment and Learning why some Northern Ireland students start repaying their student loans when they earn a salary of £15,795 per annum, whilst others do not make any repayments until they earn more than £21,000 per annum.

(AQW 12293/11-15)

Dr Farry: I can advise that, from April 2012, the repayment threshold for new and continuing students from Northern Ireland (and Scotland) has increased from £15,000 to £15,795 and will increase annually in line with inflation. In England and Wales, the repayment threshold for continuing students who commenced their studies before September 2012 has also increased to £15,795 and will increase annually in line with inflation. However, the repayment threshold for new students who commence their studies from September 2012 will be £21,000.

The rationale for not increasing the repayment threshold to £21,000 for Northern Ireland domiciled students is based on the fact that tuition fees at Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions are being maintained at current levels, subject only to annual inflationary increases. For Northern Ireland domiciled students studying in the rest of the United Kingdom, tuition fee loans of up to £9,000 are available to meet the significantly increased fees, however, the funding was not available to increase the repayment threshold.

It is recognised that these changes will result in Northern Ireland domiciled students reaching the repayment threshold more quickly than their English and Welsh counterparts. However, while the repayment threshold will be higher in England and Wales for new students, it is also important to bear in mind that the interest rate on student loans will also be significantly higher there. In England and Wales, variable interest rates of up to 3% above inflation (i.e. Retail Price Index inflation) will apply whereas interest rates for Northern Ireland domiciled students will continue to be based on the current rate of Retail Price Index inflation. At present, the rate of interest payable by Northern Ireland domiciled students is 1.5%.

I can further advise that Northern Ireland domiciled students have a shorter period of time in which to pay back their loans in comparison to students from England and Wales. This is a more advantageous arrangement for Northern Ireland domiciled students because any outstanding loan balance they have is written off after 25 years in contrast to new English and Welsh students whose outstanding loan balance will not be written off until 30 years have elapsed. In other words, new English and Welsh students have five more years than students from Northern Ireland to make repayments on their loans before they are written off.

Training for Success

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the necessity for Specialist Support Provision within the Training for Success contract; and at which target group these services are aimed.

(AQW 12335/11-15)

Dr Farry: Training for Success (TfS) targets 16-17 year olds with a flexible menu that allows young people to enter training at an appropriate level and progress to a stage where they can maximise their potential through achievement of qualifications, employment, individual tailored training, personal development and employability skills. The programme is open to all young people, including those with a disability or additional support needs. There is extended eligibility of up to age 22 for those with a disability and up to age 24 for those from an in-care background.

It is recognised that some TfS participants require support while learning, and in accessing employment opportunities. This group of young people is difficult to define in terms of specific and individual need; such is the range of characteristics displayed. The following is a list of possible characteristics that may be common to many of the young people in this group:

- poor levels of literacy and numeracy skills;
- disabilities;
- poor record of attendance during the last year in school;
- low level of achievement (if any) in formal school-based examinations;
- poor behaviour in, or attitude to, education, training and/or employment;
- second or third generation unemployed;
- low level of motivation;
- history of trouble and conflict with authority;
- possible involvement in illegal or anti-social activities;
- poorly developed or unrealistic career goals;

- health related problems;
- alcohol, solvent or drug related abuse or dependencies;
- inability to relate to peers;
- homelessness;
- parenting;
- pregnancy;
- the responsibility of caring for other family members; and
- other psychological/physiological problems requiring help and support.

This list of barriers is by no means comprehensive and other issues may occur for this group of young people.

TfS recognises the importance of providing a range of support to those who require it with the aim of assisting them in their learning by keeping them engaged in learning and achieving the best possible outcomes. The Department has engaged Specialist Support Providers to work in conjunction with Training Suppliers to ensure that the necessary support is provided.

The Department covers the cost of specialist support for each young person assessed as having specialist support needs. In addition, the Department pays an enhanced weekly training fee to Training Suppliers in respect of TfS participants with a disability to help a Supplier provide significant additional input of resources such as specialist equipment.

To assist potential participants with a disability, a Pre-Entry Training Support referral process is in place whereby support needs can be identified prior to entry to training in order that specialist support can be in place as soon as possible after joining the TfS programme.

Of those who commenced training in each of the last three years, specialist support was provided to 1,185 in 2009/10, 1,192 in 2010/11 and 1,035 in 2011/12. This equates to 20%, 19.7% and 17.1% of those who commenced training over the respective 3 years.

Currently funding is up to a maximum of £1,000 annually per participant towards the provision of specialist support where the need has been identified in the participant's Personal Training Plan.

Prior to re-tendering, the Department received feedback from a number of training suppliers indicating that the arrangements for additional learning support were insufficiently flexible under the existing arrangements. In light of this request the funding for additional learning support under the new contract arrangements will be allocated directly to the new contracted training suppliers.

Feedback from training suppliers has indicated that individuals requiring additional learning support, in the main, are on the Skills for Your Life and Skills for Work Level 1 strands of the TfS programme. It is for this reason that the Department will introduce under the new contract arrangements a weekly fee of £3.00 payable in respect of each participant on these strands. This will ensure that the funding is targeted at those who need it most. It will allow suppliers a greater flexibility to provide a wider service to those individuals that need assistance. Under the current arrangements, the Department's average spend on additional learning support is typically in the region of £300k per annum. The new arrangements will double this funding.

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Training for Success

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many people have availed of Specialist Support Provision, in each of the last three years; and what this figure represents as a percentage of the Training for Success cohort in each year. **(AQW 12336/11-15)**

Dr Farry: Training for Success (TfS) targets 16-17 year olds with a flexible menu that allows young people to enter training at an appropriate level and progress to a stage where they can maximise their potential through achievement of qualifications, employment, individual tailored training, personal development and employability skills. The programme is open to all young people, including those with a disability or additional support needs. There is extended eligibility of up to age 22 for those with a disability and up to age 24 for those from an in-care background.

It is recognised that some TfS participants require support while learning, and in accessing employment opportunities. This group of young people is difficult to define in terms of specific and individual need; such is the range of characteristics displayed. The following is a list of possible characteristics that may be common to many of the young people in this group:

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- disabilities;
- poor record of attendance during the last year in school;

- low level of achievement (if any) in formal school-based examinations;
- poor behaviour in, or attitude to, education, training and/or employment;
- second or third generation unemployed;
- low level of motivation;
- history of trouble and conflict with authority;
- possible involvement in illegal or anti-social activities;
- poorly developed or unrealistic career goals;
- health related problems;
- alcohol, solvent or drug related abuse or dependencies;
- inability to relate to peers;
- homelessness;
- parenting;
- pregnancy;
- the responsibility of caring for other family members; and
- other psychological/physiological problems requiring help and support.

This list of barriers is by no means comprehensive and other issues may occur for this group of young people.

TfS recognises the importance of providing a range of support to those who require it with the aim of assisting them in their learning by keeping them engaged in learning and achieving the best possible outcomes. The Department has engaged Specialist Support Providers to work in conjunction with Training Suppliers to ensure that the necessary support is provided.

The Department covers the cost of specialist support for each young person assessed as having specialist support needs. In addition, the Department pays an enhanced weekly training fee to Training Suppliers in respect of TfS participants with a disability to help a Supplier provide significant additional input of resources such as specialist equipment.

To assist potential participants with a disability, a Pre-Entry Training Support referral process is in place whereby support needs can be identified prior to entry to training in order that specialist support can be in place as soon as possible after joining the TfS programme.

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Training for Success

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the annual funding, per participant, that was available to training suppliers for Specialist Support Services, under the terms of the Training for Success programme, up to March 2012. (AQW 12338/11-15)

Dr Farry: Training for Success (TfS) targets 16-17 year olds with a flexible menu that allows young people to enter training at an appropriate level and progress to a stage where they can maximise their potential through achievement of qualifications, employment, individual tailored training, personal development and employability skills. The programme is open to all young people, including those with a disability or additional support needs. There is extended eligibility of up to age 22 for those with a disability and up to age 24 for those from an in-care background.

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Training for Success

Mr B McCre asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much annual funding, per participant, is available for training suppliers to Specialist Support Services, under the terms of the new contract for the Training for Success programme.
(AQW 12341/11-15)

Dr Farry: Training for Success (TfS) targets 16-17 year olds with a flexible menu that allows young people to enter training at an appropriate level and progress to a stage where they can maximise their potential through achievement of qualifications, employment, individual tailored training, personal development and employability skills. The programme is open to all young people, including those with a disability or additional support needs. There is extended eligibility of up to age 22 for those with a disability and up to age 24 for those from an in-care background.

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Training for Success

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what consultation took place with training providers and specialist support suppliers on the new Training for Success programme model.

(AQW 12342/11-15)

Dr Farry: Training for Success (TfS) targets 16-17 year olds with a flexible menu that allows young people to enter training at an appropriate level and progress to a stage where they can maximise their potential through achievement of qualifications, employment, individual tailored training, personal development and employability skills. The programme is open to all young people, including those with a disability or additional support needs. There is extended eligibility of up to age 22 for those with a disability and up to age 24 for those from an in-care background.

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St Mary's University College, Belfast

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQW 11774/11-15, what representations his Department made in response to those received from the board of St Mary's University College, Belfast.

(AQW 12360/11-15)

Dr Farry: The position stated by the Governing Body of St. Mary's University College that it is opposed to inclusion in any merger with Stranmillis University College and Queen's University is not new. This is the position that St. Mary's has held since the merger was first proposed. No representation was required from my Department, however, the potential for St. Mary's and the other teacher training providers to enter into a more shared or integrated system for teacher training in Northern Ireland will be explored during the second stage of the Study of the Teacher Education Infrastructure.

Training for Success and ApprenticeshipsNI: Contracts

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what contingency plans are in place, with training providers and Specialist Support Providers, should the on-going judicial review continue beyond September 2012.

(AQW 12383/11-15)

Dr Farry: The ability to award new contracts for Training for Success and ApprenticeshipsNI has been significantly delayed due to an ongoing legal challenge. The Department in conjunction with Central Procurement Directorate has lodged an appeal against a judgement by the Commercial Court in relation to a decision by the evaluation panel in respect of the stage 1 Selection criteria. The appeal has been listed for hearing at the Court of Appeal on the 20 and 22 June 2012.

The way forward will depend on the outcome of the above hearing with the ultimate contingency being a continued extension of the existing contracts with training providers and specialist support providers.

Arm's-length Bodies: Pension Schemes

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether all the pension schemes that are in place across his Department's arm's-length bodies are exclusively Consumer Price Indexed, including the benefits that were earned by contributions before the change from the Retail Price Index; and to detail any exceptions.

(AQW 12387/11-15)

Dr Farry: At least one pension scheme utilised by my Department's arm's-length bodies is not exclusively Consumer Price Indexed (CPI): in Ulster Supported Employment Limited, the scheme in operation uses RPI as the basis for calculation, and there is a cap in place of 5%. This is a private scheme, run by trustees on behalf of the disabled employees and clients. It is funded by employee and employer contributions, which includes around 300 host company employers and clients. There is no grant in aid contribution for this scheme and it is not part of any NICS system.

Employees of certain DEL arm's length bodies are members of the Northern Ireland Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee pension scheme (NILGOSC), the Northern Ireland Teachers' Pension Scheme (NITPS), and the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (Northern Ireland). These are the responsibility of the Department of the Environment, Department of Education and Department of Finance and Personnel respectively; information on whether these schemes are exclusively Consumer Price Indexed may be obtained from these Departments. As Tribunal NDPBs, you may wish to note that judicial staff positions within the Industrial Tribunals and Fair Employment Tribunal are pensionable under the provisions of the Judicial Pensions and Retirement Act 1993; information on the scheme may be obtained from the Department of Justice.

Essential Skills Courses

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning why his Department is to stop paying a £10 weekly incentive to unemployed adults on Essential Skills courses.

(AQW 12435/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Department intends to stop paying the £10 weekly training bonus as it has proved ineffective in encouraging participants on Steps to Work (StW) to participate on Essential Skills provision within the programme.

While the percentage of participants undertaking Essential Skills courses through the programme in June 2009 was 11.7%, by December 2011 this percentage had actually reduced to 10.6%. The numbers of StW participants choosing this route, 2,957 at December 2011, account for only ten per cent of all StW participants and represent a tiny minority of the overall numbers doing so through Further Education Colleges and other provision. During the period September 2008 to January 2012 approximately 75,000 people attended these courses to address their essential skills needs and did so without financial incentives.

A survey of participants with identified Essential Skills needs on other Steps to Work provision showed that the payment of a financial incentive did not encourage participants to undertake Essentials Skills training.

The Essential Skills bonus payment of £100, payable to participants who achieve a qualification, is being retained. In addition, in common with all other StW participants, those undertaking Essential Skills training will continue to receive a £15.38 weekly payment on top of existing benefits together with any travel costs in excess of £4 per week.

The proposal to remove the additional £10 bonus payment to Essential Skills participants was initially proposed by the Lead Contractors delivering the programme when they were asked to consider which aspects of the programme were least effective.

Steps to Work/Back-to-Work Courses: Childcare

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister for Employment and Learning why parents on accredited back-to-work courses cannot avail of funded childcare provided by a regulated after schools service and can only avail of funded childcare through registered childminders.

(AQW 12612/11-15)

Dr Farry: I can confirm that participants on Steps to Work, my Department's main adult return to work programme, and other Departmental employment and training programmes, who qualify for assistance towards childcare costs are eligible for funding for childcare provided by either a registered childminder, an immediate family relative or a breakfast/homework/after schools club.

Condition Management Programme: Funding

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the total funding allocated to the Condition Management Programme in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust since its inception.

(AQW 12625/11-15)

Dr Farry: Since the introduction of the Condition Management Programme (CMP) in October 2005, through to 31 March 2012, just under £5.8m has been allocated to CMP Providers operating within the Northern Health and Social Care Trust (NHSCT) area of operations. Discussions between DEL and the NHSCT are scheduled to agree the total funding allocation for the current 2012/13 financial year and an interim payment of £500K has been released pending determination of the full allocation.

Third-level Education Courses in the Republic of Ireland

Mr Rogers asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether his Department has had any discussions with its counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, or the Central Admissions Office, in relation to making third level education courses in the Republic of Ireland more accessible to students from Northern Ireland.

(AQW 12811/11-15)

Dr Farry: I met with my counterpart, Ruairi Quinn TD, in September 2011 and discussed the possibility of working together to stimulate cross-border student mobility. I agreed that my officials would work with their counterparts in the Department of Education and Skills (DES) to develop a programme of collaboration on areas of mutual benefit in both further and higher education.

On the specific issue of A-level and Leaving Certificate equivalences, I am aware of the decision of some universities in the Republic of Ireland to require four A-levels at the highest A grade, now the A* grade, for high demand courses such as medicine and law. This issue has been raised previously with Minister Quinn, by the Minister for Education, John O'Dowd MLA, and is the basis of ongoing discussions between the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and the Irish Universities Association (IUA). A joint CCEA/IUA report on the subject, with recommendations, is expected in the coming weeks. My Department and the Department of Education will consider those recommendations and will work with the relevant parties in determining the way forward on this issue.

June Monitoring

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the bids he has made in the June Monitoring Round.
(AQO 2141/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Department for Employment and Learning has made two bids in the June Monitoring Round as follows:

- Bid 1 in the amount of £5.84m in relation to Youth Unemployment and Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETs); and
- Bid 2 in the amount of £8.0m in relation to Steps to Work.

Essential Skills Courses

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has put in place to monitor the take-up of Essential Skills courses for adults following removal of the £10 weekly payment for participants.
(AQO 2142/11-15)

Dr Farry: Raising the Essential Skills of adults continues to be a top priority for my Department. The uptake of these courses across all provision is monitored continually and reported in the Departmental quarterly statistical bulletins. In relation to the Steps to Work programme statistics show that the numbers choosing this route, 2,957 at December 2011, account for only ten per cent of all Steps to Work participants and represent a tiny minority of the overall numbers doing so through further education colleges and other provision. During the period September 2008 to January 2012 approximately 75,000 people attended these courses to address their essential skills needs and did so without financial incentives. To date the £10 weekly payment has not been effective in increasing the numbers doing Essential Skills in the Steps to Work programme – and was initially proposed by the Lead Contractors delivering the programme when they were asked to consider which aspects of the programme were least effective.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of entitlement to Education Maintenance Allowance for young people who participate in pre-vocational schemes.
(AQO 2144/11-15)

Dr Farry: I recognise that some young people most in need are not in receipt of any allowance, which could prove to be an effective incentive to begin or continue to move towards a positive destination.

I now plan to introduce a training allowance, subject to the availability of resources, for those young people participating on existing pre-vocational schemes funded through the European Social Fund (ESF) targeted at those who are in the NEET category

Youth Unemployment

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what progress is being made in reducing levels of youth unemployment.
(AQO 2145/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Labour Market Report for May indicates that unemployment among 18 to 24 year olds is 17.9%: an increase of 0.1% on May 2011. It is therefore imperative that we move quickly to put in place the range of measures agreed by the Executive in March.

My officials are working on this as a matter of priority. I have made a bid for funds in the June monitoring round to allow early progress this year.

I have engaged with employers and employers' representative bodies and I have been encouraged by the positive response and some are already offering opportunities. I will launch the new Offer formally in September but expect all strands of the Offer to be operational before then.

The focus initially will be on building quality before we begin to expand the number of opportunities available. By March 2015 we intend to have 6,000 work experience, work-based training and job opportunities available for 18 to 24 year olds annually.

NEETs Strategy

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions have taken place within the Children and Young People's Ministerial Subgroup regarding the strategy for people who are not in education, employment or training which was recently submitted to the Executive.
(AQO 2146/11-15)

Dr Farry: An up-date on the development of the strategy for those young people not in education, employment or training has been provided at each meeting of the Ministerial Sub Committee on Children and Young People over the last two years.

I circulated a draft of the strategy, 'Pathways to Success', to my Executive colleagues in advance of the Executive's formal consideration of the strategy. The Executive endorsed the strategy on 31 May. I also made an oral statement to the Assembly yesterday.

The next meeting of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People takes place on Wednesday 20 June and I will continue to take the lead on the implementation of the strategy at this and future meetings.

Holylands, Belfast

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the Department's consideration of the report commissioned by Belfast City Council on the Holyland area.

(AQO 2147/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department has considered the report in detail, particularly those recommendations which emphasise the need to ensure a coherent approach to where and how students will live within the city in the medium and long term future.

I hosted the Holyland Stakeholder Forum this morning, where the key recommendations of the report were discussed.

Departmental officials will be involved in all relevant groups, such as the Student Housing Group and the Neighbourhood Management Forum, to take forward these recommendations.

Higher Education: 'Graduating to Success'

Mrs Overend asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the balanced programme of redeployment, efficiency improvements and additional funding which will finance the delivery of 'Graduating to Success – A Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland'.

(AQO 2148/11-15)

Dr Farry: Implementation of the strategy is still at the very early stages and detailed costs have yet to be prepared for each of the projects. However, where possible my Department will, in the first instance, seek to identify possible funding through efficiency savings, or the internal redeployment of financial or other resources.

Where the implementation groups identify aspects that will require additional finance, my Department will undertake the necessary economic appraisals and the preparation of funding bids. Additional funding will be subject to affordability considerations and the outcome of future spending reviews by government.

St Mary's University College/QUB Merger

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline any objections made by the Board of St Mary's University College, Belfast in relation to inclusion in any potential merger with Queen's University, Belfast.

(AQO 2149/11-15)

Dr Farry: I believe that St. Mary's University College has stated its objections to the merger when it was asked to consider being part of the merger, in its response to the public consultation on the proposed merger and in various meetings with me and/or my officials. St. Mary's identifies itself as a specialist institution with a distinctive mission. It has signalled that it seeks to maintain its autonomy to protect what it considers to be its distinct ethos and identity.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Giant's Causeway Visitors' Centre

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether the Giant's Causeway Visitors Centre will be open before the beginning of the 2012 Irish Open.

(AQW 11936/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): The new Giant's Causeway Visitor Experience is nearing completion and is due to open, on schedule, at the beginning of July 2012.

Apprenticeship Programmes

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the apprenticeship programmes available within her Department; (ii) the apprenticeship programmes provided by her Department; (iii) the number of people currently enrolled in these programmes; and (iv) the number of places available on the programmes.

(AQW 12086/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Programme-Led Apprenticeship (PLA) programme was introduced by the Department for Employment and Learning in September 2009. This is an intervention measure to assist young people who have been unable to find employment as apprentices during the economic downturn. While my Department, along with other NICS Departments, can contribute to this programme through the provision of work placements, we currently have no uptake on the programme.

Additionally the Department, through Invest NI, supports young people by sponsoring and working in partnership with the Prince's Trust. The Trust's Food Leadership Programme seeks to match youth unemployment to job opportunities in the Food Sector. Invest NI also recently sponsored the Prince's Trust's "Getting Started in a Creative Industry" initiative, targeted at young people between 16-25 who had disengaged from education.

North Coast: Visitor Numbers

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether she has had any discussions with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the importance of the Causeway Hospital to visitor numbers to the North Coast. (AQW 12317/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I have not held any discussions with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the importance of the Causeway Hospital.

European Funding Opportunities: Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what existing and future European funding opportunities are available to small and medium-sized enterprises. (AQW 12345/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department acts as Managing Authority for the European Sustainable Competitiveness Programme for Northern Ireland 2007-2013 which offers a wide range of support to SMEs. It is co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund and provides assistance for research and innovation, business competitiveness and enterprise.

Invest NI also helps SMEs to access the 7th Framework Programme (FP7) which is focused on research, technological development and demonstration activities.

In terms of future opportunities, my officials are working with DFP on the development of a successor to the Competitiveness Programme for the 2014-2020 period. This will retain a core focus on the competitiveness of SMEs. My Department is also taking steps to ensure that NI businesses, including SMEs can benefit from future EU initiatives such as the Competitiveness of Enterprises and SMEs Programme (COSME), and Horizon 2020 (the successor to FP7).

Banking Sector: Job Losses

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans she has to minimise job losses in the banking sector. (AQW 12351/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Banking is a reserved matter and, as such, my Department has no statutory oversight of the banking sector. However, I recognise the importance of growing the financial sector in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the main Northern Ireland banks make an important contribution to financial sector employment here.

I was therefore concerned to learn of the recent announcements in relation to job losses in the banking sector here. I met with representatives from the Irish Bank Officials' Association, the Finance Union, in March to discuss these developments. I emphasised how important it is that senior management in these banks are seen to be behaving in a responsible manner as they take forward staffing cuts. I and the Finance Minister will continue to monitor developments and engage with any relevant parties as and when appropriate.

Invest NI/Law Society

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what work is ongoing between InvestNI and the Law Society to increase international usage of firms of solicitors from Northern Ireland. (AQW 12373/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI engages with all relevant stakeholders to help raise the profile of the legal profession within overseas markets both in terms of securing opportunities for existing law firms in the region and attracting new inward investment.

Examples of initiatives where The Northern Ireland Law Society and Invest Northern Ireland have worked together are:

- Hosting representatives from the ABA (American Bar Association) – Section of International Law for a conference in Belfast in October 2011.
- Delivering a seminar on Invest NI support available for local law firms who wish to grow their business and develop overseas opportunities.

Invest Northern Ireland continues to have ongoing discussions with the Law Society to explore new initiatives, initially in the GB marketplace, that would help grow and diversify the legal sector in Northern Ireland.

Tourist Board: Costs

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the total cost of legal services incurred by the Tourist Board in the last three years; and to outline the procurement process for these services. (AQW 12375/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The total spend for legal services for the last three years is as follows:

2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
£37,246	£38,959	£34,199

Legal services were tendered through the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) in December 2006 (Reference S/15061/06); and again through CPD in October 2010 (Reference Project 2042).

Broadband in Rural Areas

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what measures her Department has taken to ensure that rural businesses not only have access to high speed Broadband, but are also free to choose from a range of broadband providers.

(AQW 12419/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department has delivered a number of initiatives in recent years that were either entirely or substantially aimed at providing high speed broadband access for business and residential consumers located in rural areas. This included:

the £51million Next Generation Broadband Project which rolled out the highest level of fibre-to-the-cabinet technology in the UK;

the £1.9million Northern Ireland Broadband Fund which has seen significant roll-out of fixed-wireless broadband services through providers such as North West Electronics and Net 1 Ltd; and

the remote Broadband Services contracts, previously with Avanti Communications and now with Onwave Ltd, through which satellite broadband services have been made available region-wide.

These initiatives mean that those living, working or conducting business in rural areas have access to services, from a number of providers, that offer download speeds of between 2Mbps and 100Mbps. The associated contracts require that access to infrastructure or services is available on a wholesale basis in order that other broadband providers can deliver their own brand of services.

Sustainable Energy Programme

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the move, from Belfast to Scotland, of the Sustainable Energy Programme which is carried out by the Energy Saving Trust, resulting in the transfer of four energy advice jobs from Enniskillen to Chiswick.

(AQW 12444/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I understand that the NI Sustainable Energy Programme (NISEA), run by the independent Utility Regulator, has never directly funded energy efficiency telephone advice services: the Energy Saving Trust has been employed only as a programme administrator for NISEP.

The Department of Social Development is responsible for the promotion of energy efficiency in the domestic sector in Northern Ireland. I understand that the NI Housing Executive funds an energy efficiency advice line run by Bryson Energy.

Events Funding Programme

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 9650/11-15, whether evaluations of these festivals have been carried out; and (ii) if so, are the results published.

(AQW 12446/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Post event evaluations have been conducted. The results are not published, due to their commercially sensitive nature.

Dairy Industry

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions she has had with the dairy industry in relation to milk products entering new export markets.

(AQW 12488/11-15)

Mrs Foster: On 28 May 2012 I met with representatives of Dairy UK which is the trade association that represents the interests of milk producers, producer co-ops and dairy companies in the UK. The discussions concerned 12 key policy areas which include the role of government in assisting milk producers in exploiting export markets.

I am committed to working with milk producers to enable them remain competitive and sustainable and to increase export sales in this sector. Since April 2009 dairy companies in Northern Ireland have participated in 24 trade events organised by Invest NI which targeted Dubai and the USA among many others.

I would encourage local dairy producers to continue to utilise these opportunities to explore new markets and to increase exports thereto.

Food and Drinks Industry

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress her Department has made towards achieving 'Most Favoured Nation' status in international markets for the food and drinks industry.

(AQW 12492/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The principle known as most-favoured-nation status is governed by the World Trade Organisation Agreements and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. Under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, import and export controls with any place outside the United Kingdom are a reserved matter.

Sustainable Energy Programme

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the impact on competition within the renewable energy market of allocating the entire Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme fund to one company, Carillion, **(AQW 12513/11-15)**

Mrs Foster: The NI Sustainable Energy Programme (NISEP) is run by the independent Utility Regulator. I understand that it is incorrect to say that the entire fund has been allocated to one company: the majority of NISEP funding is awarded to energy efficiency schemes and only 10% for renewable energy projects. Any organisation which meets the qualifying criteria can apply for NISEP funding. I also understand that a temporary suspension of customer applications for several renewables schemes has been agreed with Power NI to allow the Utility Regulator an opportunity to consider the concerns raised.

The recent launch of my Department's Renewable Heat Premium Payments and the continued support of the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation should ensure that there is a market for renewable energy products in Northern Ireland.

Energy: Whitty Report

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the conclusion in Lord Whitty's report 'Energising Northern Ireland' that priority should be given to the consolidation of the existing gas networks rather than major new projects.

(AQW 12534/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Responses to the Department's 2011 consultation on extension of the natural gas network noted overall support from the energy industry and the wider community for bringing gas to the new areas outlined in the consultation paper, i.e. the main towns in the West and North West of Northern Ireland, namely Dungannon, Cookstown, Magherafelt, Omagh, Enniskillen/Derrylin and Strabane, and towns in East Down such as Saintfield, Ballynahinch, Crossgar and Downpatrick.

Extension of the natural gas network to new areas does not preclude increasing the availability of natural gas in existing licensed areas, where continued connection of new business and domestic consumers is ongoing by the respective licensees in accordance with their business models. To delay extension of the gas network to new areas until there is greater gas penetration in existing gas licence areas leaves consumers in the West and East Down without the potential for connecting to gas to reduce their energy costs, improve security of energy supply, and in particular, to enhance business competitiveness.

Energy: Whitty Report

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the conclusion in Lord Whitty's report 'Energising Northern Ireland' that development of renewable fired electricity generation for heating and networks should be focussed on the south and west of Northern Ireland, where natural gas networks will not be economically viable.

(AQW 12564/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department is committed to developing a more secure, diverse and sustainable heating market in Northern Ireland. The development of the renewable heat market and the natural gas network will provide greater choice and competition in the heat market as well as supporting wider energy goals, including reduced carbon emissions, increased energy security, and opportunities for green jobs. I have recently announced the Northern Ireland Renewable Heat Premium Payment Scheme for the domestic sector and I hope to make further announcements in due course on a longer term Renewable Heat Incentive for non-domestic applications.

With regards to the economic viability of proposals to extend the natural gas network, following completion of an economic and technical feasibility study on gas extension in 2010, and a consultation exercise in 2011, the Department has recently appointed consultants to prepare a more detailed business case in respect of taking natural gas to towns in the West and to East Down.

Energy: Whitty Report

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the conclusion in Lord Whitty's report 'Energising Northern Ireland' that heating oil should be included within the remit of the Utility Regulator.

(AQW 12565/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I have no plans to extend the powers of the independent regulator to cover heating oil. This would impose sizable regulatory costs on a competitive oil supply and distribution sector that would have to be borne by consumers. It would be a significant departure from the rest of the United Kingdom and most European Union countries – where the sector also is not regulated.

Energy: Whitty Report

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the conclusion in Lord Whitty's Report 'Energising Northern Ireland' that, in relation to natural gas, any extension of the pipelines should be based on rigorous cost benefit and that at present, neither the proposed western extension nor the major gas storage facility seem to be justifiable.
(AQW 12595/11-15)

Mrs Foster: In 2010, DETI in co-operation with the Utility Regulator completed an economic and technical feasibility study on gas network extension to 6 towns in the west of Northern Ireland. Following a consultation in summer 2011 on gas network extension, the Department is in the process of completing a more detailed business case in respect of gas extension to towns in the West and to East Down. This will provide further detailed information on the costs and benefits associated with taking natural gas to new areas in Northern Ireland.

The two gas storage projects being considered in East Antrim are commercial projects, with no financial input from Government. A gas storage facility in Northern Ireland would enhance our security of energy supply.

Pay Day Loan Companies

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given the increasing number of pay day loan companies and the high number of people unable to repay borrowings from them, what consideration he has given to introducing legislation which requires credit status checks to be carried out in advance of approval.
(AQW 12613/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Payday lenders are required to be licensed under the Consumer Credit Act (CCA) 1974 and the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) is responsible for issuing such licences. The policy responsibility for this matter is reserved and the Department for Innovation, Business and Skills (BIS) is the relevant GB department. On 24 May 2012, BIS announced that it had reached agreement with those organisations representing the main payday lenders on a range of improvements to be made to their customer codes of practice. The improvements to their codes of practice include a commitment to undertake sound, proper and appropriate affordability assessments and credit vetting as part of each loan application. These updated codes of practice are to take effect from 25 July 2012.

Quangos

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many QUANGOS, that are attached to her Department, have been created as a result of legislation passed by the Northern Ireland Assembly since 2007.
(AQW 12687/11-15)

Mrs Foster: None.

Invest NI: Job Creation

Ms Ruane asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many jobs InvestNI has created in the South Down constituency in the last three years.
(AQO 2150/11-15)

Mrs Foster: During the period 1st April 2009 and 31st March 2012, Invest NI offered almost £9million of assistance to businesses in the South Down Parliamentary Constituency area, including 572 locally-owned projects, which, in total, contributed towards planned investment of over £41million and the promotion of 480 new jobs.

Invest NI works with businesses to promote new jobs but it is ultimately the responsibility of the company to ensure that those jobs are delivered on the ground; therefore, not all of promoted jobs are created immediately, since some projects can take up to 5 years to fully mature.

Invest NI also assisted the creation of nearly 270 new jobs through the Enterprise Development Programme, formerly the Start a Business programme, delivered in conjunction with Enterprise Northern Ireland.

Employment

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what initiatives her Department has planned for the creation of more jobs.
(AQO 2157/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The central aim of the Northern Ireland Economic Strategy is to grow employment and increase prosperity for all, through a focus on export-led economic growth.

All the actions and commitments included within the Economic Strategy will contribute to the achievement of this aim.

My Department will contribute to rising levels of employment by directly supporting the promotion of over 25,000 new jobs. DETI will also work with DEL to develop and implement a strategy to reduce economic inactivity through skills, training, incentives and job creation.

Agri-Food Strategy Board

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the forward work programme of the Food Strategy Board. (AQO 2158/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Agri-food Strategy Board held its first meeting on 6 June 2012 and work is currently underway on a forward work programme.

As set out in the Executive's Programme for Government 2011-15, the aim is to develop an agreed strategic plan for the Agri-food sector this year.

Mobile Phone Coverage: Rural Areas

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the situation in Gortin, Co Tyrone and other rural areas following the withdrawal of mobile phone coverage by the company 'Everything Everywhere'. (AQO 2161/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Currently there is a rationalisation and upgrade programme by Everything Everywhere which has involved the switching off of T-Mobile sites across Northern Ireland.

I understand that the company is aware of a few small pockets on the network where coverage has been lost and is currently seeking to find workable solutions working with the local communities involved.

Giant's Causeway: Interpretive Centre

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the work to build a new interpretive centre at the Giant's Causeway. (AQO 2162/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre will open first week in July 2012 and will include a section on interpretation.

Tourism: Northern Ireland Products

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps are being taken to ensure that Northern Ireland specific tourism products are available to, and stocked by, retail outlets in which the Northern Ireland Tourist Board can influence the sale of such material. (AQO 2163/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board is committed to the development of quality local products and produce, to ensure that all aspects of the visitor experience reflect the unique assets of Northern Ireland.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board recognises the important role the Tourism Information Centre Network plays in shaping the visitor experience. Tourism Information Centres are wholly owned and managed by their operators, which in most cases is the local council.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board does not have jurisdiction, nor does it exercise any influence on any retail outlet in Northern Ireland encouraging the sale of goods.

Department of the Environment

Arm's-length Bodies: Invoices

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment, in relation to the ten-day prompt payment of invoices performance target for his Department's arm's-length bodies, to detail (i) whether it is based on calendar or working days; and (ii) when the ten-day count commences. (AQW 11230/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): The Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) is committed to the Better Payments Practice Code as set out in Annex 4.6 of Managing Public Money. In response to the current economic position, Departments, their agencies and NDPBs are required to take all appropriate steps to pay businesses within 10 days, as well as reporting at least annually on this commitment. Payments are deemed to be late if they are made outside the agreed terms, or where no terms are agreed, 30 days after receipt of a valid invoice.

District councils are bodies corporate and are not NDPBs of the Department. However, within the Accounts Direction issued annually by the Department, district councils are encouraged to pay suppliers as promptly as possible and to endeavour to meet the 10 day prompt payment commitment. In their annual return, councils are asked to advise of their own target for paying invoices and also to have arrangements for reviewing this target.

The Department of the Environment has two Arms length bodies, the Northern Ireland Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee (NILGOSC) and the Local Government Staff Commission (LGSC).

In relation to 11230 both of these bodies report prompt payments on calendar days; NILGOSC commence the 10 days from receipt of invoice, whereas LGSC record from the date of the actual invoice.

In relation to 11231 NILGOSC had 498 invoices paid during 2011/2012, with 11 considered as late. LGSC had 526 invoices paid during 2011/2012, with none paid late.

In relation to 11232 councils' performance in relation to the 10 day payment is recorded in the table below.

In relation to 11233 the LGSC agrees standard payment terms of 30 days from receipt of invoice. NILGOSC agrees standard payment terms of 10 days from date of invoice. None of the 26 District Councils has agreed standard payment terms longer than 30 days.

AQW 11232/11-15 Prompt Payment Report – 10 day target

Council	2009/2010 %	2010/2011 %	2010/2011 No of invoices
Antrim	12	10	963
Ards	10	24	2,769
Armagh	11	17	1,623
Ballymena	10	12	1,379
Ballymoney	6	6	325
Banbridge	N/A	6	258
Belfast	6	9	4,878
Carrickfergus	14	14	862
Castlereagh	N/A	N/A	N/A
Coleraine	8	8	113
Cookstown	53	61	3,367
Craigavon	4	3	472
Derry	26	25	5,453
Down	N/A	N/A	N/A
Dungannon	30	32	1,922
Fermanagh	N/A	16	1,391
Larne	3	7	772
Limavady	12	19	1,230
Lisburn	5	9	1,229
Magherafelt	39	46	6,249
Moyle	16	14	479
Newry & Mourne	5-10	5-10	N/A
Newtownabbey	20	22	3,322
North Down	N/A	N/A	N/A
Omagh	33	33	1,864
Strabane	12	12	563

Clearly the 10 day target is not being achieved across the full breadth of Councils, with poor performance in case after case. I shall write to Councils to further advise of their obligations, shall publish the figures annually and shall assess what further I can do in this matter.

Arm's-length Bodies: Invoices

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of invoices paid by his Department's arm's-length bodies in the 2011/12 financial year; and how many of the invoices were paid late.

(AQW 11231/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) is committed to the Better Payments Practice Code as set out in Annex 4.6 of Managing Public Money. In response to the current economic position, Departments, their agencies and NDPBs are required to take all appropriate steps to pay businesses within 10 days, as well as reporting at least annually on this commitment. Payments are deemed to be late if they are made outside the agreed terms, or where no terms are agreed, 30 days after receipt of a valid invoice.

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Councils: Invoices

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment, in relation to the ten day prompt payment of invoices performance target, to detail (i) the performance of each council in the (a) 2009/10; and (b) 2010/11 financial years; and (ii) the number of invoices paid within ten working days in the 2010/11 financial year.

(AQW 11232/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) is committed to the Better Payments Practice Code as set out in Annex 4.6 of Managing Public Money. In response to the current economic position, Departments, their agencies and NDPBs are required to take all appropriate steps to pay businesses within 10 days, as well as reporting at least annually on this commitment. Payments are deemed to be late if they are made outside the agreed terms, or where no terms are agreed, 30 days after receipt of a valid invoice.

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Arm's-length Bodies: Standard Payment Terms

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the standard payment terms his Department's arm's length bodies seek to agree with business suppliers; and which councils agree payment terms longer than the standard payment terms.

(AQW 11233/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) is committed to the Better Payments Practice Code as set out in Annex 4.6 of Managing Public Money. In response to the current economic position, Departments, their agencies and NDPBs are required to take all appropriate steps to pay businesses within 10 days, as well as reporting at least annually on this commitment. Payments are deemed to be late if they are made outside the agreed terms, or where no terms are agreed, 30 days after receipt of a valid invoice.

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Clearly the 10 day target is not being achieved across the full breadth of Councils, with poor performance in case after case. I shall write to Councils to further advise of their obligations, shall publish the figures annually and shall assess what further I can do in this matter.

MOT Tests

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of the Environment whether he is aware of the concerns of motorists whose vehicles are factory fitted with high intensity discharge and LED lights, but are not fitted with a headlamp washing system, and their notifications of refusal following recent amendments to MOT tests.

(AQW 11235/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I fully understand the concerns of motorists when changes are made at European level to vehicle testing requirements. However, the standards that are applied in Northern Ireland are those that are in operation throughout Europe.

The requirement to have headlamp washers fitted with high intensity discharge (HID) or light emitting diode (LED) headlamps has existed for a number of years under the type approval regulations. However, the requirement for these to be checked in annual tests was introduced only through European Commission Directive 2010/48/EU, of 5 July 2010.

In Northern Ireland, in line with the approach adopted in Britain, these items were included in the annual test from 1 February 2012 to 30 April 2012 on an advisory basis. From 1 May 2012 the absence of a headlamp washer system where one is required, or a defect in a mandatory washer system, has been a reason for failure.

The impact of the recent changes on pass rates has been minimal to date. However, the position will continue to be monitored very closely.

Cavanacaw, Omagh: Gold Mine

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment, in relation to the goldmine at Cavanacaw, Omagh, what action he intends to take in response to the Northern Ireland Ombudsman's findings that the planners' inaction was wholly unacceptable and that the Planning Service failed to take appropriate timely enforcement action commensurate with the breach of planning control, given the very significant impact this had on local residents including the complainants.

(AQW 11304/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I have already made it very clear that the planning system has to act properly, move quickly and give confidence to all. If there is a failure to live up to these standards, it is right and necessary that Planning and the Department are held to account and be seen to be held to account. That is the value and importance of the Ombudsman investigating complaints.

The complaint in this matter is very serious. Local people and families endured heavy vehicle movements for weeks and months on end during 2008 and 2009, when DOE had a role and powers to step in. My Department accepts the findings and conclusions, and we will act upon them. I have asked for an update every six weeks on how the conclusions are being acted on.

There are a very large number of effective and attentive planning officials. But there are also times when, in my judgement, the course of least resistance has been adopted. The flipside of good planning is good enforcement. That should be the standard now and in the future.

Planning Applications for Minerals Extraction or Minerals Plant/Machinery

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning applications for minerals extraction or minerals plant/machinery, between May 2002 and May 2007, were (i) approved; and (ii) refused.

(AQW 12165/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Between May 2002 and May 2007, 172 planning applications for minerals extraction or minerals plant/machinery were processed.

- (i) 153 of these applications were approved.
- (ii) 19 of these applications were refused.

Planning Applications: Enforcement

Mr Swann asked the Minister of the Environment to detail his Department's policy on enforcement action when the conditions of a planning application are not met and when these conditions had been imposed to meet former planning policy statements and would not be imposed now under current planning policy guidance.

(AQW 12178/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Planning Policy Statement 9 – the Enforcement of Planning Control sets out the general policy approach that the Department will follow in taking enforcement action against unauthorised development in Northern Ireland.

The Department's key objectives for planning enforcement are to

- Bring unauthorised development under control;
- To remedy any undesirable effects of unauthorised development including where necessary, the removal or cessation of unacceptable development and;
- To take legal action, where necessary against those who ignore or flout planning legislation.

Where a breach of planning control has been established and the Department has tried and failed to resolve the breach, formal enforcement action may be taken where it is considered expedient to do so. Where planning permission has been granted subject to conditions, and one or more of these conditions has not been complied with, a breach of condition notice can be served.

A planning condition should only be imposed out of necessity and if it is likely that a failure to comply with it will be damaging and justify enforcement action. In the event that circumstances have changed since the original condition was imposed the Department will, assess the situation on a case by case basis and have regard to the prevailing planning policy at the time.

Floodplain: Location

Mr Swann asked the Minister of the Environment what detailed information his Department provides to applicants on the location of the flood plain when granting planning approval.

(AQW 12179/11-15)

Mr Attwood: When determining planning applications where flood risk is known to exist, the Department will pay particular regard to current planning policy set out in Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 15 Planning and Flood Risk. This policy can be viewed on the Department's website.

In relation to detailed information on the location of a flood plain, all planning applications are determined with reference to the Strategic Flood Map (NI) which can be inspected at the Rivers Agency website.

It is the responsibility of the applicant however to consider flood risk issues at a given site. It is in their interests to do this as early as possible in the planning process. In order to facilitate the identification and consideration of flooding or drainage issues and enable proper scoping of potential risks, early discussion with DOE Planning and Rivers Agency is recommended.

Where a Flood Risk Assessment has been submitted in support of a planning application and mitigation measures are agreed with DARD Rivers Agency the following informative may be attached to planning approvals:-

The applicant is advised that the site is located within an area of identified flood risk and the onus is on the applicant to ensure that any mitigation measures are addressed.

Councils: Invoices

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment whether existing departmental guidance states that all local councils, when measuring prompt payment performance figures, either contractual or aspirational, should count the days elapsed from the date an invoice is first received.

(AQW 12189/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I refer you to the Assembly Questions previously requested under AQWs 11232/11-15 and 11233/11-15.

In relation to departmental guidance the Department's annual Accounts Direction to all councils includes encouragement to pay suppliers as promptly as possible and to endeavour to meet the 10 day prompt payment commitment being made by Northern Ireland Executive Departments.

In relation to the reporting of performance figures, AQW 11232/11-15 provided a table detailing the number and percentage of invoices paid within 10 days. Councils are not currently required to report on the 10 day target. DOE shall write to Councils and again advise of the 10 day target. I am not aware of councils having changed their reporting period from calendar to working days, but shall ascertain details of this when DOE write as above. The number of councils who use the invoice date and alternatively the invoice received date when measuring performance is in the table below. I would again reiterate that this is reported on against the 30 days target stated in their annual accounts.

I believe that prompt payment is crucial not least in the current environment. Upon receipt of the above information, I will assess the situation further. If there are cases of undue delay in payment, I would encourage details being forwarded to my office

Invoice Date	Invoice Received Date
Antrim Borough Council	Ards District Council
Ballymena Borough Council	Armagh City & District Council
Ballymoney Borough Council	Belfast City Council
Banbridge District Council	Carrickfergus Borough Council
Craigavon Borough Council	Castlereagh Borough Council
Lisburn City Council	Coleraine Borough Council
Magherafelt District Council	Cookstown District Council

Invoice Date	Invoice Received Date
	Derry City Council
	Down District Council
	Dungannon & South Tyrone Borough Council
	Fermanagh District Council
	Larne Borough Council
	Limavady Borough Council
	Moyle District Council
	Newry & Mourne District Council
	Newtownabbey Borough Council
	North Down Borough Council
	Omagh District Council
	Strabane District Council

MOT Tests

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what plans his Department has to exempt pre-1960 vintage cars from MOT tests, as is planned in England.

(AQW 12193/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department's Driver and Vehicle Agency does not currently make concessions in the MOT tests of pre-1960 vintage cars. However, you will be aware that at its meeting on 22 March 2012 the Environment Committee considered the synopsis of responses to the Department's consultation on possible exemption of certain categories of historic vehicles from MOT testing. You may recall that the responses indicated that there is broad support for exemption of pre-1960 vehicles from periodic testing.

You may also recall that the Committee was content with the Department's proposed way forward, which is to develop policy on the basis of the consultation responses that would make use of the exemption in Roadworthiness Directive 2009/40/EC concerning the periodic testing of pre-1960 vehicles. The Department is progressing its detailed consideration of the appropriate way forward, to ensure that the requirements of the Directive are met in the detail of the policy.

Councils: Invoices

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment (i) which local councils submitted their 10-day prompt payment performance figures in line with Annex 4.6.3 of Managing Public Money, and reported figures on the basis of working days; and (ii) which local councils changed their reporting period from calendar days to working days.

(AQW 12194/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I refer you to the Assembly Questions previously requested under AQWs 11232/11-15 and 11233/11-15.

In relation to departmental guidance the Department's annual Accounts Direction to all councils includes encouragement to pay suppliers as promptly as possible and to endeavour to meet the 10 day prompt payment commitment being made by Northern Ireland Executive Departments.

In relation to the reporting of performance figures, AQW 11232/11-15 provided a table detailing the number and percentage of invoices paid within 10 days. Councils are not currently required to report on the 10 day target. DOE shall write to Councils and again advise of the 10 day target. I am not aware of councils having changed their reporting period from calendar to working days, but shall ascertain details of this when DOE write as above. The number of councils who use the invoice date and alternatively the invoice received date when measuring performance is in the table below. I would again reiterate that this is reported on against the 30 days target stated in their annual accounts.

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Banbridge District Council	Carrickfergus Borough Council
Craigavon Borough Council	Castlereagh Borough Council
Lisburn City Council	Coleraine Borough Council
Magherafelt District Council	Cookstown District Council
	Derry City Council
	Down District Council
	Dungannon & South Tyrone Borough Council
	Fermanagh District Council
	Larne Borough Council
	Limavady Borough Council
	Moyle District Council
	Newry & Mourne District Council
	Newtownabbey Borough Council
	North Down Borough Council
	Omagh District Council
	Strabane District Council

MOT Tests

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what concessions are made in the MOT tests of pre-1960 vintage cars.
(AQW 12195/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department's Driver and Vehicle Agency does not currently make concessions in the MOT tests of pre-1960 vintage cars. However, you will be aware that at its meeting on 22 March 2012 the Environment Committee considered the synopsis of responses to the Department's consultation on possible exemption of certain categories of historic vehicles from MOT testing. You may recall that the responses indicated that there is broad support for exemption of pre-1960 vehicles from periodic testing.

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Planning Applications for Minerals Extraction or Minerals Plant/Machinery

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning applications for minerals extraction or minerals plant/machinery, between May 2002 and May 2007, were approved retrospectively.
(AQW 12234/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Between May 2002 and May 2007 the Department approved 153 applications for minerals extraction or minerals plant/machinery. With regard to establishing those that were approved retrospectively in the period of this question (2002-2007), the Department does not hold this information in a form that is readily available and could only be compiled at a disproportionate cost.

Planning Applications for Minerals Extraction or Minerals Plant/Machinery

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning applications for minerals extraction or minerals plant/machinery, between May 2002 and May 2007, were refused retrospectively.
(AQW 12235/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Between May 2002 and May 2007 the Department refused 19 applications for minerals extraction or minerals plant/machinery. With regard to establishing those that were refused retrospectively, the Department does not hold this information in a form that is readily available and could only be compiled at a disproportionate cost.

Councils: Invoices

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment which local councils, when reporting the number of invoices paid within 10 days, counted the number of days that elapsed from the date the invoice was first received, and which ones used another date as the starting date.

(AQW 12275/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I refer you to the Assembly Questions previously requested under AQWs 11232/11-15 and 11233/11-15.

In relation to departmental guidance the Department's annual Accounts Direction to all councils includes encouragement to pay suppliers as promptly as possible and to endeavour to meet the 10 day prompt payment commitment being made by Northern Ireland Executive Departments.

In relation to the reporting of performance figures, AQW 11232/11-15 provided a table detailing the number and percentage of invoices paid within 10 days. Councils are not currently required to report on the 10 day target. DOE shall write to Councils and again advise of the 10 day target. I am not aware of councils having changed their reporting period from calendar to working days, but shall ascertain details of this when DOE write as above. The number of councils who use the invoice date and alternatively the invoice received date when measuring performance is in the table below. I would again reiterate that this is reported on against the 30 days target stated in their annual accounts.

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	Derry City Council
	Down District Council
	Dungannon & South Tyrone Borough Council
	Fermanagh District Council
	Larne Borough Council
	Limavady Borough Council
	Moyle District Council
	Newry & Mourne District Council
	Newtownabbey Borough Council
	North Down Borough Council
	Omagh District Council
	Strabane District Council

Cars Impounded for Breach of Regulations

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment, for each of the last five years, to detail (i) the value of the cars that have been impounded for breach of regulations and have subsequently been sold; and (ii) the value of the sales.

(AQW 12282/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The arrangement for the removal and disposal of unlicensed motor vehicles is contained within the UK-wide contract, which is awarded and administered by the Driver & Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) in Swansea.

DVLA has advised that under the previous wheel clamping contract, under which the revenue from the sale of unclaimed vehicles was remitted to DVLA, information was not recorded about the value of impounded cars that were subsequently sold. In relation to the current wheel clamping contract, the revenue from the sale of unclaimed vehicles is retained by the contractor and the

value of such sales is not held by DVLA. I shall write to DVLA to advise that I believe this information should be also held by DVLA as a matter of public interest and accountability.

Marine Bill: Consultation

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to list the groups he has met in relation to the Marine Bill.
(AQW 12300/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I have met a wide range of stakeholders in the course of developing the Marine Bill. The following groups have been represented:

- B9 Energy Offshore Developments Ltd;
- Belfast Harbour;
- Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside;
- Irish Federation of Sea Anglers;
- Marine Conservation Northern Ireland;
- Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group;
- Northern Ireland Coastal and Marine Forum;
- Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation;
- Northern Ireland Marine Task Force;
- Seafish;
- Strangford Lough and Lecale Partnership;
- Ulster Wildlife Trust;
- WWF; and
- sixth formers representing Holy Cross College, Lumen Christi College, Glenlola Collegiate, Down High School, Methodist College and St. Malachy's College.

Snares

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the recent changes to Scottish law on the control of snares.
(AQW 12314/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I am aware of the recent changes in the law in Scotland on the control of snares introduced by the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011. The Department's planned consultation on proposed regulations to control the use of snares will seek views on whether or not the types of controls introduced in Scotland will be relevant to Northern Ireland.

Roadside Enforcement Initiative

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the areas where the Roadside Enforcement Initiative has been carried out in the last 12 months, broken down by constituency.
(AQW 12320/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) has primary responsibility for the enforcement of regulations pertaining to commercial goods vehicles, coaches, buses and taxis. DVA has been proactive in targeting a wide range of illegal activities within each of these transport sectors. The Agency also supports the Police Service of Northern Ireland in roadside operations to assess modified cars.

With regards to roadside enforcement activities, the table below details the number of inspections carried out at the roadside broken down by vehicle category over the 12 month period of 1st April 2011 to 31st March 2012.

Enforcement activities are recorded by townland and therefore it is not possible to provide the requested information broken down by constituency. The information is presented by County and separately for Belfast, where a significant proportion of enforcement initiatives are carried out.

County/Area	Goods	Bus	Taxi	Car
Antrim	412	77	273	29
Armagh	308	50	92	10
Londonderry	429	179	498	84
Down	146	89	219	54
Tyrone	455	146	209	49
Fermanagh	92	28	89	27

County/Area	Goods	Bus	Taxi	Car
Belfast	205	265	800	15
Total	2047	831	2180	268

I am to meet with officials to consider the profile of enforcement activity.

Nesting Birds' Habitats

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment how the High Hedges Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 affects nesting birds' habitats. (AQW 12328/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The High Hedges Act requires a District Council to issue a remedial notice in respect of a complaint about a hedge that the council has decided is adversely affecting the reasonable enjoyment of a domestic property. The notice specifies what action must be taken to remediate the problem and to ensure it does not re-occur. The Department has provided the following advice to District Councils with regard to the protection of wild birds and their habitats that should be considered when drafting a remedial notice:

Councils must take into account whether any protected birds, animals or plants are present in the hedge and how they would be affected by any works, having regard not only to relevant legislation but also to local Biodiversity Action Plan policies; whether appropriate advice has been taken to ensure that the proposed remedial action will not result in the hedge dying; or the potentially seasonal nature of the work since hedge cutting should be avoided during the bird nesting season (March – August) if birds are nesting in the hedge.

Climate Change

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of the Environment for their assessment of the benefit of new Climate Change legislation in helping to achieve their 2012-13 European Climate Change Priorities. (AQW 12347/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Policy development to support the proposed Northern Ireland Climate Change Bill is currently under way. The Bill may not be introduced to the Assembly before early 2014 but I am attempting to accelerate this timescale. As such, it will not impact directly on achievement of the key objectives under the Climate Change and Energy thematic priority of the European Priorities 2012-13: Winning in Europe document, although it will be a key driver to meeting similar objectives in future European Priorities.

However, one of the overall key aims of the 2012-13 document is to "...work to strengthen our European engagement to realise fully the opportunities which the EU presents, to influence and shape future policy and build our positive profile". The development of a Northern Ireland Climate Change Bill shows a high level of political commitment to contributing to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions on these islands, in Europe and, indeed, globally. Positioning ourselves as a world leader in carbon reduction will clearly help us to become more influential within Europe and build our positive profile, not just in 2012-13 but for many years to come.

I have met with the Climate Chaos Coalition, farming groups and others on the issue of emissions. I believe a Northern Ireland Bill is necessary and should have challenging targets on the face of the Bill. That is why I sought and received positive advice in this regard from the London Committee on Climate Change.

Arm's-length Bodies: Pension Schemes

Mr Allister asked the Minister of the Environment whether all the pension schemes that are in place across his Department's arm's-length bodies are exclusively Consumer Price Indexed, including the benefits that were earned by contributions before the change from the Retail Price Index; and to detail any exceptions. (AQW 12388/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The DOE has two arm's-length bodies with pensionable employees – the Northern Ireland Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee (NILGOSC) and the Local Government Staff Commission (LGSC).

The pension scheme applicable to these bodies is the Local Government Pension Scheme. In this scheme pensions increases prior to April 2011 were based on the increase in the Retail Prices Index (RPI). From April 2011, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) replaced RPI as the measure of inflation used to apply cost of living increases.

In relation to the standard scheme, active members of the scheme, and those who left after 1 April 2011, all accrued benefits will be increased in line with the Consumer Price Index (CPI). For deferred and pensioner members who left prior to 1 April 2011, the increase to their benefits will be measured by RPI up to April 2011 and then CPI thereafter.

In relation to those who contracted with the scheme for additional pension benefits, for contracts that commenced prior to 1 April 2012, the current guidance from the Government Actuaries Department applies a pre and post retirement increase of RPI. However, this guidance is currently under review.

For contracts that commenced after 1 April 2012, the pre and post retirement increase to benefits is based on the CPI, again in accordance with the guidance from the Government Actuaries Department.

Grange Lane, Mallusk: Bridge

Mr Girvan asked the Minister of the Environment why he has not yet met with elected representatives on site to discuss the bridge at Grange Lane, Mallusk.

(AQW 12499/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I am very much aware of the problems of the bridge at Grange Lane, Mallusk, and accordingly tasked a senior departmental official to meet with Danny Kinahan MLA and a number of residents on 5 April 2012 to explain the Department's position. I have been particularly attentive to this issue and reject any suggestion to the contrary.

Legally my Department can only provide emergency funding in relation to expenditure incurred by a council in taking immediate action to safeguard life or property, or to prevent suffering or severe inconvenience once an emergency or disaster has taken place. To date, such funding is not available where there has been an ongoing issue. Furthermore, my Department can only provide funding to local councils and has no powers to provide funding to private owners.

I will continue - as before - to discuss how this issue can be resolved. However, to date there have been no verified costs produced, no firm details about who would have legal responsibility following repair works (etc).

My office has successfully demonstrated a willingness to test the limits of DOE competence. However, it must be recognised that DOE - and DOE alone - does not necessarily have all the answers to this issue.

Bus Companies Operating from Republic of Ireland

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the rules that apply to bus companies, which operate from Republic of Ireland, when providing bus services in Northern Ireland; and (ii) how these rules affect the types of the services they can provide.

(AQW 12916/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Transport Act (NI) 1967 requires an operator who provides passenger transport services in Northern Ireland to hold a NI bus operator's licence. However, EU Regulation 1073/2009 allows operators licensed in other EU Member States, including Ireland, to provide passenger services which are delivered wholly within NI on a "temporary basis". This arrangement is known as cabotage.

As Regulation 1073/2009 does not explicitly define "temporary", the Department has sought legal advice on the types of service which could be deemed temporary in nature and therefore could be undertaken by bus operators from other Member States. The advice concluded that the following could not be deemed as being "temporary" in nature and therefore could only be delivered by a NI licensed operator:

- A permanent service i.e. one subject to a long term arrangement or contract,
- A frequent service i.e. one involving daily trips such as journeys to and from school including over a number of days,
- A regular service i.e. weekly trips to specific events,
- A series of services delivered by the same operator to the same hirer

This means that operators licensed in other Member States can only undertake bus services within NI on an ad hoc basis.

My officials have provided this information in the form of an Advice Sheet to all Northern Ireland Government Departments. In providing this advice to all departments, I have made it clear that, if operators from the Republic wish to register as licensed operators here, DOE will work closely with such operators to enable this to happen, in good time and consistent with required standards.

In particular, my department has liaised with the Department of Education in this matter. My intention through all of this has been to ensure safety and compliance with the law and protect users not least children.

I have also liaised with the Transport Minister in Dublin, Leo Varadkar, including concerning the European Commission's view on this situation. Liaison will continue with the Commission, through various channels, on the matter.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Invest NI: Remuneration for Public Servants

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the proposals he has (i) received; and (ii) approved for the restructuring of the remuneration packages for public servants working within InvestNI, since coming into office.

(AQW 12198/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I refer the Member to AQW 1/11-15.

Peace III Funding

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much Peace III funding has been claimed to date; and how much remains to be claimed.

(AQW 12329/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Total expenditure to date under the PEACE III Programme is £112,032,454, leaving a balance of £177,438,682 remaining.

Rates Debt

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what was the level of write-off of rates debt in 2011/12; and how this compares with the previous three years.

(AQW 12438/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The table below provides the amount of rating debt written off in 2011/12 and in each of the previous three years.

	2011/12	2010/11	2009/10	2008/09
Amount Written-Off (£000s)	21,823	15,222	10,207	5,845

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Health and Social Care Bodies: Invoices

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many responses to Assembly Written Questions (AQW) will require revision following the publication of departmental guidance HSC(f)27/2012; and (ii) to list the AQW reference numbers of (a) responses to be revised; and (b) responses already revised.

(AQW 12152/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety):

- (i) Figures in relation to the 10 day prompt payment compliance of HSC bodies have been requested in the following Assembly Written Questions:
- AQW 7815/11-15
 - AQW 6297/11-15
 - AQW 2225/11-15
- (ii) None of the responses have been revised following the publication of departmental Circular HSC (F)27/2012. I do not plan to retrospectively revise these responses since the information provided was based on extant HSC guidance at that time.

Health and Social Care Trusts: Invoices

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 7815/11-15, which Health and Social Care Trusts, when reporting the number of invoices paid within 10 days, counted the number of days elapsed from the date the invoice was first received or used another date as the starting date.

(AQW 12154/11-15)

Mr Poots: The starting dates used by the six Health and Social Care Trusts when calculating compliance with the 10 day prompt payment target are shown in the following table:

Trust	Starting date used
NIAS, South Eastern Trust	Date when the invoice is first received in the Trust.
Southern Trust, Northern Trust, Belfast Trust	Date when the invoice is first received in the Trust. Where there is a dispute which delays payment of the invoice, and resolution is the responsibility of the supplier, the date of resolution is used.
Western Trust	Date when the invoice is first received in the Trust. Where there is a query on the validity of the invoice (for example incorrect price or goods not delivered), the date used is either when a revised invoice is received or when the goods are subsequently delivered.

Learning Difficulties: Residential Care

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what provision is in place for long-term residential care for people with severe learning difficulties.

(AQW 12237/11-15)

Mr Poots: I recognise that the provision of flexible and appropriate care and support is vital in supporting people with a learning disability to live within our communities. Such services range across advice and support, health care services, day care services, respite and short break services and residential care. Services are provided to meet the specific assessed needs of the individual.

I can advise that, through continued implementation of the Bamford Action Plan, my Department, in collaboration with other Departments and Agencies, is working to deliver care and support to all those with a learning disability assessed as having a need.

In addition, my Department has recently completed a consultation on a Learning Disability Service Framework which details what people with a learning disability can expect in terms of care and support to meet their individual needs in ways that they understand.

Bangor Diabetic Clinic

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the Bangor Diabetic Clinic.

(AQW 12299/11-15)

Mr Poots: Within the context of "Transforming Your Care" the South Eastern HSC Trust has recently reviewed all outpatient clinics for long-term conditions. I am advised that at a recent meeting it was agreed that the Trust and the Health and Social Care Board would work to develop primary care partnerships with consultants and GPs. This will enable work to be taken forward towards the reinstatement of the Bangor Diabetes Clinic.

Child Immunologist

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether there are any plans to recruit a full-time child immunologist; and if not, to outline the reasons for his position on this issue.

(AQW 12330/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am unaware of plans to recruit a full-time child immunologist at present. The appointment to any specialist post is a matter for HSC Trusts based on the commissioner's assessment of need. For a highly specialised post such as this, it is also prudent to assess the availability of potential candidates before commencing recruitment.

Counselling and Psychotherapy Services: Regulation

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he has any plans to regulate counselling and psychotherapy services.

(AQW 12333/11-15)

Mr Poots: There are no plans for regulating counselling and psychotherapy services at present. The regional group, taking forward implementation of my Department's Strategy for the Development of Psychological Therapy Services, are developing a framework of standards but it is expected that services would only be commissioned from those accredited by one of the professional bodies.

Belfast City Hospital: Accident and Emergency Department

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people were employed at the Accident and Emergency Department of the Belfast City Hospital when it was closed, broken down by post.

(AQW 12343/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information requested is provided in the table below.

Staff Employed in the Accident and Emergency Unit at Belfast City Hospital prior to its closure in November 2011

Grade	Belfast City Hospital Nov 11	
	HC	WTE
Consultant	4	4.00
Staff Grade/Associate Specialist	2	2.00
Specialist Registrar	3	3.00
Band 7 Nurse	4	3.71
Band 6 Nurse	8	7.20

Grade	Belfast City Hospital Nov 11	
	HC	WTE
Band 5 Nurse	26	23.79
Nurse Support staff	5	4.17
Occupational Therapist	1	1.00
Domestics / Porters	7	5.07
Band 4/5 Admin / Medical Secretary	3	1.97
Band 2/3 Admin	21	14.67
Total	84	70.58

Source: Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

Notes:

1 HC = Headcount; WTE = Whole-time Equivalent.

Royal Victoria Hospital: Accident and Emergency Department

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people were employed at the Accident and Emergency Department of the Royal Victoria Hospital on (i) 1 April 2011; and (ii) 1 April 2012, broken down by post.

(AQW 12344/11-15)

Mr Poots: The current position of A&E staff at the Royal Victoria Hospital has been provided in answer to AQW 12048/11-15. Both these figures (at May 2012) and figures at April 2011 are presented below.

Staff Employed in the Accident and Emergency Unit at Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast by Grade at April 2011 and May 2012

Grade	April 2011		May 2012	
	HC	WTE	HC	WTE
Consultant	7	7.00	12	11.00
Staff Grade/Associate Specialist/Specialty Doctor	3	3.00	4	4.00
Specialist Registrar	7	7.00	6	6.00
Foundation House Officer	6	6.00	9	9.00
Band 7 Nurse	6	5.76	11	10.47
Band 6 Nurse	6	5.84	15	14.04
Band 5 Nurse	29	24.84	52	46.90
Nurse Support staff	7	6.12	14	12.29
Band 4/5 Admin/Medical Secretary	4	3.59	7	5.96
Band 2/3 Admin	11	11.00	29	25.59
Total	86	80.15	159	145.25

Source: Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

Notes:

2 HC = Headcount; WTE = Whole-time Equivalent.

Private Sector Health Providers

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given that private sector health providers often employ Health Service staff who are working outside their Health Service contracts, and who often use Health Service facilities, for his assessment of whether Health Service management could use their resources more imaginatively and efficiently to gain better value for money from the public purse.

(AQW 12362/11-15)

Mr Poots: All public servants should strive to use resources efficiently and effectively to achieve value for money for the public purse.

The management of private practice in the health service is the responsibility of the HSC Trusts. Trusts must have appropriate procedures in place to ensure that private practice is conducted in accordance with the financial principles and procedures set out in the Management of Private Practice in Health Service Hospitals in Northern Ireland Handbook.

HSC consultants have a contractual obligation to their Trust to ensure any private practice should be undertaken in accordance with the standards of practice set out in the Code of Practice agreed between the Department and the BMA in 2003.

Private Consultants

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assurances are given to patients who are referred to a private consultant, that the private consultant is as qualified and experienced in a particular specialty as the Health Service consultant to whom the patient was originally referred.

(AQW 12363/11-15)

Mr Poots: Unless there is a clinical reason why a specific consultant should be the one to see the patient, patients referred to local Trusts for assessment or treatment are considered to have been referred to the specialty rather than to a named consultant. No specific assurances are given to patients transferred to Independent Sector providers as part of waiting list initiatives. However, the HSC has in place a series of quality control mechanisms to ensure that clinicians used are of an appropriate quality.

In general, Independent Sector providers in Northern Ireland are staffed by local NHS consultants working in a private capacity. They are subject to regulation and are registered with the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority in accordance with the provisions of the Health and Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 and the related Independent Healthcare Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005. They will also comply with the standards identified in 'Standards for Better Health (Dept. Of Health, 2005)' and 'Quality Standards in Health & Social Care (DHSSPS, 2006)'.

Arm's-length Bodies: Pension Schemes

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether all the pension schemes that are in place across his Department's arm's-length bodies are exclusively Consumer Price Indexed, including the benefits that were earned by contributions before the change from the Retail Price Index; and to detail any exceptions.

(AQW 12389/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Department has responsibility for the HSC Pension Scheme and the Firefighters Pension Scheme.

With regard to the HSC Pension Scheme pensions in payment and deferred awards

are index linked under the Pensions (Increase) Act (Northern Ireland) 1971, which currently up-rates public sector pensions in line with the Consumer Price Index (CPI). The only exception to this is the indexation of Additional Pension Benefits purchased before April 2011, which continue to be uprated in line with the Retail Price Index.

With regards to the Firefighters Pension Scheme pensions in payment and deferred awards are also index linked under the Pensions (Increase) Act (Northern Ireland) 1971. The Firefighters' Pension Scheme currently states that Additional Pension Benefits should be up-rated in line with the Retail Price Index (RPI), however, the Department has consulted on proposals to amend this and this change will be applied retrospectively to April 2011.

Arm's-length Bodies and Quangos: Remuneration

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current total annual cost of remuneration for board members at his Department's arm's-length bodies and quangos.

(AQW 12411/11-15)

Mr Poots: The total cost of remuneration for board members of the 18 Health and Social Care (HSC) Bodies for which I have responsibility is £1,168,465. This is based on a full complement of membership on each body, however the final outturn figure in respect of each financial year may be slightly less as members leave and new members take time to be appointed. This figure also includes the cost of the Chair Designate of the Safe Guarding Board for Northern Ireland to be established in September 2012.

A full list of HSC Bodies, appointees and the remuneration received by each member can be found in the OFMDFM Annual Report <http://www.ofmfdmni.gov.uk/index/making-government-work/public-appointments.htm> (pages 168 - 193 refer to my department).

Acute Hospitals: Live Births

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many live births were recorded at each acute hospital, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 12416/11-15)

Mr Poots: The number of live births at each acute hospital, in each of the last three years, is shown in the table below.

Hospital	Financial Year		
	2008/09	2009/10*	2010/11
Altnagelvin Area	2,824	2,786	2,892
Antrim	3,009	2,742	2,822
Causeway	1,426	1,432	1,425
Craigavon Area	3,844	3,943	4,023
Daisy Hill	2,186	2,106	2,081
¹ Downe	0	<5	51
Erne	1,352	1,294	1,286
Lagan Valley	1,133	1,066	864
Mater Infirmorum	1,270	1,154	1,199
Royal Maternity	5,355	5,478	5,570
Ulster	3,462	3,504	3,723

Source: KP19 return

1 Downe Midwife Led Unit opened on 22nd March 2010

* In line with Branch policy, cell sizes less than 5 have been masked to protect patient confidentiality.

Health and Social Care Trusts: Expenditure

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total paid, by each Health and Social Care Trust, to pest extermination companies, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 12442/11-15)

Mr Poots: The table below sets out the total paid to pest extermination companies – as provided by Health and Social Care Trusts for 2009/10, 2010/11 and 2011/12 (rounded to nearest £). The figures provided by Western Trust and South Eastern Trust include VAT, the figures provided by the other Trusts, do not include VAT.

	Belfast Health & Social Care Trust £	Northern Health & Social Care Trust £	South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust £	Southern Health & Social Care Trust £	Western Health & Social Care Trust £
2009/10	27,324	16,690	32,321	14,831	11,364
2010/11	48,212	15,641	39,678	17,111	18,018
2011/12	47,093	15,020	28,748	22,240	15,172

Antrim Area Hospital: Waiting Times

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the waiting times in the Antrim Area Hospital for the (i) short stay ward; (ii) clinical decision ward; and (iii) corridor ward located outside the clinical decision ward between 1 September 2011 and 30 April 2012, broken down by intervals of 1 hour up to 24 hours.

(AQW 12475/11-15)

Mr Poots: For the purposes of this question, it has been assumed that waiting times refers to the time between the decision to admit the patient to the short stay ward and the time the patient leaves the emergency care department.

It is also important to note that there will always be a period of time required to arrange a suitable hospital bed following the decision to admit a patient from an emergency care department.

- (i) Information on the waiting times for admission to the short stay ward in the Antrim Area hospital is detailed in the table overleaf. Between 1 September 2011 and 30 April 2012, the majority (1,122, 86.9%) of patients were admitted to the short stay ward in Antrim Area hospital within 2 hours of the decision to admit being taken.
- (ii) The 'clinical decision ward' within the Antrim Area hospital, closed in June 2011.
- (iii) There is no 'ward located outside the clinical decision ward' within the Antrim Area hospital.

**Waiting Times for Admission to the Short Stay Ward in Antrim Area Hospital
(1 September 2011 – 30 April 2012) 1**

Length of Wait	Number of Patients
Under 1 hour	923
1 to 2 hours	199
2 to 3 hours	65
3 to 4 hours	27
4 to 5 hours	26
5 to 6 hours	16
6 to 7 hours	7
7 to 8 hours	4
8 to 9 hours	7
9 to 10 hours	3
10 to 20 hours	14
More than 20 hours	0
Total	1,291

Source: Northern Health & Social Care Trust

1 In order to prevent personal disclosure, it is not possible to provide a breakdown of the waiting times for all of the timebands requested. As a consequence, information on waiting times for those waiting longer than 10 hours has been aggregated to (i) 10 to 20 hours, and (ii) More than 20 hours.

Antrim Area Hospital: Admissions

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the performance figures on emergency care published by his Department, to detail the number of patients at the Antrim Area Hospital admitted to the (i) short stay ward; (ii) clinical decision ward; and (iii) corridor ward located outside the clinical decision ward, between 1 September 2011 and 30 April 2012.

(AQW 12478/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) Between 1 September 2011 and 30 April 2012, 614 patients left the Antrim Area Hospital Emergency Department to be admitted to the short stay ward.
- (ii) The 'clinical decision ward' within the Antrim Area hospital, closed in June 2011.
- (iii) There is no 'corridor ward located outside the clinical decision ward' within the Antrim Area Hospital.

Sexual Health Improvement Network

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail who is involved in the multi-agency Sexual Health Promotion Network and when do they meet.

(AQW 12486/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Sexual Health Improvement Network comprises a number of representatives from the statutory, voluntary and community sectors. The list is shown below.

The Network meets two to three times per year.

Sexual Health Improvement Network

Members	Organisation
Annemarie McClure	Opportunity Youth/ Co-chair Faith Group
Audrey Simpson	Family Planning Association
Bernadette Cullen (Chair)	Public Health Agency
Bernie Hannigan	Research & Development, Public Health Agency
Brenda Bradley	Health & Social Care Board, Pharmacy
Bryan Nelson	Belfast Health & Social Care Trust
Carmel Kelly	South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust
Carol Emerson	Genitourinary Medicine (GUM), Royal Victoria Hospital
Caroline Bloomfield	Public Health Agency
Claire Galloway	Genitourinary Medicine (GUM), Causeway
Colette Brolly	Public Health Agency
Deirdre McNamee	Public Health Agency
Deirdre Webb	Public Health Agency
Diane McIntyre	Public Health Agency
Dickie Barr	Love for Life
Elizabeth Gilhooly	Belfast Health & Social Care Trust
Fiona Carey	South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust
Gabrielle O'Neill	South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust
Gail Malmo	Public Health Agency
Gary Crothers	Aids Care Education & Training
Gemma Lutton	Northern Health & Social Care Trust
Gerard Collins	Department of Health Social Services & Public Safety
Gerard Rocks	Southern Health & Social Care Trust
Harry McAnulty	Rainbow Project
Janet Moore	Department of Health Social Services & Public Safety
Janice Armstrong	Public Health Agency
Jason White	South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust
Joe Brogan	Health & Social Care Board, Pharmacy
John Duffy	Health & Social Care Board, Social Services
John O'Doherty	Rainbow Project
Jonathon Fyfe	Southern Health & Social Care Trust
Jonathon Hill	General Practitioner Practice, QUB
Judith Cairns	Love for Life/ Co-chair Faith Group
Julie Neill	Health Intelligence, Public Health Agency
Lyn Donnelly	Health & Social Care Board, Southern Local Commissioning Group
Lynda Vladeanu	South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust
Madeline Heaney	Public Health Agency

Members	Organisation
Maelisa Kennedy	Voice of Young People in Care
Maeve Cross	Belfast Health & Social Care Trust
Maeve Hully	Patient and Client Council
Margaret Gordon	Northern Health & Social Care Trust
Margaret Rose McNaughton	Department of Health Social Services & Public Safety
Maria Dowds	Health & Social Care Board
Maria Lohan	Queens University Belfast
Marie Hutton	Western Health & Social Care Trust
Mark McBride	Public Health Agency
Mary Crawford	Brook Northern Ireland
Mary Donnelly	Health & Social Care Board, Primary Care
Mary Potter	Department of Education Northern Ireland, Pupil Support
Matthew Dolan	Health & Social Care Board, Pharmacy
Michael Owen	Public Health Agency
Naresh Chada	Department of Health Social Services & Public Safety
Neil Irvine	Consultant in Health Protection, Public Health Agency
Nicola McGarrell	Police Service Northern Ireland
Olive Matthews	Department of Employment and Learning Northern Ireland
Orlaith Hendron	Lesbian Advocacy Services Initiative
Pauline Baird	North Eastern Education & Library Board
Pauline Leeson	Children in Northern Ireland
Peter Wright	Ulster Chemist Association
Roisin O'Neill	Western Health & Social Care Trust
Rory Thompson	HIV Support Centre
Say Quah	Belfast Health & Social Care Trust
Sharon Hamill	Church of Ireland Youth Department
Sharon Lawlor	Department of Education Northern Ireland, Curriculum Support
Stephen Jackson	Department of Education Northern Ireland
Steve Williamson	Cara Friend
Ursula Meehan	North Eastern Education & Library Board

Health and Social Care Trusts: Expenditure

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much each Health and Social Care Trust has spent to date on equality and diversity courses for staff.

(AQW 12490/11-15)

Mr Poots: HSC Trusts have a statutory responsibility to provide Equality and Diversity Training to their employees. This is provided by Trust Human Resources/Equality staff as part of their normal duties. The cost of providing this training could be obtained by asking each HSC Trust to undertake a special manual exercise, however, this could only be completed at a disproportionate cost.

Paramedics

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) how many paramedics are currently employed by (a) the Ambulance Service; and (b) his Department's arm's-length bodies; (ii) how many paramedics are required to ensure full coverage in (a) the Ambulance Service; and (b) his Department's arm's-length bodies; and (iii) what recruitment is currently taking place or is planned.

(AQW 12496/11-15)

Mr Poots: Paramedics are only employed by the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service Health & Social Care Trust (NIAS) and are registered with the Health Professions Council (HPC). NIAS have advised that as at 31st March 2012 there were a total of 426 (423.58 whole-time equivalent) Paramedics in post. This figure also includes Paramedic supervisors and Rapid Response Vehicle Paramedics. There are other posts within NIAS which require the post-holder to be a registered Paramedic, for example Area Managers, however these staff would not routinely be providing ambulance cover and are therefore not included in the figures above.

According to NIAS, the whole-time equivalent of Paramedics required to ensure full coverage was 433.0 as at 31st March 2012.

Recruitment for 18 paramedics in training is currently underway. It takes two years to train a Paramedic to the standard required for HPC registration. The 18 vacancies are in addition to a number of trainees already in the Trust.

Sickness Absence

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the percentage of sickness absence in each of the Health and Social Care Trusts in each year since April 2010; and the agreed target rate of sickness as set out in any memoranda of understanding between his Department and the trade unions.

(AQW 12511/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Department's Human Resources Directorate monitors sickness absence levels across all HSC Trusts on a biannual basis. The table below details the overall percentage of sickness absence in each Trust and the overall regional average for the reporting periods available.

There is no memorandum of understanding between my Department and the Trade Unions regarding an agreed rate of sickness absence. A target of 5.2% for Trust-level average sickness absence was set in Priorities for Action 2010/2011, to be achieved by the end of March 2011. Data for the monitoring period October 11 to March 12 is currently being compiled.

HSC Trusts	April 10 – September 10	October 10 – March 11	April 11 – September 11
Northern	4.93%	5.46%	5.20%
Western	4.94%	5.01%	4.65%
Belfast	5.56%	6.01%	5.12%
Southern	4.59%	5.25%	4.86%
South Eastern	5.53%	5.57%	4.83%
NIAS	6.71%	7.21%	6.35%
Regional Average	5.38%	5.75%	5.17%

Information relating to sickness absence monitoring is published on a bi-annual basis and can be accessed on the departmental website:

<http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/hrd/wpu/wpu-monitoring.htm>

Inver House, Larne

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many (i) rehabilitation beds; and (ii) palliative care beds are available at Inver House, Larne.

(AQW 12521/11-15)

Mr Poots: During the period from 1st April 2011 to 31st March 2012 there were an average of 14 rehabilitation beds and 4 palliative care beds available at Inver House, Larne.

The average number of available beds is defined as the average number of beds during the year in wards which are open overnight, measured at midnight. Hospitals may also have a number of beds in wards which are only open during the day. Beds reserved for day care admissions or regular day admission are not included.

Inver House, Larne

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety which services have been relocated to the upper floor of Inver House, Larne since November 2008.

(AQW 12523/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am advised that the first floor of Inver House is currently vacant. However following the completion of the required refurbishment to this floor the Northern Trust plans to relocate staff from the Directorate of Primary & Community Care for Older People's Services into this part of the building. This relocation will involve the Larne Primary Care Integrated team and the Whitehead Intermediate Rehabilitation and Stroke Service Team.

Private Nursing Care: Costs

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) how the interest rate charged on deferred payments to recover the cost of private nursing care is calculated; (ii) what is the current interest rate; (iii) whether there is a standard interest rate applied across Northern Ireland; and (iv) how the policy compares with the rest of the UK.

(AQW 12575/11-15)

Mr Poots: Northern Ireland has not introduced a formal deferred payment scheme whereby a financial contribution linked to a specific asset can be deferred for an agreed length of time; however, HSC trusts have the discretion to defer payment for nursing/residential care and charge either, a lesser agreed percentage rate, or a standard 8%. This interest rate is taken from other similar situations elsewhere in the legal system. Councils in Scotland, England and Wales have been able to offer Deferred Payments since 2002, but it is not a statutory duty.

Air Ambulance

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the feasibility study on the need for an air ambulance.

(AQW 12853/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Health and Social Care Board has now presented the final version of its feasibility study on the provision of a helicopter emergency medical service/air ambulance in Northern Ireland to my Department.

This is an important matter and I will, therefore, wish to consider carefully the implications of the report's findings and recommendations for my Department's policy on the provision of this service.

Department of Justice

Prisons: Review of Code of Conduct and Discipline

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 11467/11-15, given that the Northern Ireland Civil Service Appeals Board Report of 2009/10 states that the Prison Service needs to complete a review of its Code of Conduct and Discipline, why, three years after the Pearson Report raised this issue, the review is not yet complete.

(AQW 12222/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): The Review of the Code of Conduct and Discipline is a complex piece of work which has taken time to complete in the context of several reports including Pearson and the work of the Prison Review Team which concluded in October 2011. The review of the COCD is almost complete and will shortly be the subject of consultation with our Trade Union partners.

NIPS are currently developing a new Professional Code of Conduct.

Ackah and Deane Report

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 11467/11-15, on which dates did the Ackah and Deane report begin and conclude.

(AQW 12266/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Ackah and Deane review began in August 2009 and concluded with receipt of their report in December 2009.

Sickness Absence

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Justice to detail the percentage of sickness absence in his Department in each year since April 2010; and the agreed target rate of sickness as set out in any memoranda of understanding between his Department and the trade unions.

(AQW 12283/11-15)

Mr Ford: A detailed analysis of sickness absence data for all NICS Departments is published annually by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and is available on their website.

The sickness absence rate for the Department of Justice for the 2010/11 year was 11.0 days. However this figure is currently being reworked by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) to include Northern Ireland Prison Service staff so this rate is subject to change.

2011/12 absence statistics are not yet available, and will be published by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) in September – October 2012.

There are no agreed target rate of sickness agreed in any memoranda of understanding between my Department and the trade unions.

John Gallagher

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) whether he plans to order an investigation into why John Gallagher was able to live in Strabane, having absconded from the Central Mental Hospital in Dublin; and (ii) whether the relevant authorities in the Republic of Ireland were aware of the situation or made any efforts to have him returned to their jurisdiction.

(AQW 12310/11-15)

Mr Ford: John Gallagher was tried in the Republic of Ireland for the murder of his former girlfriend and her mother in 1988. He was found guilty but insane and was committed to a mental hospital in Dublin. In 2000 he absconded to England and subsequently he moved to Strabane. Last month he returned voluntarily to hospital in Dublin.

Any application for an extradition warrant to the Republic of Ireland would be a matter for the Irish authorities to consider in the first instance and would be subject to their own legislation. I have recently discussed the case with the Minister for Justice and Equality. Given its cross-jurisdictional nature, I am looking into the circumstances of the case and the legal issues involved. I will inform the Assembly as soon as I am in a position to do so.

I understand that there are currently six extradition warrants in train for the extradition of offenders from Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland.

Prisons: Training for Staff

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 11517/11-15, to outline the pressures facing the Northern Ireland Prison Service that have prevented delivery of the training; and whether he can asseverate that this will not impact on the credibility of disciplinary procedures and hearings that have been conducted since the publication of the Ackah and Deane report.

(AQW 12311/11-15)

Mr Ford: I can confirm that the pressures facing the Northern Ireland Prison Service referred to in my response to AQW/11517/11-15 related to the operational demands on Establishments with high prisoner numbers resulting in the difficulty to release staff for training.

In terms of the credibility of disciplinary procedures and hearings staff involved in the application of the current Code of Conduct and Discipline (COCD) do so in accordance with current agreed guidelines.

Republican Action Against Drugs

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Justice how many (i) prosecutions; and (ii) convictions have been secured, in each of the last three years, as a result of people being forced to leave their homes through the actions of Republican Action Against Drugs.

(AQW 12350/11-15)

Mr Ford: The information requested is not available. Court sentencing and conviction datasets do not hold information on the circumstances in which offences were committed.

Fines

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Justice to detail the (i) number; and (ii) total value of all fines which are currently outstanding.

(AQW 12352/11-15)

Mr Ford: As at 30 May 2012, there were 46,810 fines outstanding with a total value of £7,810,712.

A fine is treated as outstanding from the point when it is imposed and a period of time is allowed for payment.

Prisons: Conduct, Disciplinary and Grievance Procedures

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 11517/11-15, and given that this recommendation was not implemented, whether the Northern Ireland Prison Service conduct, disciplinary and grievance procedures are fit for purpose.

(AQW 12364/11-15)

Mr Ford: Staff involved in the application of the current Code of Conduct and Discipline (COCD) do so in accordance with agreed guidelines. Furthermore staff are aware of their responsibilities in the implementation of the NIPS Grievance procedure.

On this basis I am content that current procedures are applied in accordance with the agreement reached with relevant Trade Union Associations.

John Gallagher

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether (i) the Northern Ireland authorities were made aware that John Gallagher was living in Strabane; (ii) any agency sought his return to the Republic of Ireland; and (iii) any arrest warrant, including a European Arrest Warrant, was sought.

(AQW 12367/11-15)

Mr Ford: John Gallagher was tried in the Republic of Ireland for the murder of his former girlfriend and her mother in 1988. He was found guilty but insane and was committed to a mental hospital in Dublin. In 2000 he absconded to England and subsequently he moved to Strabane. Last month he returned voluntarily to hospital in Dublin.

Any application for an extradition warrant to the Republic of Ireland would be a matter for the Irish authorities to consider in the first instance and would be subject to their own legislation. I have recently discussed the case with the Minister for Justice and Equality. Given its cross-jurisdictional nature, I am looking into the circumstances of the case and the legal issues involved. I will inform the Assembly as soon as I am in a position to do so.

I understand that there are currently six extradition warrants in train for the extradition of offenders from Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland.

Arm's-length Bodies: Pension Schemes

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice whether all the pension schemes that are in place across his Department's arm's-length bodies are exclusively Consumer Price Indexed, including the benefits that were earned by contributions before the change from the Retail Price Index; and to detail any exceptions.

(AQW 12390/11-15)

Mr Ford: The majority of the pension schemes in place across the Department of Justice's arms-length bodies are Consumer Price Index linked.

For these schemes, I can confirm that the change to the Consumer Price Index applies both for pensions in payment and preserved pension benefits attributable to contributions paid before the change from Retail Price Index for this scheme.

There are 2 exceptions within Department of Justice arm's-length bodies:

- 1 NI Police Fund operates a small flexible stakeholder pension scheme.
- 2 The Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust's pension arrangement is a Group Personal Pension Scheme.

David and Sarah Johnston: Costs of Trial

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice for a breakdown of the costs, to date, of the trial of David and Sarah Johnston; and for an estimate of its final cost.

(AQW 12406/11-15)

Mr Ford: The known costs to date include:

Cost Type	Estimated Cost
PPS Prosecution ¹	£150,000
Defence (Legal Aid Costs) ²	£7,034.80
Court Costs - Judiciary & Staff Costs, Jury & Facilities	£33723
Total	£190,757.80

- 1 Exact costs are not known as yet as fees for counsel and witness expenses have not yet been finalised.
- 2 Represents the fees paid in relation to proceedings in the Magistrates' Court.

The legal aid bills for the Crown Court proceedings have yet to be submitted for assessment and payment.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland has indicated that it not possible to identify the costs associated with this case.

Martin Corey: Temporary Release

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether he consulted the Secretary of State on the temporary release of Martin Corey, given that his licence was revoked.

(AQW 12408/11-15)

Mr Ford: Compassionate temporary release is granted under Rule 27 of the Prison and Young Offenders Centre Rules (Northern Ireland) 1995, subject to a satisfactory risk assessment. I am not required to consult with the Secretary of State in relation to a period of temporary release for any prisoner and therefore did not do so in this case.

Crimes Against Older People

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice what new laws or strategies his Department has to combat crimes against older people. (AQW 12425/11-15)

Mr Ford: Tackling crime against older and vulnerable people is a commitment for my Department within the Programme for Government. As part of this commitment I intend to develop and build on work already underway to build community confidence in sentencing.

The Lord Chief Justice in his Programme of Action, is enhancing the structures by which the judiciary ensure consistent and appropriate sentences. I have also recently announced that two lay members will be included on the Lord Chief Justice's Sentencing Group, one of whom will be representative of the views of victims, to help increase transparency and confidence in sentencing. My Department will also be bringing forward a community engagement strategy.

My Department has also taken a number of actions which will support the work of the wider justice agencies and Government in tackling crimes against older and vulnerable people and addressing the fear of crime.

The Community Safety Strategy, which will be published in the coming months, includes a commitment to help older and vulnerable people feel safer, and will include proposals which build on existing successful initiatives at regional and local level to tackle crime and fear of crime, including support for intergenerational projects and Neighbourhood Watch schemes.

At local level, Policing and Community Safety Partnerships will ensure that local statutory bodies and agencies deal with the anti-social behaviour and crime-related issues that matter in their area; and work in partnership with the community to reduce the impact of anti-social behaviour and crime.

Criminal Damage Claims: Compensation

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Justice how much the Compensation Agency has paid out in compensation for criminal damage claims, in each of the last two years. (AQW 12429/11-15)

Mr Ford: The information requested is outlined in the table below.

Financial Year	2010/11	2011/12
Total of Compensation Paid	£4,418,587.00	£5,968,702.00

Criminal Injury Claims: Compensation

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Justice how much the Compensation Agency has paid out in criminal injury compensation, in each of the last two years. (AQW 12430/11-15)

Mr Ford: The information requested is outlined in the table below.

Financial Year	Criminal Injuries 1988 Order	Tariff Scheme (introduced 2002)	Total of Compensation Paid
2010/11	£8,026,404	£12,309,889	£20,336,293
2011/12	£4,176,046	£11,907,083	£16,083,129

Criminal Damage Claims

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Justice how many criminal damage claims have been received in the last two years; and how many of those claims have been successful. (AQW 12431/11-15)

Mr Ford: The information requested is outlined in the table below.

Financial Year	Criminal Damage Claims Received	Successful Claims to date
2010/11	803	251
2011/12	768	154

Criminal Injury Claims

Mr D McIlveen asked Minister of Justice how many criminal injury claims have been received in the last two years; and how many of those claims have been successful.

(AQW 12432/11-15)

Mr Ford: The information requested is outlined in the table below.

Financial Year	Criminal Injuries 1988 Order Claims Received	Successful claims to date under 1988 Order	Tariff Scheme (introduced 2002)	Successful claims to date under Tariff
2010/11	21	3	5,403	1,471
2011/12	16	0	5,260	323

Colin Bell

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, given that the recommendations contained in the Ackah and Deane report have not been implemented by the Prison Service following the death in custody of Colin Bell, for his assessment of whether this jeopardises the credibility of all disciplinary actions carried out since his death.

(AQW 12467/11-15)

Mr Ford: I would refer the Member to the responses I provided to AQW/12364/11-15; AQW/12311/11-15; and AQW/11517/11-15. All disciplinary actions carried out since the death of Colin Bell have been conducted in accordance with the procedures previously agreed with the relevant Trade Union Associations.

Victim Impact Statements

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Justice whether it is common practice for a family member, or estate executor, to be denied the opportunity to make a victim impact statement at the trial of someone accused of a crime against an individual, who was victim of the crime prior to their death.

(AQW 12470/11-15)

Mr Ford: Victim impact statements have been available to the courts for some time in Northern Ireland. If bereaved family members or another party acting on the victim's behalf wish to make a statement they can forward it to the Public Prosecution Service to include in the prosecutorial papers as an evidence statement to present to the court before sentencing and after a finding of guilt.

Given that there is no formal process for the making of victim impact statements, I recently consulted publicly on how to improve their use and intend to implement a new victim impact scheme, incorporating the provision of victim impact statements and victim impact reports, and the use of community impact assessments, by January 2013.

Crimes Against Older People

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Justice whether there are any plans to impose harsher penalties on people found guilty of physical, mental or financial attacks on older people.

(AQW 12476/11-15)

Mr Ford: I have made a commitment in the Draft Programme for Government to tackle crime and the fear of crime against older and vulnerable people. All crime is to be condemned, but such crimes are particularly abhorrent. As part of my commitment I intend to develop and build on work already underway to build community confidence in sentencing.

Sentencing decisions in the individual case are a matter for the judiciary. In making these decisions, judges are guided by sentencing guidelines which already indicate that the courts should treat the age and vulnerability of the victim, and the abuse of a position of trust, as aggravating factors. The Lord Chief Justice, in his Programme of Action, is enhancing the structures by which the judiciary ensure consistent and appropriate sentences. But I believe more needs to be done to increase transparency and confidence in sentencing, which is why I have recently announced that two lay members will be included on the Lord Chief Justice's Sentencing Group, one of whom will represent the views of victims. My Department will also be bringing forward a community engagement strategy.

Trials: Attendance at

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Justice to outline the process for a family member, or estate executor, to attend the trial of someone accused of a crime against an individual prior to their death.

(AQW 12477/11-15)

Mr Ford: All criminal courts in Northern Ireland are open to the public (other than proceedings in the Youth Court) unless the trial Judge directs otherwise.

Internships

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice how many internships are available in his Department; and if none, what plans he has to introduce an internship scheme.

(AQW 12483/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Department of Justice currently has thirteen internships in place.

The Department also provides internship opportunities in accordance with the NICS Work Experience policy which can be found on the NICS Recruitment Service website:

<https://irecruit-ext.hrconnect.nigov.net/pages/content.aspx?Page=work-experience>

Within the provisions of the NICS policy, Corporate HR, DFP coordinates internships on behalf of the Executive Departments. The Department of Justice recently offered an opportunity, via Corporate HR, for the Queens University Belfast Politics, International Studies and Philosophy Internship scheme, 2012-13 academic year. However, due to the high level of interest from the Executive Departments compared to the number of successful students, it has not been possible to assign an intern to the position identified within the DOJ.

Police College

Mr McGlone asked Minister of Justice what opportunities will be available for local contractors to sub-contract work in the construction of the new policing college.

(AQW 12494/11-15)

Mr Ford: There will be substantial opportunities for local suppliers and contractors both to supply materials and to carry out sub-contracted services to the main contractor. With projects of this scale it is normal practice for local companies to advertise themselves to the main contractors during the bidding phases of the contract.

There will then be further opportunities for local companies as the college is prepared for operations in the run up to 2015.

The Desertcreat Programme Team is making all efforts to ensure public awareness of the nature of the programme and the procurement stages. Any enquiring contractor or supplier can obtain up to date information on any aspect of the new college's development, by contacting the Programme Team on info@desertcreatcollege.org or through the website www.desertcreatcollege.org.

The Programme Office Team will publish updates on procurement opportunities via the website and its facebook page <http://www.facebook.com/desertcreatcollege> as well as the normal statutory channels, such as the ISNI portal on www.isni.gov.uk/ contracts.

Court Hearings

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in light of the scenes at Strabane Magistrates' Court on 31 May 2012, when people in the gallery shouted, cheered and applauded for two men accused of terrorist offences, what action he intends to take to prevent the glorification of terrorism by people attending court, or have them prosecuted for engaging in this activity.

(AQW 12535/11-15)

Mr Ford: The conduct and management of proceedings during a court hearing is entirely a matter for the judiciary. I am satisfied that the current statutory powers that are available to deal with disruptive behaviour in court are adequate.

I am advised by my officials that there was no disturbance in the public gallery during the sitting of Strabane Magistrates' Court on 31 May 2012.

Human Trafficking

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the mitigation that victims of human trafficking can put forward as a defence in cases of coerced labour or prostitution; and whether legal aid will be made available to all victims in these cases.

(AQW 12571/11-15)

Mr Ford: The mitigation that victims of human trafficking can put forward may be relevant at the stage when a decision is being made about prosecution or at the trial. The first is a matter for the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) and the latter for the court.

In respect of the former I would note the PPS has issued for consultation a Policy for Prosecuting Cases of Human Trafficking. This incorporates a section on prosecuting suspects who might be trafficked victims. The policy states that should evidence or information be available to the prosecutor to support the fact that the person has been trafficked and has committed the offence whilst in a coerced situation this will be considered as a strong public interest factor mitigating against prosecution.

Criminal legal aid is available to anyone who appears in court charged with committing a criminal offence, subject to two prescribed tests. These are, firstly, whether it appears to the court that the financial means of the person charged are insufficient to enable them to pay for their own legal representation and, secondly, whether it appears to the court that it is desirable in the interests of justice that the person should have legal aid funding to defend the case.

Legal Aid

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Justice whether he intends to introduce legislation to allow his Department to recover legal aid claimed by defendants in cases in which they have subsequently been found guilty.

(AQW 12580/11-15)

Mr Ford: I intend to make new rules, the Criminal Legal Aid (Recovery of Defence Costs Orders) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2012, in the next few weeks to enable the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission to recover some or all of the costs of legal aid from convicted defendants in the Crown Court, where it appears that defendants have the means to pay for these costs. Where the Court considers that a convicted defendant has the means to pay such costs, it will have the power to make a Recovery of Defence Costs Order.

Criminal Offences in the Republic of Ireland

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether his Department is aware of any other people, residing in Northern Ireland, who have been convicted of criminal offences in the Republic of Ireland and have absconded without completing their sentences.

(AQW 12615/11-15)

Mr Ford: John Gallagher was tried in the Republic of Ireland for the murder of his former girlfriend and her mother in 1988. He was found guilty but insane and was committed to a mental hospital in Dublin. In 2000 he absconded to England and subsequently he moved to Strabane. Last month he returned voluntarily to hospital in Dublin.

Any application for an extradition warrant to the Republic of Ireland would be a matter for the Irish authorities to consider in the first instance and would be subject to their own legislation. I have recently discussed the case with the Minister for Justice and Equality. Given its cross-jurisdictional nature, I am looking into the circumstances of the case and the legal issues involved. I will inform the Assembly as soon as I am in a position to do so.

I understand that there are currently six extradition warrants in train for the extradition of offenders from Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland.

Court Hearings

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, given that members of the public, who are seated in the gallery area at court hearings, are not allowed to talk or interfere with the court process, what discussions he has held with the (i) Chief Constable; and (ii) Lord Chief Justice with a view to addressing the matter of supporters of terrorists being permitted to cause disturbances by shouting, cheering and applauding during hearings.

(AQW 12685/11-15)

Mr Ford: The conduct and management of proceedings during a court hearing is entirely a matter for the judiciary. I am satisfied that the current statutory powers that are available to deal with disruptive behaviour in court are adequate.

Case Number 12/046196 at Dungannon Magistrates' Court

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how the defendant, in case number 12/046196 at Dungannon Magistrates' Court, has been charged with committing an alleged rape on 19 April 2012 whilst he was a prisoner in Hydebank Young Offenders Centre.

(AQW 12686/11-15)

Mr Ford: The alleged offence took place in 2011 and not 2012 as stated on the charge sheet. This clerical error will be amended subject to the direction of the District Judge (Magistrates' Court).

Offender Levy

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to the Offender's Levy, whether deductions will be made from the benefits or salaries of those people who have been fined but refuse to pay, in the same way that people, who receive a custodial sentence, will have the levy deducted from their prisoner earnings.

(AQW 12702/11-15)

Mr Ford: Collection and enforcement of the levy, from offenders in the community, will be made in the same way as an existing court fine.

Currently there is no provision to secure fine payment from direct deductions from income, but proposals to allow for such deductions are being developed for inclusion in a Justice Bill, which I am planning to introduce to the Assembly by January 2013.

Serious Case Reviews

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 9924/11-15, whether he plans to order a Serious Case Review into the handling of these cases.

(AQW 12823/11-15)

Mr Ford: The appropriate agencies are already reviewing aspects of the case and I have asked to see the outcome of that review in due course.

Department for Regional Development

Roads: Minor Repairs

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the funding allocated to minor road surface repairs, in each Roads Service division, for each year since 2007/08.

(AQW 12103/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): My Department's Roads Service has advised that the initial allocations to each Roads Service Division for carriageway patching since 2007/08 were as follows:

Roads Service Division	07/08 (£k)	08/09 (£k)	09/10 (£k)	10/11 (£k)	11/12 (£k)	12/13 (£k)
Northern	3,575	3,460	3,784	3,596	3,443	3,459
Southern	4,321	4,315	5,086	4,980	5,472	5,055
Eastern	3,617	3,827	3,949	3,916	3,600	4,163
Western	4,916	5,015	5,075	5,697	5,379	5,695
Total	16,429	16,617	17,894	18,189	17,894	18,372

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises: Logistics

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 10721/11-15, what discussions his Department has had with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on improving logistics solutions for small and medium-sized enterprises.

(AQW 12146/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department has not had discussions with the Department of Enterprise Trade & Investment on improving logistics for small and medium sized enterprises.

Transport Research Laboratory

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the findings of the recent research carried out by the Transport Research Laboratory, on behalf of the Department for Transport.

(AQW 12172/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Member will be aware that my Department's Roads Service is committed to providing safer roads for vulnerable road users, including pedestrians and cyclists, by utilising a range of measures, such as road safety education and engineering, traffic calming and enhancement of the pedestrian and cycling network.

Roads Service takes account of all research relating to the network. Whilst the Transport Research Laboratory (TRL) literature review on "the role of infrastructure in the causation and reduction of injuries to cyclists" is worthwhile in highlighting possible conflict points and hazards, the TRL admits that it was difficult to draw definitive conclusions from the literature.

When developing and implementing the cycling strategy and cycle network, as set out in both the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP) and the Regional Transport Strategy (RTS), Roads Service continues to liaise with various interested bodies, such as, Sustrans, Travelwise, DOE Road Safety Branch, Translink, etc, to develop a cycle network that is as safe as possible and fully integrated with other modes of transport.

The Road network, which has been developed over many years, must serve many different purposes including the movement of freight, passenger movement and also leisure travel. The needs of cyclists and pedestrians are taken into account during the development of a road scheme, in order to provide high quality cycle/pedestrian facilities, where possible.

Roads Service will continue to prioritise, design and implement safety measures for cyclists in accordance with the Department of Transport's policy and guidelines, which have undergone considerable research and are well established.

Traffic Flow

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what is the optimal road speed to maximise traffic flow.

(AQW 12175/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that optimal road speeds are used on some parts of the UK motorway network to benefit the flow of traffic, improve road safety and promote reliable journey times. However, there is no single optimal speed due to variables such as, the volume of traffic, the measured speed of vehicles and the distance between vehicles. These variables are measured by loops in the carriageway, with the information collected being fed into algorithms which determine the optimal speed in relation to the prevailing traffic conditions. This technology was first used in the UK on a section of the M25

motorway around London and has since been applied by the Highways Agency to other parts of their motorway network, including the M42 at Birmingham.

In Northern Ireland, Roads Service has introduced a system of variable mandatory speed limits on the M1 from the Black's Road junction to the Clifton Street junction, on the Westlink.

Bus Shelters: Vandalism

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of repairing vandalised bus shelters, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 12190/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Maintenance of the bus shelters, provided by Adshel through its contract with my Department's Roads Service and most District Councils, is funded by the company at its own expense. My Department therefore does not hold information on the costs incurred by Adshel in fulfilling its contractual commitments. Roads Service has a small budget of approximately £1,000 per year to maintain 58 bus shelters that were provided by my Department, prior to the commencement of the Adshel contract.

I can further advise that Translink's Rural Transport Unit pays an annual maintenance fee of £3,000 to Adshel for the upkeep of four bus shelters owned by it.

Street Lighting: Damage

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the importance of replacing, rather than removing, damaged street lighting appliances to safeguard the public, given the current levels of anti-social behaviour.

(AQW 12251/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it will generally replace a damaged street light that has been removed for public safety. However, if the damage is the result of excessive or repeated vandalism, and it results in an electrical hazard to the public, or the cost of repeated reinstatement has become prohibitive, the street light may be removed as a temporary measure.

Review of Public Administration

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Regional Development what powers or functions he plans to devolve to local councils under the Review of Public Administration; and whether this represents a change to his previous commitments.

(AQW 12262/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Executive agreed in September 2009 that the following public realm aspects of local roads functions should transfer from Roads Service to Local Government:

- Pedestrian permits;
- Permitting local events to be held on roads;
- Alleygating; and
- Off-street parking/on-street parking enforcement.

However, it was envisaged that under such a transfer, policy responsibility for parking would remain with my Department.

It was originally envisaged these functions would transfer to Local Government by May 2011. However, the Executive agreed in June 2010 to re-frame the timetable for the reform of Local Government and that these functions should transfer by 2015. The Environment Minister is currently consulting with his Executive colleagues on the range of functions that could transfer to Local Government. During those discussions, I indicated my preference to retain responsibility for off-street parking/on-street enforcement due to the financial implications for my Department arising from the transfer of these functions.

In the interim period, my Department has introduced legislation which, with the exception of cycle races, road races and parades, will enable local Councils to close roads for special events. Officials from my Department and Local Government are developing guidance that will enable Councils to undertake this function later this financial year.

In addition, the Department of the Environment has introduced legislation which enables Councils, with the approval of my Department, to make orders for the erection of alley gates on relevant roads. This legislation came into operation on 1 April 2012.

Sickness Absence

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the percentage of sickness absence in his Department in each of the last three years; and the agreed target rate of sickness as set out in any memoranda of understanding between his Department and the trade unions.

(AQW 12284/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Sickness targets for the NI Civil Service are set by the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

My Department's sickness absence targets and rates for the last three years are set out in the table below. Absence statistics for 2011/12 are not yet available, but will be published by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency in the autumn.

Year	Category	Target (working days lost)	Actual number of working days lost	Percentage of available working days lost
2009/10	Non-industrial staff	8.5	6.7	3.0 %
	Industrial staff*	13.4	13.0	5.9 %
2010/11	All Departmental staff #	8.0	8.5	3.9 %
2011/12	All Departmental staff #	7.9	Not yet available	Not yet available

* Internal Departmental target

Combined absence targets for industrial and non-industrial staff were introduced by the NI Civil Service in 2010/11

There are no agreed sickness absence targets between my Department and the Trade Unions.

Sheepbridge: Park and Ride

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Regional Development when Roads Service staff last cleared litter from the Sheepbridge Park and Ride car park near Newry.

(AQW 12291/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My department's Roads Service has advised that this area was cleared of litter, brushed and strimmed in preparation for the arrival of the Olympic torch in Newry City on the 5th June 2012.

Sheepbridge: Park and Ride

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has any plans to extend the Sheepbridge Park car park near Newry.

(AQW 12292/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Park and Share facility at Sheepbridge is currently marked out for 25 vehicles. However, following recent representations on the matter, I asked Roads Service to monitor usage at this facility. Observations during that period indicated that between 33 to 45 vehicles were parked in the vicinity of this site.

Roads Service officials have advised that up to 25 additional spaces could be provided at the Sheepbridge location at an estimated cost of around £60k without having to acquire additional land.

However, as the Member may be aware, Roads Service has much smaller budget allocations over the next two years and there is currently no funding earmarked for additional Park and Share facilities at this location.

Nevertheless, I have asked Roads Service to proceed with some initial development work so it will be in a position to take advantage of any funding opportunities that may arise in the future.

Comber Greenway/Sandown Road

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration has been given to installing a pedestrian crossing at the point where the Comber Greenway crosses the Sandown Road, Belfast.

(AQW 12332/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it would be more appropriate to consider the provision of a toucan crossing at this location, so that it could also be used by cyclists.

Roads Service officials further advise that they have identified this site, along with other locations on the Greenway, as areas where toucan crossings would provide benefits to both pedestrians and cyclists.

While Roads Service has no immediate plans to provide such a facility on Sandown Road, it will be considered for inclusion in a future works programme, subject to positive outcomes to technical feasibility studies and the availability of funding at that time.

NI Water: Cost of Legal Services

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total cost of legal services incurred by NI Water in the last three years; and to outline the procurement process for these services.

(AQW 12374/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the total cost of legal fees incurred in the three years up to 31 March 2012 was £4.8 million (exclusive of VAT).

All NIW legal services are procured by way of open tender competition.

Translink: Cost of Legal Services

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total cost of legal services incurred by Translink in the last three years; and to outline the procurement process for these services.

(AQW 12376/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink has advised that the relevant legal fees incurred during the 3 years in question are as set out in the table below:

	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Total £k	233,541	337,189	363,420

Translink is a public utility which complies with the Utilities Contracts Regulations 2006. As such, Translink procures its legal service needs through competitively tendered framework agreements (or Panels). These panels cover distinct and separate areas of the business such as prosecutions, claims, liability matters, and employment matters (such as Tribunal work).

Waterside Area, Derry: New Railway Station

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the timescale for the provision of a new railway station at the Waterside in Derry; and to outline the level of interest and commitment to providing a halt to accommodate passengers using the recently opened Peace Bridge.

(AQW 12379/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink advise that they are working with Ilex to carry out a joint 'Londonderry Railway Station Feasibility Study' in order to identify the preferred location and concept layout of a new or refurbished station. As part of the study Translink will consider options to continue using the existing location, acquiring and re-using the old station building and also a new build option, including consideration of a site in close proximity to the Peace Bridge. It is Translink's intention to hold a public consultation event in Londonderry as part of the decision-making process. The study is expected to be completed during 2012.

The study is being undertaken at this stage so that suitable steps can be taken to protect any identified preferred site taking account of the views of local stakeholders.

It should be emphasised that there is no funding within the current capital programme for a station to be built or refurbished.

Arm's-length Bodies and Quangos: Remuneration

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the current total annual cost of remuneration for board members at his Department's arm's-length bodies and quangos.

(AQW 12413/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The current total annual cost of remuneration for Non Executive Board Members of the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company (NITHCo) and Northern Ireland Water (NIW) is approximately £229,108 (there is limited provision for additional payments in respect of additional attendance requirements). The salaries and allowances paid to the Executive Directors are in respect of their roles as full time employees of NITHC/Translink and NIW rather than for their Director/Board roles.

Full details of the amounts paid to Board members are published in the Annual Report and Accounts of each body.

Arm's-length Bodies: Pension Schemes

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development whether all the pension schemes that are in place across his Department's arm's-length bodies are exclusively Consumer Price Indexed, including the benefits that were earned by contributions before the change from the Retail Price Index; and to detail any exceptions.

(AQW 12436/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that its pension scheme was established under the Trust and Pension law through a Trust Deed and Rules and uses the Retail Price Index.

Translink has advised that with effect from 1 April 2011, all benefit indexation covering NILGOSC and other retirement benefit schemes operating have been based on the Consumer Price Index rather than the Retail Price Index. This covers all benefits earned.

Grange Lane and Trench Lane, Mallusk: Bridge

Mr Girvan asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQO 2066/11-15, and in light of the statement that Roads legislation does not permit my Department to spend public money on what the Minister's department perceives to be a 'privately owned structure', whether the ongoing discussions between the various agencies and Departments opens up the possibility for public money, including funding from his Department, to be made available to erect the bridge on an inter-departmental funding basis.

(AQW 12451/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: As I advised the Member in my response to his Assembly Question, AQO 2066/11-15, Grange Lane and Trench Lane, Mallusk, including the bridge over the Ballymartin River, are in private ownership. They are not, therefore, the responsibility of my Department's Roads Service.

Roads Service recently sought to clarify what commitments, if any, had been given by Newtownabbey Borough Council or other Departments in respect of this issue. However, it has not been possible to establish the up-to-date position.

I understand that Newtownabbey Borough Council wrote to Minister Attwood on 1 February 2012, seeking emergency status and associated support for the replacement bridge, and that they are awaiting a response. I also understand that the Council has not made a financial commitment to the project. However, if a funding package could be secured, the Council would be willing to provide project management expertise.

While I appreciate the concerns and difficulties experienced by local residents, my Department is unable to contribute funding for the replacement or repair of private structures.

Quangos

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to reduce (i) the number of QUANGOs; and (ii) the operational cost of QUANGOs.

(AQW 12463/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department is not responsible for any QUANGOs. Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company (NITHC) is a public corporation. Northern Ireland Water (NIW) is legally a government owned company and regulated utility, although financially, it is treated as a non departmental public body as part of the public expenditure regime

Internships

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development how many internships are available in his Department; and if none, what plans he has to introduce an internship scheme.

(AQW 12481/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Northern Ireland Civil Service internships are managed centrally by the Department of Finance and Personnel. At present, no such internship opportunities have been identified within my Department. The position will be reviewed in 2013.

I should, however, point out that DRD provides a considerable level of support to relevant students and staff through other workplace-based learning opportunities and through Further Education assistance.

Translink: Management Posts

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 11792/11-15, how many management level posts currently exist in the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company compared with three years ago.

(AQW 12493/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink advise that there are 11 management level posts in the NI Transport Holding Company(NITHC). This includes the 9 Senior Executives for the group as a whole. The numbers remain unchanged from 2009. Additionally you should note that the figures given to you under AQW 11792/11-15 of 82 managerial posts included the NITHC management level posts referred to here.

Free Travel for People Aged Over 60

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Regional Development how many additional buses or trains are provided to manage free travel for people aged over 60.

(AQW 12520/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The information required to answer this question is not available.

Translink provides services closely matched to the travel demand patterns of its passengers and where concessionary travel for over 60s now represents a considerable section of total passenger numbers, no service can be specifically attributed to 60+ concession travel only. Where concession travel contributes to the overall levels of usage and helps sustain frequency of services, all passengers, especially the fare paying passengers, benefit from that frequency of service.

In 2011/12 there were 2.5m passenger trips undertaken by holders of a 60+ pass on buses and 0.5m on trains. In the same period there were a total of 66.5m passenger trips on buses and 10.7m on trains.

Roads Service: Grass-cutting Rota

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has any plans to ask Roads Service to move from an annual grass cutting rota to a more flexible scheme that works on a needs basis.

(AQW 12557/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Roads Service cuts grass on areas, deemed to be part of the public road, to prevent overgrowth onto carriageways and footway surfaces and obstruction of sightlines and traffic signs. Such grass cutting operations are carried out for road safety reasons and not for cosmetic or amenity purposes.

The present policy provides for two cuts a year in rural areas and five cuts in urban areas. The area to be cut is one swathe width, approximately 1.2m wide, with the complete area required for sightlines to be cut as necessary. This maintains a balance between road safety and environmental protection.

I currently have no plans to ask Roads Service to deviate from this policy.

Translink: 60 Plus SmartPass

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQO 2070/11-15, to detail (i) how the usage information from (a) Translink; and (b) each of the other operators was quantified; (ii) the nature of the information assessed by the independent external auditors; and (iii) the amounts accredited for the 60+ concessionary fare schemes by each of the operators, in each of the last two years.

(AQW 12569/11-15)

Mr Kennedy:

- (i) Usage information provided by Translink and other operators is quantified by use of fares and reimbursement adjustments.
- (ii) The information assessed by the independent external auditors is the information held by operators necessary to meet the documentation standard as set out in the schemes terms & conditions. These conditions have been agreed with the Department of Finance and Personnel and NI Audit Office. This includes:-
 - the claims sheets provided to the department;
 - a record of all tickets issued and reconciled against money received;
 - the annual accounts; and
 - a copy of the published timetable.
- (iii) Interpreting the 60+ scheme to refer to all age related concessions over the age of 60 the overall amounts accredited to Translink and private operators ,as a group for the last two years, is as follows:

	2010/11	2011/12
Translink	£23,992,000	£25,759,000
Private Operators*	£498,000	£524,000

* Note: Due to current invoicing arrangements the amounts shown above for Private Operators includes all concession types. That is it includes an amount for child concessions but these will be relatively small.

Quangos

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development how many QUANGOS, that are attached to his Department, have been created as a result of legislation passed by the Northern Ireland Assembly since 2007.

(AQW 12651/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department is not responsible for any QUANGOs. None of my Department's arm's length bodies were created after 1 April 2007 as a result of legislation passed by the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Department for Social Development

Housing Benefit or Temporary/Emergency Accommodation

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development (i) how much was paid to private landlords through the housing benefit or temporary/emergency accommodation in each of the last five years, broken down by constituency; and (ii) what this figure represents as a percentage of his Department's annual housing budget.

(AQW 10912/11-15)

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 shows the amount of estimated Housing Benefit paid to private landlords for temporary/emergency accommodation by Housing Executive District Office, for the last five years. In relation to part (ii), Housing Benefit is not part of the Department's annual housing budget.

Homeless Accommodation Costs 2007-20011

	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
	HB estimated	HB estimated	HB estimated	HB estimated	HB estimated
Antrim District Office	12,135	39,123	93,379	108,111	127,877
Armagh District	49,484	26,393	59,989	50,788	67,833
Ballycastle District Office	9,833	22,001	27,097	52,083	40,587
Ballymena District Office	71,061	32,560	94,997	119,572	187,450
Ballymoney District Office	627	34	3,299	7,298	21,386
Banbridge District	20,761	19,094	41,001	35,398	40,089
Bangor District Office	28,497	34,438	98,345	104,447	156,169
Belfast Area Programme	542,800	315,152	587,286	522,330	656,823
Carrickfergus District Office	416	3,981	6,393	1,459	2,309
Castlereagh District Office	15,574	11,291	34,998	73,041	131,645
Coleraine District Office	6,848	5,928	21,368	37,265	38,716
Collon Terrace District	71,842	52,919	206,934	272,522	328,657
Cookstown District	0	2,327	6,590	2,469	930
Downpatrick District	86,601	57,958	184,863	204,420	246,473
Dungannon District	244,618	210,164	340,876	306,150	275,306
Fermanagh District	155,230	108,559	176,232	118,094	180,682
Larne District Office	2,400	435	9,612	12,392	13,758
Limavady District	302	180	1,808	3,030	-189
Lisburn District 1	112,921	82,601	334,524	346,505	469,952
Lisburn District 3	53,234	40,571	119,955	108,105	168,507
Lurgan District	46,801	28,293	70,207	69,699	92,175
Magherafelt District	2,219	1,169	14,542	12,400	12,845
Newry District	106,526	134,280	337,833	459,380	576,063
Newtownabbey District 1 Office	21,061	10,718	18,992	8,605	13,073
Newtownabbey District 2 Office	770	5,386	28,828	19,976	27,254

	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
	HB estimated	HB estimated	HB estimated	HB estimated	HB estimated
Newtownards District	15,486	20,432	65,433	94,022	194,019
Omagh District	972	3,974	17,862	27,935	49,058
Portadown District	12,759	12,293	31,302	46,416	81,159
Strabane District	940	0	797	4,393	5,797
Waterloo Place District	179,034	149,417	294,384	317,782	463,390
Waterside District	14,293	11,889	24,632	54,076	100,138
Total	1,886,043	1,443,558	3,354,358	3,600,164	4,769,931

Notes

- 1 Housing Benefit is an estimate as information is not held in this format.
- 2 Housing Benefit is calculated by estimating the total cost using number of properties @ NI average charge and deducting actual top-up paid

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.

Childcare Costs

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the economic rationale for both parents being in employment when the cost of childcare is greater than the salary of one of the parents.

(AQW 11344/11-15)

Mr McCausland: It is not the role of Government to make any assessment of the economic rationale for how much a couple choose to pay for childcare costs. It is entirely their choice.

Assistance with childcare costs is available for eligible parents through Working Tax Credits and, under the proposed Universal Credit, help with childcare costs will be available to eligible parents regardless of the number of hours worked.

Civil Servants: Religious and Gender Composition

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the (i) religious; and (ii) gender composition of the civil servants at each grade in his Department in (a) 2000; (b) 2005; and (c) the most recent year for which figures are available.

(AQW 11802/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Recruitment and promotion exercises for General Service posts (i.e. administrators and managers) are managed on a corporate basis by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) through the HRConnect outsourced service. All Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) recruitment and promotion competitions are delivered in line with the Civil Service Commissioners' Recruitment Code and Commissioners regulate all recruitment to and within the NICS, at all levels, to ensure that the 'merit principle' is adhered to.

DFP also provides statutory monitoring returns to the Equality Commission on its workforce composition for the NICS.

The religion of NICS staff is not held. However, as required by the Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order

1998 (FETO), information is collected on the perceived community background of staff and applicants for posts in the NICS annually at the 1 January. Using this data, the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) has provided the information requested, broken down by grade, in the table at Annex I.

Annex 1**(i) Community Background Profile**

General Service Grade (or equivalent)	DSD Community Profile (2000)			DSD Community Profile (2005)			DSD Community Profile (2011)		
	Protestant	Roman Catholic	% Roman Catholic within Grade	Protestant	Roman Catholic	% Roman Catholic within Grade	Protestant	Roman Catholic	% Roman Catholic within Grade
*G7+	52	19	27	43	56	57	48	65	58
DP	59	50	46	70	108	61	77	118	61
so	117	131	53	180	206	53	186	242	57
EOI	187	238	56	290	408	58	254	372	59
EOII	686	909	57	808	1069	57	809	1083	57
AO	1360	1706	56	1512	2214	59	1503	2005	57
AA	553	877	61	407	640	61	314	396	56
Total	3014	3930	57	3310	4701	59	3191	4281	57

(ii) Gender Profile

General Service Grade (or equivalent)	DSD Gender Profile in 2000			DSD Gender Profile in 2005			DSD Gender Profile in 2011		
	Male	Female	%Female within Grade	Male	Female	%Female within Grade	Male	Female	%Female within Grade
G5+	17	1	6	17	3	15	10	6	38
SP/G7	46	10	18	52	32	38	63	35	36
DP	74	36	33	92	89	49	89	108	55
SO	141	111	44	188	204	52	197	239	55
EOI	177	256	59	263	443	63	268	365	58
EOII	568	1053	65	677	1229	64	727	1184	62
AO	984	2159	69	1262	2511	67	1377	2167	61
AA	651	925	59	468	600	56	381	343	47
Total	2658	4551	63	3019	5111	63	3112	4447	59

Notes:

1. All figures relate to permanent staff within the Department and includes both full & part time staff i.e. headcount. All figures relate to permanent NICS staff and exclude staff on a career break.
2. The community background profile does not include staff whose community background cannot be determined and therefore the total count for community background and gender will not match.

General *G7+: A disclosure control has been applied to the community background profile such that the G5+ and SP/G7 categories have been amalgamated

Social Mobility

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development, given that social mobility is higher in societies such as Scandinavian countries compared with societies such as the UK and USA (i) to detail the academic research he has consulted which supports his analysis that the proposals to cut welfare will reduce intergenerational poverty; (ii) for his Department's estimate of the current level of social mobility; and (iii) for his Department's assessment of the level of social mobility after welfare reforms are implemented.

(AQW 11841/11-15)

Mr McCausland:

- (i) The Coalition Government's proposals to reform the welfare regime are designed, through incentivising work, to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty. The introduction of Universal Credit is aimed at supporting those into work by ensuring that people generally keep a higher proportion of their earnings and reflects research findings, from organisations such as Joseph Rowntree Foundation, that work is an important route out of poverty. This assertion is also supported by initial statistical analysis undertaken by my Department which estimates that over 34,000 people including 10,000 children will be lifted out of poverty by 2017 as a result of these benefit changes. Lifting these children out of poverty will, not only, improve their immediate circumstances but will greatly enhance their life chances thereby reducing the likelihood that they will experience poverty in adulthood and continue the cycle of deprivation onto future generations. Also, of equal importance, our actions will provide a second chance for those who have already reached adulthood and who have, most probably, been living in poverty for all, if not the majority, of their lives.

Increasing a family's income however will not of itself solve the root causes of intergenerational poverty, that is why I continue to work with my Executive colleagues to develop a more co-ordinated and effective anti-poverty strategy, one which properly links economic and social policies in the recognition that growing the economy and tackling worklessness must go hand in hand.

- (ii) & (iii) My Department does not hold information at present that would allow an assessment of the level of social mobility either now or after welfare reform is implemented.

Welfare Reform

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of people in full-time work who are classified as living in poverty; (ii) the number of children, with parents in full-time work, who are classified as living in poverty; and (iii) for his assessment of how welfare reform will impact on the level of poverty for adults and children in such circumstances.

(AQW 11842/11-15)

Mr McCausland:

- (i) The total number of individuals in full-time employment, who are part of a household which is considered to be in low-income or poverty, was 48,700 in 2009/10. This includes both full-time employees and the full-time self-employed. The figure is presented on a Before Housing Costs basis.
- (ii) The number of dependent children who live in a household where either one parent or both parents are in full-time work, and where the household is considered to be in low-income or poverty, was 58,400 in 2009/10. The figure is presented on a Before Housing Costs basis.

These results are produced using the Family Resources Survey datasets for Northern Ireland, and the Households Below Average Income dataset for Northern Ireland.

- (iii) A completed Equality Impact Assessment on Welfare Reform was published on my Department's website on 4th May. It did not, however, specifically consider the impact on the level of poverty. However, my officials are currently working with a statistical modelling tool (the Policy Simulation Model) developed by Department for Work and Pensions as data becomes available from other Government Departments such as Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to further identify the impact of welfare reform. Using a read across from Department for Work and Pensions' figures, we estimate that Universal Credit will lift over 34,000 individuals, including 10,000 children out of poverty. At this stage, it is not possible to give a definitive breakdown by category.

Early Years Strategy: Co-operation

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Social Development what co-operation his Department has had with the Department of Education in relation to an early years strategy.

(AQW 12046/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department to date has had no discussions with the Department of Education specifically in relation to an early years strategy.

I am personally committed to early interventions and I have met with Minister O'Dowd to discuss a number of issues including nurture units and improving educational attainment, as my Department has the lead responsibility for the Neighbourhood Renewal strategy. The Strategy includes a commitment to address a range of social deprivation issues which affect a young person's life chances.

I believe increased cooperation and collaboration between key Departments is essential for the successful development and implementation of an early years strategy. I would therefore welcome the opportunity for my Department to contribute to the development of an early years strategy.

Arm's-length Bodies: Board Members

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Social Development how many former senior civil servants, from deputy secretary grade to permanent secretary grade, serve on the boards of his Department's arm's length bodies in a (i) paid; and (ii) unpaid capacity. **(AQW 12159/11-15)**

Mr McCausland: There are no former senior civil servants, from deputy secretary grade to permanent secretary grade serving on my Department's arm's-length bodies in either a paid or unpaid capacity.

Child Maintenance: Reforms

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the imminent introduction of charges to be borne by parents who are paying child maintenance as a result of reforms to child maintenance; and what guarantees he can give that this will not have a detrimental effect on children.

(AQW 12168/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Charging is designed to act as an incentive for parents to consider their options and where possible work collaboratively to make a family-based arrangement. It is considered fair and in line with the principles of parental responsibility to ask parents to contribute towards the cost of their application and ongoing maintenance payments given the significant financial benefit of child maintenance.

There is evidence that contact between the non-resident parent and his/ her children is more likely where there is an amicable relationship with the parent with care and if maintenance is being paid. The introduction of charges is intended to encourage parents to consider their options and what is in the best interests of their children and moving away from costly, adversarial state imposed solutions towards mutually agreed family based agreements will deliver better outcomes for children.

Child Maintenance: Arrears

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of parents, who now reside outside Northern Ireland, who are currently in child maintenance payment arrears; and (ii) the total amount of arrears owed to his Department by these parents.

(AQW 12169/11-15)

Mr McCausland:

- i) As at 31 March 2012, 2024 parents who now reside outside Northern Ireland currently owe arrears of child maintenance.
- (ii) The total amount of arrears owed by parents residing outside of Northern Ireland at the end of March 2012 was £14.1m.

Child Maintenance financial and accounting records are maintained on the Department's Child Maintenance Computer Systems. There are two child support systems in operation and both systems have a long history of problems. As a result of the underlying problems in the IT systems, the Department is unable to generate a complete and accurate listing of individual cases. Consequently the information supplied cannot be validated. The accuracy and completeness of this information is therefore limited.

Child Maintenance: Arrears

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister for Social Development (i) how he ensures that people with child maintenance payment arrears, who have relocated to an address outside Northern Ireland, are pursued; and (ii) what links his Department has with agencies in other EU countries in relation to pursuing arrears.

(AQW 12171/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Where people with child maintenance arrears relocate to an address outside Northern Ireland but remain habitually resident (or are treated as being habitually resident) in the United Kingdom my Department will continue to employ the full range of enforcement powers at its disposal to actively pursue the outstanding arrears.

It may be possible for the parent with care to make an application for a Reciprocal Enforcement of Maintenance Order to their local magistrate in order to obtain maintenance and/or outstanding child maintenance arrears from those who relocate outside the Department's jurisdiction.

- (ii) My Department has no direct links with agencies in other EU countries in relation to pursuing arrears.

Child Maintenance: Administration

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister for Social Development what historical arrangements have existed within his Department in relation to charging parents for the administration of child maintenance payments; and to detail the rationale for not collecting such fees at present.

(AQW 12173/11-15)

Mr McCausland: There is provision for the charging of fees in the Child Support (Northern Ireland) Order 1991. Fees were charged from the establishment of the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency (CSA) in 1993 until 1995. Due to well publicised problems with the complexity and delivery of the initial Child Support Scheme charging of fees was temporarily suspended from 18 April 1995. Charges for fees up to and including 17 April 1995, remained payable. As performance and service delivery continued to fall a long way short of expectations, in April 2001 the power to charge fees was revoked. Outstanding fees already charged up to 17 April 1995 were still payable until 5 August 2008, when all outstanding fees were extinguished.

Child Maintenance: Arrears

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the amount of child maintenance payment arrears as a result of his Department's charge for DNA testing; and (ii) the level of arrears recovery in each month of the last three years, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 12174/11-15)

Mr McCausland:

- (i) Information detailing the amount of outstanding fees owed by non-resident parents in respect of DNA testing is not available for both of the current child maintenance schemes. However, in relation to the statutory scheme introduced in 2003, as at 31 March 2012, fees in excess of £54,000 were owed by non-resident parents in respect of DNA testing.
- (ii) The level of arrears recovery in each month of 2009/ 2010 and 2010/ 2011 is detailed in the table below. Data for the financial year ending March 2012 has not yet been validated. It has not been possible to provide a breakdown of this information by constituency.

Child Maintenance Arrears Collected in Month

2009/2010		2010/2011	
April	252,586	April	225,404
May	296,503	May	239,289
June	278,236	June	225,276
July	254,211	July	197,493
August	239,578	August	212,036
September	252,135	September	201,687
October	268,343	October	231,181
November	272,065	November	218,329
December	275,920	December	193,608
January	223,167	January	202,853
February	205,537	February	226,766
March	249,110	March	267,520
Total	3,067,391	Total	2,641,442

Areas at Risk Pilot Programme

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to the Areas at Risk Pilot Programme, whether he has taken into account the overall evaluation of the Programme, which found that the timescale was unrealistic in achieving sustainable development for those areas identified.

(AQW 12200/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Areas at Risk programme is a short term initiative providing funding for up to two years, with its remit to increase community cohesion and capacity, strengthen community infrastructure and to afford communities the opportunity to achieve a more sustainable approach to community participation and development. My Department commissioned Community Evaluation Northern Ireland (CENI) to conduct an evaluation of the pilot programme and this was fully considered in the development of the way forward for the pilot.

The evaluation found that the Projects involved in the Areas at Risk believed that the timescale should be extended. However, there remains other areas that have not yet benefited from this intervention. Therefore in order to maximise the resources available and to target the maximum number of areas possible given the limitation of the budget the timescale for the programme has not been extended.

Areas at Risk Pilot Programme

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to the Areas at Risk Pilot Programme, what safeguards were put in place to prevent the pilot areas returning to Areas at Risk after 31 March 2012, given that the short timescale was identified as a major inhibitor to the projects.

(AQW 12201/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Areas at Risk programme is intended to be a short term initiative, with its remit, to increase community cohesion and capacity, strengthen community infrastructure and to afford communities the opportunity to achieve a more sustainable approach to community participation and development.

The very purpose of this short term programme, which has benefitted 27 areas to date, is to assist and empower communities to enable them to strengthen their capacity which would allow them to work towards sustainability and thus prevent further decline. It was further expected that alternate funding avenues would be sourced, particularly from those organisations with primary responsibility for programmes and or projects.

Areas at Risk Pilot Programme

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Social Development, given that some areas in the Areas at Risk Pilot Programme have advanced to the final stages of significant capital investment and that his Department has withdrawn funding from them, for his assessment of the benefits of continuing funding in these cases to achieve a positive legacy through economic and community investment and reduced dependency on the public purse.

(AQW 12204/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Through short term funding of up to two years, the Areas at Risk programme afforded projects the opportunity to increase community cohesion and capacity and strengthen community infrastructure. It was expected that this period of support would enable communities to build relationships with those organisations with lead responsibility for delivering services and programmes that seek to achieve economic and community investment in their areas. Through this process it was further expected that alternate funding avenues would be opened, particularly from those organisations with primary responsibility for programmes and capital projects.

Officials from my Department have recently completed a review of the Areas at Risk pilot programme and I have approved the recommendations from that review. In order to maximise the limited resources available and to support as many deprived areas as possible consideration will not be given to any extensions to funding and new applications will not be accepted from areas that have already benefitted from the Programme

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Rogers asked the Minister for Social Development how many people in each constituency are in receipt of Disability Living Allowance.

(AQW 12244/11-15)

Mr McCausland: At February 2012, there was a total of 188,642 people receiving Disability Living Allowance. The table shows the breakdown of this total, based on Parliamentary Constituency-

Parliamentary Constituency	Number of DLA Recipients
Belfast East	7,774
Belfast North	13,266
Belfast South	7,709
Belfast West	17,014
East Antrim	7,442
East Londonderry	7,864
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	9,680
Foyle	14,460
Lagan Valley	8,854
Mid Ulster	10,363
Newry and Armagh	12,316
North Antrim	8,948
North Down	6,345

Parliamentary Constituency	Number of DLA Recipients
South Antrim	9,116
South Down	11,999
Strangford	8,738
Upper Bann	12,937
West Tyrone	12,983
No Constituency Specified	834
Total	188,642

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.

Unemployment

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the total number of workless households and the percentage of households where no one has ever worked.

(AQW 12246/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In the most recent period for which information is available (April – June 2011), the Labour Force Survey estimated that there were 121,000 households in Northern Ireland in which no adult worked. Of the estimated 569,000 households in Northern Ireland, 12,000 households (2.0 per cent) were households where no adult has ever worked.

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Arm's-length Bodies and Quangos

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the current number of arm's-length bodies and quangos that are attached to his Department; and how this figure compares with the number in (i) 2008; (ii) 2009; (iii) 2010; and (iv) 2011.

(AQW 12290/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information sought for each year is set out in the last four editions of the OFMDFM Public Appointments Annual Report available from their website or via the following link:-

<http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/index/making-government-work/public-appointments/public-appointments-annual-reports.htm>

Newmarket Street Area of Coleraine: Social Housing

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development what social housing provision is being assessed for the Newmarket Street area of Coleraine.

(AQW 12319/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The five year housing need projection up to 2016 has identified a need for 230 units for Coleraine Town. Newmarket Street is located within the Coleraine Central Local Housing Area and has a projected need for 58 units of mainly older person accommodation.

Housing Associations are actively seeking an appropriate site to address this identified need

North Antrim Area: Homelessness

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the levels of homelessness in the North Antrim area, broken down by people who are (i) in sheltered accommodation; (ii) not in sheltered accommodation; and (iii) homeless, but sleeping at friends' houses.

(AQW 12324/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I assume the Member is referring to temporary accommodation which is offered by the Housing Executive to any homeless applicant with an apparent priority need pending their homelessness assessment; and to those who are accepted as full duty homeless applicants pending permanent re-housing.

Table 1 below details the number of homeless acceptances for the Housing Executive District Office areas of Ballymoney, Ballymena and Ballycastle for the last financial year.

Table 2 below details the number of people provided with temporary accommodation during the last financial year. The Housing Executive only holds statistics for those who accept temporary accommodation. They do not record those who refuse temporary accommodation or make their own temporary accommodation arrangements.

Table 1 – Homeless acceptances 2011/12

Housing Executive District Office	Ballycastle	Ballymena	Ballymoney	Total
Accepted as Homeless	62	359	103	524

Table 2 – Temporary Accommodation Provision 2011/12

Housing Executive District Office	Housing Executive Hostels	Voluntary Hostels	Private Sector Accommodation	Total
Ballycastle	0	1	22	23
Ballymena	20	85	93	198
Ballymoney	5	10	30	45
Total	25	96	145	266

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Housing Executive Homes: Heating

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive homes, broken down by district council area, are reliant on (i) the basic electricity supply; and (ii) storage heaters such as Economy 7, for their sole source of heating; and when these heating systems will be replaced to reduce the likelihood of fuel poverty.

(AQW 12353/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not routinely collate information by district council area. In relation to (i) the Housing Executive is not aware of any homes reliant on a basic electricity supply to heat their homes. In relation to (ii) the Housing Executive has been implementing a programme to replace electrical heating systems, including Economy 7 systems, with a more efficient heating system and as a result they have reduced the number of their homes with electrical heating systems, including Economy 7, from a peak of 26,000 to the current level of 8,432. The table below gives details of these properties by NIHE district office area.

District Office Area	Electrical Heating systems including Economy 7
East Belfast	369
North Belfast	809
Shankill	241
South Belfast	293
West Belfast	412
Antrim	86
Ballycastle	9
Ballymena	318
Ballymoney	53
Carrickfergus	89
Coleraine	477
Larne	241
Newtownabbey 1	405
Newtownabbey 2	192
Armagh	170
Banbridge	76
Dungannon	60

District Office Area	Electrical Heating systems including Economy 7
Fermanagh	100
Lurgan Brownlow	486
Newry	218
Portadown	185
Bangor	408
Castlereagh	980
Downpatrick	306
Lisburn Antrim St.	397
Lisburn Dairyfarm	17
Newtownards	357
Collon Terrace	212
Cookstown	35
Limavady	103
Magherafelt	45
Omagh	40
Strabane	17
Waterloo Place	98
Waterside	128
Northern Ireland Total	8432

There are currently 2,851 and 1,131 dwellings with electrical heating systems, including Economy 7, included in the Housing Executive's heating replacement programmes for 2012/13 and 2013/14 respectively. The number of actual starts will depend on funding and progress with individual scheme designs/approvals.

Housing Executive tenants in houses and low rise flats are offered gas central heating if situated in a gas supply area and oil central heating if outside a gas supply area. A number of tenants have refused a conversion from electric to oil for economic/affordability reasons. In high rise flats where gas and oil are not feasible new electric heating systems are currently being piloted in South Belfast and Lisburn where initial reaction from tenants has been positive

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Doon Park, Killynure Road, Carryduff: Window Replacement

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development (i) whether there is a scheme to replace windows in Housing Executive properties in Doon Park, Killynure Road, Carryduff; and (ii) when this scheme will commence.

(AQW 12382/11-15)

Mr McCausland: As part of the Housing Executive's review of double glazing, I have agreed what category groups and schemes should now proceed. The scheme in Doon Park, Killynure Road, Carryduff should commence in autumn 2012.

North Antrim Area: Community Groups

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development how much funding his Department has awarded to community groups in the North Antrim area, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 12434/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department has awarded £3,803,675.03 in the last five years to community groups in the North Antrim area. Please see attached Annex A which provides a breakdown of funding for each of the last five years.

Annex A**North Antrim Community Groups Funding**

Community Group	Project	2007/08 £	2008/09£	2009/10£	2010/11£	2011/12£
Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund						
Ballykeel Business Development Ltd	Ballykeel Business Centre – Phase 2 Extensions	6,707.00				
Ballykeel Environmental Action Team (BEAT) Ltd	Ballykeel Community Co-ordinator	33,160.55	33,662.05	34,623.53	28,311.58	
Ballykeel Environmental Action Team (BEAT) Ltd	BEAT (NI) Ltd	73,373.28	65,746.33	60,492.00	83,663.89	70,508.62
Braid Amateur Boxing Club	Braid ABC	11,213.28	12,481.34	12,481.34	7,092.81	5,699.00
Ballee Community Association	Ballee Pre Schools	22,590.35	44,170.82	66,236.37	11,341.14	
Children's High Intensity Play care Services (CHIPS)	After School Club and Summer Scheme	91,455.20	90,262.61	90,916.71	88,034.24	
Children's High Intensity Play care Services (CHIPS)	Feasibility Study		5,000.00			
BB Community Transport	BB Community Transport Pilot Scheme	5,850.00				
Ballee Flute Band	Ballee School of Music		7,456.00			
Ballee Community Association	Ballee After Schools	35,058.25	40,809.92	36,530.02	22,937.93	
Ballee Community Association	Ballee Childcare Facility	80,028.63	162,090.18			
Ballee Community Association	Ballee Community Childcare Services				41,886.71	14,406.39
Ballee Community Association	Ballee Community Development Officer		28,834.43	42,636.41	42,922.49	14,406.44
Ballee Community Association	Ballee Entrance Features			56,318.88		

Community Group	Project	2007/08 £	2008/09£	2009/10£	2010/11£	2011/12£
Ballee Community Association	Ocean Youth Trust	1,426.28				
Ballee Community Association	Ballee Visual Art			1,606.00		
Ballee Community Association	Ballee Learning Support Programme			3,480.00		
Ballee Community Association	Bringing Ballee Together 60+ Luncheon Club					
Ballykeel 1 Community Association	Improve your English & Maths		1,112.00	4,225.64		
Ballykeel 1 Community Association	Be Safe at Home		2,045.00			
Ballykeel 1 Community Association	Challenging Anti-Social Behaviour			1,000.00		
Ballykeel 1 Community Association	Ballykeel Mature Adults Interactive Luncheon Club			6,800.00	10,200.00	5,211.00
Total Neighbourhood Renewal Investment		360,862.82	493,670.68	417,346.90	336,390.79	110,231.45
Dunclug Dedicated Community Chest Fund						
Dunclug & District Residents Association	W5 Day Trip	382.48				
Dunclug & District Residents Association	Fire Service LIFE Project		2,500.00			
Dunclug & District Residents Association	Cross Community Christmas Event		811.00			
Parents and Kids Together (PAKT)	Corrymeela Residential	6,029.76				
Parents and Kids Together (PAKT)	Corrymeela Programme		15,384.12			
Northend United Youth Football Club	07/08 football Season	2,396.47				

Community Group	Project	2007/08 £	2008/09£	2009/10£	2010/11£	2011/12£
Northend United Youth Football Club	Easter Tournament	5,000.00				
Northend United Youth Football Club	Scotland Cup International Festival			7,590.00		
Dunclug Partnership	Media Skills	5,845.56	10,764.99	4,002.96		
Dunclug Partnership	Analysis of Ethnic Minorities	8,613.44	4,003.75			
Dunclug Partnership	Shared Future Concert II	2,166.88		1,030.00		
Dunclug Partnership	Community Cohesion					
Dunclug Partnership	Development of a Strategic Plan				2,193.40	
Total Dedicated Community Chest		30,434.59	33,463.86	12,622.96	2,193.40	
Northern Ireland Housing Executive Funding						
Arroy Community Association	Shared Neighbourhood Programme					4,500.00
Castle Community Association	Shared Neighbourhood Programme					6,342.00
Liscolman	Re-Imaging project					5,000.00
Mosside	Re-Imaging project		1,050.00			
Ballymena Inter Ethnic Forum	Bi-lingual Advocacy				2,000.00	
Ballymena Inter Ethnic Forum	Ballykeel Re-Imaging project					2,000.00
Dervock & District Community Association	Re-Imaging project			2,000.00		
Glebeside	Better Bonfires Initiative					500.00
Total Northern Ireland Housing Executive		0.00	1,050.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	18,342.00
Voluntary and Community Unit Funding						
Programme						
Community Investment Fund		64,335.00	74,937.00			

Community Group	Project	2007/08 £	2008/09£	2009/10£	2010/11£	2011/12£
Community Investment Fund 2009/2012				68,974.40	66,226.00	65,564.00
Community Volunteering Scheme 2006/2010		33,054.40	33,985.00	12,295.00		
Community Support Programme		198,409.00	203,076.00	248,311.00	227,257.00	209,274.12
Areas at Risk Pilot Programme			166,907.36	202,959.30	90,395.00	
Volunteer Bureaux Initiative 2010 - 2011					10,761.00	6,345.00
Total Voluntary And Community Unit		295,798.40	478,905.36	532,539.70	394,639.00	281,183.12
Total Dsd Funding Allocated Per Year		687,095.81	1,007,089.90	964,509.56	735,223.19	409,756.57

Arm's-length Bodies: Pension Schemes

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Social Development whether all the pension schemes that are in place across his Department's arm's-length bodies are exclusively Consumer Price Indexed, including the benefits that were earned by contributions before the change from the Retail Price Index; and to detail any exceptions.

(AQW 12437/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Department has 3 arm's length bodies - the NI Housing Executive, ILEX Urban Regeneration Company and the Charity Commission for NI. The Housing Executive and ILEX are members of the Local Government Pension Scheme for Northern Ireland (LGPSNI), which is administered by the NI Local Government Officers Superannuation Committee. The Charity Commission does not currently have a pension scheme in place.

Prior to April 2011, LGPSNI increases were based on the Retail Price Index (RPI), but from April 2011 the Consumer Price Index (CPI) replaced the RPI as the measure of inflation used to apply cost of living increases. For active members of the scheme and for those who left after 1 April 2011, all accrued benefits will be increased in line with the Consumer Price Index (CPI). For deferred and pensioner members who left prior to 1 April 2011, the increase in their benefits will be measured by RPI up to 31 March 2011 and by CPI thereafter.

Arm's-length Bodies and Quangos: Remuneration

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the current total annual cost of remuneration for board members at his Department's arm's-length bodies and quangos.

(AQW 12455/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The total cost of remuneration in 2011-12 for board members in this Department's 3 executive arm's length bodies is detailed in the following table.

Body	Remuneration Costs of Board members (2011-12 Financial Year)
ILEX Urban Regeneration Company	£96,614
NI Housing Executive	£122,539
Charity Commission for NI	£18,000
Overall Total	£237,153

Quangos

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to reduce (i) the number of QUANGOs; and (ii) the operational cost of QUANGOs.

(AQW 12462/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department has immediate plans to abolish 2 of its 7 "Quangos". Other Bodies are also subject to review.

The operation of all Quangos is subject to value for money considerations on an individual basis. For example there has been a fundamental review of the NI Housing Executive, the outcome of which will be presented to the Assembly in due course.

Oaklee Housing Association: Average Rent

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development what is the average rent paid by tenants of Oakley Housing Association for a two-bedroom property.

(AQW 12508/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The average rent paid by Oaklee tenants for a two-bedroomed property is £67.87

Housing Executive: Double-glazing Scheme and Boiler-replacement Scheme

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Social Development, given the concerns he has raised in relation to the double-glazing scheme and the pilot boiler replacement scheme, for his assessment of the Housing Executive's ability to delivering further energy efficiency measures.

(AQW 12516/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive are the Home Energy Conservation Authority for Northern Ireland, and have a long and proven track record in delivering grant funded schemes to tackle fuel poverty through energy efficiency measures. For example, my Department's Boiler Replacement pilot scheme was very successful. It assisted approximately 1700 people to have their boilers replaced with newer, more efficient ones and provided employment for over 640 small installers. I have also announced on 25 May 2012, a £12million boiler replacement scheme to improve energy efficiency in 16,000 homes across Northern Ireland. This will be run by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and applications will be invited from September 2012.

Fermanagh District Council Area: Social and Affordable Homes

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Social Development how many (i) social; and (ii) affordable homes he envisages being built in the Fermanagh District Council area, as part of the Programme for Government target; and what potential sites have been identified in the area for social or affordable housing.

(AQW 12519/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Programme for Government target is to deliver 8,000 new social and affordable homes by 2015, broken down as 6,000 social and 2,000 affordable homes.

The Table below sets out the Social Housing Development Programme for the Fermanagh District Council area for the 3 year period 2012/13 – 2014/15.

Programme Year	Housing Association	Location	Dwellings	Need Group
2012/13	Ark	PSNI Site, 9 Main St, Belcoo	10	General
2012/13	Clanmil	Ballaghmore Heights Backlands, Enniskillen	14	General
2013/14	Apex Housing	Belleek	7	General
2014/15	Apex Housing	Cavandale Phase 2 Enniskillen	10	General

Thirty nine units were also completed between April 2011- March 2012, with fifty three units on site at March 2012.

Affordable homes are demand led and cannot be identified as the member requests.

Alongside the sites noted above, the former MOD site at Grosvenor Barracks in Enniskillen has been acquired for the provision of social/affordable housing and has the capacity to accommodate approximately 200 units.

Girdwood Site: Social Housing

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) on which date his Department informed the Northern Ireland Housing Executive that phase one (100 houses) of the former Girdwood Barracks site in North Belfast would no longer proceed as part of the Social Housing Development Programme; and (ii) the explanation that was given for this decision.

(AQW 12522/11-15)

Mr McCausland: On 24 June 2011 the Housing Executive was advised that I had formally approved the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) for 2011/12.

That approval transferred the site at Girdwood to the section of the Programme reserved for "strategic sites" such as Titanic Quarter and the Sirocco site, as this section lists those sites that will become available for social housing at some future date once more detailed plans for their development are available.

Girdwood Site: Meetings

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the names of individuals and organisations who attended meetings which he personally attended, excluding meetings he had with departmental officials, where the former Girdwood Barracks site, North Belfast, was discussed.

(AQW 12527/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In my capacity as Minister for Social Development I have attended meetings with representatives from local schools and the Mater Hospital where the former Girdwood Barracks site was discussed.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive: Average Rent

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development what is the average rent paid by Northern Ireland Housing Executive tenants for a two-bedroom property.

(AQW 12544/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive does not calculate rents based on the number of bedrooms but on the number of bed spaces. Typically a two-bedroom house could have two, three or four bed spaces.

The table below details typical weekly rents by the number of bed spaces across property types.

Property Type	Number of bed spaces		
	2	3	4
Detached House	£58.00	£64.62	£66.28
Semi detached house	£53.02	£59.65	£61.31
Terrace house	£51.37	£58.00	£59.65
Flat/maisonette (2 storey or less)	£43.08	£49.71	£51.37
Flat/maisonette (3 storey or more)	£38.11	£44.74	£46.40

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Bloomfield, Bangor: Average Rent

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development what rent is currently being paid by Housing Executive tenants for bungalows in Bloomfield, Bangor.

(AQW 12563/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The weekly rent payable for the respective bungalows within Bloomfield are as follows:

	Rent
Balloo Road	£54.68
Bloomfield Road South	£53.02
Ballyree Drive	£49.71

The differential in rental levels reflects differences in layout and specification within the dwellings.

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.

Long Streets, North Belfast: Vesting

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development to outline his plans for decamping residents of the Long Streets, North Belfast over the next three years when the area is being developed.

(AQW 12570/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Notices of intention to vest have been served in the area effective from 13 April 2012 and I am now considering the objections received and the need, or otherwise for a Public Inquiry.

There are a number of new build schemes programmed to complete, e.g. Parkside, Coulter's previous car park at 25 – 49 Antrim Road and Whitewell, which may be available for clearance. In addition there will be on-going re-lets available in the neighbouring

estates which will assist with any re-housing of tenants. This will all be taken into account when the Housing Executive draw up clearance plans for the area which will of course be subject to community consultation.

Girdwood Site: Social Housing

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development how many social houses are scheduled to be built on the former Girdwood Barracks site, North Belfast in the (i) 2012/13; (ii) 2013/14; and (iii) 2014/15 financial years.

(AQW 12572/11-15)

Mr McCausland: On 21 May I was pleased to announce the agreement of a concept plan for the much needed regeneration of the Girdwood site in the heart of North Belfast.

The concept plan for Girdwood provides for the regeneration of the site to deliver a range of shared development opportunities to support social, sports, economic and residential development. The site will provide: a multi-use pitch for football, gaelic and rugby; an indoor sports arena; a commercial building to house a range of business and social economy enterprises; and, residential development.

The residential element of this concept plan will be delivered by a Housing Association with the support of the Housing Executive. The actual number of units to be developed will ultimately be dictated by housing need and of course will also be dependent on planning permission. In that respect it is too early to say exactly what will be delivered and when.

Disabled Facilities Grants

Ms Ruane asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the level of funding allocated to Disabled Facilities Grants in the last year.

(AQW 12590/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The total Housing Executive expenditure on Disabled Facilities Grants in the last financial year, 2011/12, was £13,564,463.

Housing Executive Properties: Carbon Monoxide Monitors

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) how many Housing Executive houses are fitted with carbon monoxide monitors; (ii) the cost of fitting the monitors; (iii) how many of the monitors have been replaced or are due to be replaced; and (iv) why the replacements were necessary.

(AQW 12593/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that in relation to (i) a total of 27,273 carbon monoxide detectors have been installed in Housing Executive homes as at 7 June 2012; (ii) the cost of supplying and fitting each detector was £29.50; (iii) of these, approximately 13,500 detectors need to be replaced and to date 7,401 have been replaced at no extra cost to the Housing Executive and (iv) the replacements are necessary because the Housing Executive specification requires the detectors to meet EU standards (BS50291:2001) and a batch of detectors which were supplied to their contractors did not meet this requirement. The detectors in question surpass the previous standard (BS7860:1996) and are acceptable to sell in the United Kingdom but do not meet the EU standard.

Photography

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 11009/11-15, to detail the number of photographs taken by publicly funded photographers in which he has appeared in his Ministerial role and which included a member of (i) Sinn Féin; (ii) the SDLP; (iii) the UUP; and (iv) the Alliance, who was not there in their Ministerial role, and which have been released to the media or published on the Executive's Flickr account.

(AQW 12630/11-15)

Mr McCausland: i) One, (ii) One, (iii) Three, (iv) NIL. [Prior to all visits my Private Office contacts local constituency offices to make representatives aware of the visit.]

Customer First Model

Ms Boyle asked the Minister for Social Development, in light of the concerns raised that the Customer First Model will have a detrimental impact on vulnerable user groups in the West District, whether he would suspend the planned roll-out of the Model, in that area, until an equality impact assessment has been carried out on its effect upon staff and customers.

(AQW 12637/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I am aware the Social Security Agency recently announced the continued roll-out of the Customer First initiative across the rest of the Social Security Working Age Network.

On 8 March 2011, my predecessor, Minister Alex Attwood advised the Assembly on the outcome of the evaluation of the Social Security Agency's Customer First Pilot in what was previously known as North District.

The Evaluation report concluded that from an Equality perspective, there were no differential impacts for any of the Section 75 groupings for either customers or staff as a result of the new customer service delivery arrangements. Furthermore, the initiative had proven to deliver significant service improvements, which when rolled out would be made available to all customers of the Agency. I am therefore surprised why the member would suggest that vulnerable user groups in the west of Northern Ireland would suffer detrimental impact as this had not been shown to be the case for vulnerable customers in the east of the province.

Minister Attwood in concluding his statement indicated that the roll-out of Customer First would now be an operational matter for the Agency.

I have also been advised by senior Agency Officials that the Agency will continue to work with Trade Union Side and staff to consider measures which may militate against any adverse impact such as reasonable daily travelling distances. Agency officials will continue to work with local representatives to ensure they are kept informed as Customer First is rolled out.

Social Fund: Future of

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development if his Department has made any plans for the future of the Social Fund (AQW 12667/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In line with national plans for the reform of Social Fund, Northern Ireland and the other devolved administrations have been tasked with designing new discretionary support provision to replace Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans for living expenses and household. It is anticipated that within the passage of the Welfare Reform Bill (Northern Ireland) 2012 going through the Assembly, Social Fund will be abolished from April 2013.

At its meeting on the 26th April 2012, the Executive agreed to my Department developing new discretionary support and officials within my Department have been working on the development of a replacement scheme. To inform decision making, the Social Security Agency has commissioned the Social Fund Reform Research Study, which included consultation with a wide range of stakeholders about the nature of discretionary support they would wish to see in the future. Based on the findings from the research, work is ongoing on the design of the new scheme and associated eligibility criteria. The remaining elements of the current Social Fund, including regulated elements, will be incorporated within the new Universal Credit for delivery as customers migrate to the new benefit.

Housing Executive: Double-glazing Scheme

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development whether the double-glazing schemes for Housing Executive properties will be completed during this mandate.

(AQW 12707/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I have ensured that in the Programme for Government the Northern Ireland Executive gave a commitment that the thermal efficiency of all Housing Executive properties would be improved by 2014/15 through the provision of double glazing. However I also need to ensure that this programme delivers best value for money and the work is in line with industry standards. I therefore wrote to the Housing Executive's Chief Executive asking him to rigorously and urgently review this specification. The review will be completed urgently and will not have an impact on the target date of 2015, and although there may be slight delays while this is carried out, all homes will remain in the programme and no tenant who was promised double glazing will lose out. It is estimated that around 30,000 homes will be included in the Housing Executive's double glazing programme and this will be completed in the current CSR period.

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Minutes of Proceedings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 21 May 2012

The Assembly met at noon, 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 Social Democratic and Labour Party, Dr Alasdair McDonnell, that Mrs Dolores Kelly had been replaced as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. The Speaker also informed Members that Dr Alasdair McDonnell had nominated Mr Joe Byrne to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development with effect from 19 May 2012. The Speaker confirmed the appointment.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Statement - UK Audit of Retained Tissue Samples

The Minister of Justice, Mr David Ford, made a statement regarding the UK Audit of Retained Tissue Samples, following which he replied to questions.

4. Assembly Business (Cont'd)

4.1 Motion - Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Thomas Buchanan replace Mr Jimmy Spratt as a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister; and that Mr Robin Newton replace Mr Paul Givan as a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

*Mr P Weir
Lord Morrow*

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

5. Private Members' Business

5.1 Motion - Reassessment of People in Receipt of Incapacity Benefit

Proposed:

That this Assembly expresses concern that the reassessment process for people who are moving from Incapacity Benefit to Employment and Support Allowance is resulting in many people being unfairly deemed 'fit for work' and losing their benefit; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to review urgently the reassessment process to avoid both the undue distress it is causing and the additional burden it is placing on the public purse by triggering so many appeals.

*Mr F McCann
Mr A Maskey
Mr M Brady*

5.2 Amendment

Proposed:

After 'Allowance' insert:

‘, with no cognisance being taken of their medical records,’

Mr M Copeland

Mr R Swann

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made** without division.

The Question being put, the Motion, as amended, was **carried** without division.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

6. Question Time

6.1 Environment

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of the Environment, Mr Alex Attwood.

6.2 Finance and Personnel

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

7. Private Members' Business (Cont'd)

7.1 Motion - Prison Service Archived Material

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes the importance of the role played by the Prison Service in the history of Northern Ireland and pre-partition Ireland; recognises the wealth of material of historical significance owned and held by the Prison Service and the educational importance of this material; and calls on the Minister of Justice to take all the necessary steps to ensure that this collection is fully archived, that its totality is maintained and that it is as accessible as possible to the general public.

Miss M McIlveen

Mr P Weir

Mr P Givan [R]

Lord Morrow

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

8. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 4.35pm.

Mr William Hay

The Speaker

21 May 2012

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 16 - 21 May 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
 - Telling Them Why - An inspection of the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland's giving of reasons for its decisions (DOJ)
5. Assembly Reports
 - Report on the Legislative Consent Motion: UK Finance Bill (Air Passenger Duty) (NIA 53/11-15) (Committee for Finance and Personnel)
6. Statutory Rules
 - S.R. 2012/184 The Student Fees (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DEL)
 - S.R. 2012/188 The Penalty Notices (Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011) (Enforcement of Fines) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOJ)
 - S.R. 2012/196 The Durham Street and Hamill Street - Killen Street, Belfast (Stopping-Up) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)

For Information Only:

 - S.R. 2012/189 The Magistrates' Courts (Amendment) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOJ)
 - S.R. 2012/190 The Magistrates' Courts (Declarations of Parentage) (Amendment) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOJ)
 - S.R. 2012/194 The Parking Places (Disabled Persons' Vehicles) (Amendment No.3) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
 - S.R. 2012/195 The Waiting Restrictions (Lisburn) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
 - S.R. 2012/197 The Control of Traffic (Belfast City Centre) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
 - S.R. 2012/198 The Bus Lanes (Belfast City Centre) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
 - S.R. 2012/199 The Waiting Restrictions (Belfast City Centre) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
 - S.R. 2012/200 The Cycle Routes (Amendment No.3) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
 - S.R. 2012/201 The Parking Places on Roads (Coaches) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
 - S.R. 2012/202 The Parking Places on Roads (Belfast City Centre) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
 - S.R. 2012/203 The Penalty Charges (Prescribed Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
 - Consultation on the Provision of Performance and Other Information About Pupils and Schools (DE)

9. Departmental Publications

- Northern Ireland Medical and Training Agency Annual Report 2010-2011 (DHSSPS)

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 22 May 2012

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

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Public Petition

2.1 Public Petition - Unison, Causeway Branch, Petition to Save Acute Services Including Accident and Emergency

Mr Adrian McQuillan was granted leave, in accordance with Standing Order 22, to present a Public Petition relating to the Unison, Causeway Branch, Petition to Save Acute Services Including Accident and Emergency.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Statement - Reform of Northern Ireland Credit Unions

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mrs Arlene Foster, made a statement on the Reform of Northern Ireland Credit Unions, following which she replied to questions.

4. Private Members' Business

4.1 Motion - Foras na Gaeilge Proposed Funding Model

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes with concern the effects that the new funding model proposed by Foras na Gaeilge will have on Irish language organisations; expresses concern about the nature of the consultation process; and calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to review these proposals in view of her Department's emerging Irish Language Strategy.

*Mr D Bradley
Mrs K McKeivitt
Mr P McGlone*

Debate ensued.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

4.2 Motion - Under-Occupation Penalty

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes with concern the under-occupation penalty provision within proposed Welfare Reform legislation which has the potential to make many people homeless; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to outline the measures that he intends to put in place to mitigate the impact of this provision.

*Mr F McCann
Mr A Maskey
Mr M Brady*

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.30pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm with the Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) in the Chair.

5. Question Time

5.1 Social Development

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Social Development, Mr Nelson McCausland.

5.2 Justice

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Justice, Mr David Ford.

6. Private Members' Business (Cont'd)

6.1 Motion - Under-Occupation Penalty (Cont'd)

Debate resumed on the Motion.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

7. Adjournment

Mr Chris Hazzard spoke to his topic on the environmental impact of the ongoing neglect of Ballyhorgan/Bishopscourt, Co. Down.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 4.34pm.

Mr William Hay

The Speaker

22 May 2012

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 22 May 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
 - Legislative Consent Memorandum Financial Services Bill (DETI)
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
 - For Information Only:**
 - S.R. 2012/193 The Cycle Routes (Amendment No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
 - S.R. 2012/204 The Road Races (Mid-Antrim 150) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
 - S.R. 2012/205 The Road Races (Cairncastle Hill Climb) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
 - S.R. 2012/206 The Road Races (Bush, Dungannon) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
 - Research into Improving Attendance in Schools Serving Deprived Areas (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 of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as at 21 MAY 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	28.02.12
Pensions Bill NIA Bill 3/11-15	23.01.12	31.01.12	13.03.12	08.03.12	27.03.12	24.04.12	08.05.12	
/Budget Bill NIA Bill 4/11-15	13.02.12	14.02.12	N/A	N/A	20.02.12	21.02.12	27.02.12	20.03.12
Marine Bill NIA Bill 5/11-15	21.02.12	05.03.12	06.07.12					
Superannuation Bill 6/11-15	12.03.12	26.03.12	28.09.12					

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 28 May 2012

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Assembly Business

2.1 Motion - Extension of sitting

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 28 May 2012 be extended to no later than 7.30pm.

*Mr P Weir
Ms J McCann
Mr R Swann
Mr P Ramsey
Mr S Dickson*

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Statement - North-South Ministerial Council meeting in Special EU Programmes Sectoral Format

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson, made a statement regarding the North-South Ministerial Council meeting in Special EU Programmes Sectoral Format, following which he replied to questions.

3.2 Statement - Business Rates and Update on the Implementation of the Rates (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2012

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson, made a statement regarding the Business Rates and Update on the Implementation of the Rates (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2012, following which he replied to questions.

3.3 Statement - Brussels Engagement Programme and the Executive's 2012-13 European Priorities

The junior Minister, Mr Jonathan Bell, made a statement regarding the Brussels Engagement Programme and the Executive's 2012-13 European Priorities, following which he replied to questions.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

4. Question Time

4.1 Culture, Arts and Leisure

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín,

4.2 Regional Development

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Regional Development, Mr Danny Kennedy.

5. Executive Committee Business (Cont'd)

5.1 Legislative Consent Motion - Finance Bill

Proposed:

That this Assembly agrees that the provisions in clause 189 of, and Schedule 23 to, the Finance Bill as introduced in the House of Commons on 10 May 2012, dealing with the devolution of Northern Ireland long haul rates of air passenger duty, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

Minister of Finance and Personnel

Debate ensued.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

6. Committee Business

6.1 Motion - Report on Fuel Poverty

Proposed:

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Committee for Social Development on Fuel Poverty; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to implement its recommendations to ensure that a strategic, cross-departmental and cross-sectoral approach is adopted to reduce and prevent fuel poverty.

Chairperson, Committee for Social Development

Debate ensued.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

7. Private Members' Business

7.1 Motion - 'You Need to Know' Campaign

Proposed:

That this Assembly views with concern the findings of the Northern Ireland based research carried out by the National Autistic Society into the mental health of children with autism for the 'You Need to Know' campaign; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take on board the main findings of the research as his Department prepares to implement the Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

Mr D Bradley

Mr J Craig

Ms M Boyle

Mr K McCarthy

Mr R Hussey

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

8. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 6.59pm.

Mr William Hay

The Speaker

28 May 2012

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 23 - 28 May 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 Ards Borough Council (DCAL)
 - Retention and Disposal Schedule for Armagh City and District Council (DCAL)
 - Retention and Disposal Schedule for Ballymena Borough Council (DCAL)
 - Retention and Disposal Schedule for Ballymoney Borough Council (DCAL)
 - Retention and Disposal Schedule for Carrickfergus Borough Council (DCAL)
 - Retention and Disposal Schedule for Craigavon Borough Council (DCAL)
 - Retention and Disposal Schedule for Down District Council (DCAL)
 - Retention and Disposal Schedule for Fermanagh District Council (DCAL)
 - Retention and Disposal Schedule for Larne Borough Council (DCAL)
 - Retention and Disposal Schedule for Limavady Borough Council (DCAL)
 - Retention and Disposal Schedule for Lisburn City Council (DCAL)
 - Retention and Disposal Schedule for Newry and Mourne District Council (DCAL)
 - Retention and Disposal Schedule for Newtownabbey Borough Council (DCAL)
 - Retention and Disposal Schedule for Omagh District Council (DCAL)
 - Retention and Disposal Schedule for Strabane District Council (DCAL)
5. Assembly Reports
 - Report on the Inquiry into Developing the Northern Ireland Economy through Innovation, Research & Development (NIA 42/11-15) (Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment)
6. Statutory Rules
 - S.R. 2012/191 The Prison Service (Pay Review Body) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOJ)
 - S.R. 2012/207 The Route U5160, Carnbane Industrial Estate, Newry (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
 - S.R. 2012/208 The Route B30 Newry Road, Crossmaglen (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
 - S.R. 2012/209 The Marine Highway, Carrickfergus (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
 - S.R. 2012/210 The Longlands Avenue, Newtownabbey (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
 - S.R. 2012/211 The Browning Drive, Londonderry (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
 - S.R. 2012/212 The Misuse of Drugs (Designation) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DHSSPS)

- S.R. 2012/213 The Misuse of Drugs (Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DHSSPS)
- S.R. 2012/215 The Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 (Disclosure of Social Security Information) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DFP)
- S.R. 2012/217 The Valuation Tribunal (Amendment No.2) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOJ)
- Draft S.R. The Labour Relations Agency Arbitration Scheme (Jurisdiction) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DEL)
- Draft S.R. The Docking of Working Dogs' Tails (Certification and Identification) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DARD)

For Information Only:

- S.R. 2012/216 The Off-Street Parking (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)

7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 29 May 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 Second Legislative Consent Motion - Finance Bill

Proposed:

That this Assembly agrees that the provisions in clause 49 of, and Schedule 14 to, the Finance Bill as introduced in the House of Commons on 10 May 2012, dealing with gifts to the nation, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

3. Committee Business

3.1 Motion - Use of '0844' Numbers by GP Surgeries

Proposed:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the actions that he will take to bring to an end the practice of GP Surgeries using '0844' telephone numbers and the associated high call charges for patients.

Chairperson, Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Debate ensued.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

3.2 Motion - Clarification of the Intention of a Charge on Single Use Carrier Bags

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises that the intention of a charge on single use carrier bags is to reduce bag consumption and the impact on the environment; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to confirm that implementation of the levy, including its current and future scope and further increases, will be conducted in a way that focuses solely on these aims.

Chairperson, Committee for the Environment

3.3 Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after the first 'environment;' and insert:

'calls on the Minister of the Environment to clarify the scope and type of carrier bags that will be subject to charging, and to confirm that the list of exemptions will include environmentally friendly reusable bags; and further calls on the Minister

to take into consideration the concerns of the retail trade, so that the method of collecting the charge, the size of the charge and the point at which the charge is collected, are all taken into account.'

*Mr T Elliott
Mr D Kinahan*

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.21pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Speaker in the Chair.

4. Question Time

4.1 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.

4.2 Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Questions were put to, and answered by, the deputy First Minister, Mr Martin McGuinness. The junior Minister, Ms Martina Anderson, also answered a number of questions.

5. Executive Committee Business (Cont'd)

5.1 Statement - Public Expenditure: Provisional Outturn 2011/2012

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson, made a statement regarding Public Expenditure: Provisional Outturn 2011/2012, following which he replied to questions.

6. Committee Business (Cont'd)

6.1 Motion - Clarification of the Intention of a Charge on Single Use Carrier Bags (Cont'd)

Debate resumed on the Motion.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made** without division.

The Question being put, the Motion, as amended, was **carried** without division.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair,

7. Adjournment

Mr John Dallat spoke to his topic on the Causeway Hospital, Coleraine.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.11pm.

**Mr William Hay
The Speaker**

29 May 2012

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 29 May 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. 2012/192 The Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DFP)
 - S.R. 2012/218 The Quality of Bathing Water (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOE)
- For Information Only:**
- S.R. 2012/186 (C.16) The Building Regulations (2009 Amendment Act) (Commencement No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DFP)
 - S.R. 2012/187 (C.17) The Building Regulations (1979 Order) (Commencement No.3) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DFP)
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 of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as at 29 MAY 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	28.02.12
Pensions Bill NIA Bill 3/11-15	23.01.12	31.01.12	13.03.12	08.03.12	27.03.12	24.04.12	08.05.12	
/Budget Bill NIA Bill 4/11-15	13.02.12	14.02.12	N/A	N/A	20.02.12	21.02.12	27.02.12	20.03.12
Marine Bill NIA Bill 5/11-15	21.02.12	05.03.12	06.07.12					
Superannuation Bill 6/11-15	12.03.12	26.03.12	28.09.12					

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 11 June 2012

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Assembly Business

2.1 Royal Assent

The Speaker advised Members that Royal Assent had been signified on 1 June 2012 to the Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2012.

2.2 Resignation

The Speaker informed Members that he had received a letter from Ms Martina Anderson resigning as a Member of the Assembly with effect from Monday 11 June 2012. The Speaker advised that he had notified the Chief Electoral Officer, in accordance with Section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

2.3 Motion - Extension of sitting

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 11 June 2012 be extended to no later than 7.30pm.

Mr P Weir

Lord Morrow

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Statement - 'Pathways to Success' - The Strategy for Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training

The Minister for Employment and Learning, Dr Stephen Farry, made a statement regarding 'Pathways to Success' - The Strategy for Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training, following which he replied to questions.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

3.2 Legislative Consent Motion: Financial Services Bill

Proposed:

That this Assembly agrees that the provisions in Part 3 of the Financial Services Bill as introduced in the House of Commons on 10 May 2012, dealing with the transfer of functions in relation to Mutual Societies, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

3.3 Motion: Draft Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) (Exemption) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012**Proposed:**

That the draft Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) (Exemption) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Minister of the Environment

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

3.4 Motion: Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2012**Proposed:**

That the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Minister for Social Development

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

4. Committee Business

4.1 Motion: Report on the Inquiry into Developing the Northern Ireland Economy through Innovation, Research and Development**Proposed:**

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment on its Inquiry into Developing the Northern Ireland Economy through Innovation, Research and Development; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in conjunction with her Executive colleagues, to implement, as applicable, the recommendations contained therein.

Chairperson, Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Debate ensued.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

The debate was suspended for Question Time.

5. Question Time

5.1 Agriculture and Rural Development

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Mrs Michelle O'Neill.

5.2 Education

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Education, Mr John O'Dowd.

6. Committee Business (Cont'd)

6.1 Motion: Report on the Inquiry into Developing the Northern Ireland Economy through Innovation, Research and Development (Cont'd)

Debate resumed on the Motion.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

The Speaker took the Chair.

7. Private Members' Business

7.1 Motion - Review of Sentencing for the Murder of PSNI Officers

Proposed:

That this Assembly, in light of the sentences handed down to those responsible for the murder of Constable Stephen Carroll, calls for a review of sentencing for the murder of PSNI officers.

*Mr J Craig [R]
Mr P Givan
Lord Morrow
Mr S Anderson
Mr S Moutray*

7.2 Amendment

Proposed:

At end insert:

‘; and further calls for the establishment of an independent Sentencing Guidelines Council for Northern Ireland.’

*Mr A Maginness
Mr P McGlone*

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Amendment **fell** without division.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

8. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.50pm.

Mr William Hay
The Speaker

11 June 2012

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 30 May - 11 June 2012

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

- Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2012

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

3. Orders in Council

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

- Annual Report of the Lay Observer for Northern Ireland 2011 (DFP)
- Telling Them Why - An inspection of the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland giving of reasons for its decisions (DOJ)
- Child Poverty Act 2010 - Annual Report 'Improving Children's Life Chances - the First Year (OFMDFM)
- Report of the Proceedings of the Agricultural Wages Board for Northern Ireland under the Agricultural Wages (Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1997- for the year ended 31 December 2011 (DARD)
- Northern Ireland Estimates 2012-2013 (DFP)
- Northern Ireland Estimates 2010-2011 Statement of Excesses (DFP)
- Final Report of Commission Investigation Under Paragraph 11 of Schedule 9 of the Northern Ireland Act (Equality Commission for Northern Ireland)

5. Assembly Reports

- Nineteenth Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules (NIA 56/11-15)
- Report on the Transfer of Former Military and Security Sites to the Northern Ireland Executive and Report on Ilex Accounts (NIA 48/11-15)

6. Statutory Rules

- Draft S.R. 2012 The Welfare of Animals (Docking of Working Dogs' Tails and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DARD)
- Draft S.R 2012 Local Government Best Value (Exclusion of Non-commercial Considerations) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOE)
- S.R. 2012/219 The Safety of Sports Grounds (Fees and Appeals) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DCAL)
- S.R. 2012/229 The Foster Placement (Children) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DHSSPS)
- S.R 2012/230 The Fluorinated Greenhouse Gases (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOE)
- S.R. 2012/231 The Nitrates Action Programme (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOE/DARD)
- S.R. 2012/232 The Automatic Enrolment (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DSD)
- S.R 2012/235 The M2 Motorway at Whitla Street, Belfast (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 20112 (DRD)
- S.R 2012/237 The Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Automatic Enrolment) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DSD)

- S.R. 2012/238 The Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Automatic Enrolment) (Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DSD)

For Information Only:

- S.R.2012/220 The Waiting Restrictions (Larne) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
- S.R. 2012/221 The Roads (Speed Limit) (No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
- S.R. 2012/222 The Parking Places on Roads (Larne) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
- S.R. 2012/223 The Parking Places on Roads (Toome) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
- S.R. 2012/224 The Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Strabane) (Amendment No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
- S.R. 2012/225 The Loading Bays and Parking Places on Roads (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
- S.R. 2012/227 The Parking Places (Disabled Persons' Vehicles) (Amendment No.4) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
- S.R. 2012/228 The Road Races (Down Special Stages Rally) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

- Child Poverty Act 2010: Annual Report 'Improving Children's Life Chances – the First Year'
- (OFMDFM)
- Publication of Planning Appeals Commission Reports on the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 (BMAP) and Banbridge, Newry and Mourne Area Plan (DOE)
- Independent Review of Pseudomonas Aeruginosa Infection in Neonatal Units in Northern Ireland (DHSSPS)
- Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry: Terms of Reference, Chair and Acknowledgement Forum Panel Members (OFMDFM)

8. Consultation Documents

- Consultation on Draft Ten Year Breastfeeding Strategy for Northern Ireland 2012-2022 (DHSSPS)

9. Departmental Publications

- Youth Justice Agency Business Plan 2012-2013 (DOJ)

10. Agency Publications

Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland Corporate Plan 2012-15

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 12 June 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 First Stage - Historical Institutional Abuse Bill (NIA 7/11-15)

The deputy First Minister, Mr Martin McGuinness, introduced a Bill to make provision relating to an inquiry into institutional abuse between 1945 and 1995.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed (NIA 7/11-15).

2.2 Motion - Draft Local Government (Boundaries) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012

Proposed:

That the draft Local Government (Boundaries) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Minister of the Environment

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.30pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm with the Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) in the Chair.

3. Speaker's Business

The Deputy Speaker informed Members that Ms Jennifer McCann had taken up the office of junior Minister in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

4. Question Time

4.1 Employment and Learning

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Employment and Learning, Dr Stephen Farry.

4.2 Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mrs Arlene Foster.

The Speaker took the Chair.

5. Executive Committee Business (Cont'd)

5.1 Motion - Draft Local Government (Boundaries) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (Cont'd)

Debate resumed on the Motion.

The sitting was suspended at 6.00pm.

The sitting resumed at 6.04pm, with the Speaker in the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** (Division 1).

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

6. Committee Business

6.1 Motion - Amend Standing Order 49A

Proposed:

Leave out Standing Order 49A and insert –

‘49A. Membership of the Committee for Justice

A person cannot be a member of the statutory committee established to advise and assist the Minister of Justice if that person is a member of –

- (a) the Northern Ireland Policing Board;
- (b) a policing and community safety partnership; or
- (c) a district policing and community safety partnership;

and those words have the same meaning as in the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.’

Chairperson, Committee on Procedures

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support *nemine contradicente*.

7. Private Members’ Business

7.1 Motion - Mixed Housing

Proposed:

That this Assembly expresses serious concern at the current segregated housing proposals in the Girdwood Conceptual Master Plan, as announced on 21 May 2012; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to conduct a landmark review of segregation in housing to inform a strategy to promote and facilitate equality and sharing in housing in order to eliminate both discrimination and segregation, and to direct the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to promote and protect all housing as mixed.

*Mrs J Cochrane
Ms A Lo
Mr C Lyttle*

7.2 Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after ‘current’ and insert:

‘housing proposals in the Girdwood Conceptual Master Plan, as announced on 21 May 2012; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to restore the previous programme for at least 200 houses to be allocated according to objective need, and to bring forward proposals, as a central feature of the Housing Strategy, that give weight to the legitimate desire of many social housing tenants, and future applicants, to live in a shared community.’

*Mr M Durkan
Mr A Maginness*

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Amendment **fell** (Division 2).

The Question being put, the Motion was **negatived** (Division 3).

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

7.3 Motion - The Arms Trade Treaty

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the strong contribution made by the UK Government as one of the driving forces behind the Arms Trade Treaty; calls on the Prime Minister to publicly affirm his Government's commitment to the establishment of a robust human rights compliant Arms Trade Treaty in 2012; and further calls on the UK Government to insist, during the July 2012 formal negotiations, that the sale of arms shall not be authorised where there is a substantial risk that it will lead to serious violations of human rights or international humanitarian law.

Mr C McDevitt

Mr S Agnew

Ms J McCann

Mr J Wells

Mr J McCallister

Mr C Lyttle

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

8. Adjournment

Mr George Robinson spoke to his topic on the proposed closure of Her Majesty's Prison, Magilligan.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 9.49pm.

Mr William Hay

The Speaker

12 June 2012

Northern Ireland Assembly

12 June 2012

Division 1

Draft Local Government (Boundaries) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 - Motion

Proposed:

That the draft Local Government (Boundaries) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Minister of the Environment

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 59

Noes: 26

AYES

Mr S Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Bell, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mr M McGuinness, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Molloy, Mr Moutray, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Rt Hon P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Sheehan, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr S Anderson and Ms S Ramsey.

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Beggs, Mr Byrne, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hussey, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr McClarty, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McGlone, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr A Maginness, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Byrne and Mr Elliott

The Motion was **carried**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

12 June 2012

Division 2

Mixed Housing - Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'current' and insert:

'housing proposals in the Girdwood Conceptual Master Plan, as announced on 21 May 2012; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to restore the previous programme for at least 200 houses to be allocated according to objective need, and to bring forward proposals, as a central feature of the Housing Strategy, that give weight to the legitimate desire of many social housing tenants, and future applicants, to live in a shared community.'

Mr M Durkan

Mr A Maginness

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 17

Noes: 62

AYES

Mr Attwood, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Ramsey.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mrs D Kelly and Mr McDevitt.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Flanagan, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Molloy, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs Overend, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Rt Hon P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Sheehan, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms P Bradley and Mr Easton.

The following Member voted in both Lobbies and is therefore not counted in the result: Mr Agnew.

The Amendment **fell**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

12 June 2012

Division 3

Mixed Housing - Motion

Proposed:

That this Assembly expresses serious concern at the current segregated housing proposals in the Girdwood Conceptual Master Plan, as announced on 21 May 2012; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to conduct a landmark review of segregation in housing to inform a strategy to promote and facilitate equality and sharing in housing in order to eliminate both discrimination and segregation, and to direct the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to promote and protect all housing as mixed.

Mrs J Cochrane

Ms A Lo

Mr C Lyttle

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 18

Noes: 62

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Ramsey.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Lo and Mr McCarthy.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Flanagan, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Molloy, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs Overend, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Rt Hon P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Sheehan, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms P Bradley and Mr Easton.

The Motion was **negatived**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 12 June 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
 - Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland Annual Report 2011-2012 (DOJ)
 5. Assembly Reports
 6. Statutory Rules
 - S.R. 2012/226 The Police and Criminal Evidence (1989 Order) (Codes of Practice) (Temporary Modification to Code A) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOJ)
- For Information Only:**
- S.R. 2012/233 (C.19) The Pensions (2012 Act) (Commencement No.1) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DSD)
 - S.R. 2012/234 (C.20) The Pensions (2008 Act) (Commencement No.4) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DSD)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
 8. Consultation Documents
 9. Departmental Publications
 - General Dental Council Annual Report and Accounts 2011 (DHSSPS)
 10. Agency Publications
 11. Westminster Publications
 12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as at 12 June 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	28.02.12
Pensions Bill NIA Bill 3/11-15	23.01.12	31.01.12	13.03.12	08.03.12	27.03.12	24.04.12	08.05.12	01.06.12
/Budget Bill NIA Bill 4/11-15	13.02.12	14.02.12	N/A	N/A	20.02.12	21.02.12	27.02.12	20.03.12
Marine Bill NIA Bill 5/11-15	21.02.12	05.03.12	06.07.12					
Superannuation Bill 6/11-15	12.03.12	26.03.12	28.09.12					
Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill 7/11-15	12.06.12							

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 18 June 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

The Speaker informed Members that he had been notified by the Chief Electoral Officer that Ms Maeve McLaughlin had been returned as a Member of the Assembly for the Foyle constituency to fill the vacancy that resulted from the resignation of Ms Martina Anderson.

Ms McLaughlin had signed the Roll of Members on 18 June 2012 in the presence of the Speaker. The Speaker confirmed that the Member had signed the Roll and had entered her designation of identity.

2.1 Public Petition - 'Help Us Help Ourselves' Suicide Awareness and Prevention Project, Poleglass

Ms Jennifer McCann was granted leave, in accordance with Standing Order 22, to present a Public Petition relating to the 'Help Us Help Ourselves' Suicide Awareness and Prevention Project, Poleglass.

2.2 Public Petition - WAVE Trauma Centre Research

Mr Mike Nesbitt was granted leave, in accordance with Standing Order 22, to present a Public Petition relating to WAVE Trauma Centre Research.

3. Assembly Business

3.1 Motion - Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Colum Eastwood replace Mr John Dallat as a member of the Committee for the Environment.

Mrs K McKeivitt

Mr P Ramsey

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

3.2 Motion - Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Ms Caitriona Ruane replace Ms Jennifer McCann as a member of the Business Committee.

Mr P Maskey

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

4. Executive Committee Business

4.1 Motion - Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2012-13

Proposed:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £8,203,787,000, 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 the 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 £8,424,156,000,

be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the 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 3(b) and 3(a) of Table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2012-13 that was laid before the Assembly on 11 June 2012.

Minister of Finance and Personnel

Debate ensued on this Motion and the Motion on the 'Supply Resolution for the 2010-2011 Excess Votes'.

The debate was suspended for Question Time.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

5. Question Time

5.1 Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Questions were put to, and answered by, the First Minister, Rt Hon Peter Robinson. The junior Minister, Mr Jonathan Bell, also answered a number of questions.

5.2 Environment

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of the Environment, Mr Alex Attwood.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

6. Executive Committee Business (Cont'd)

6.1 Motion - Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2012-13 (Cont'd)

Debate resumed on both motions.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support *nemine contradicente*.

6.2 Motion - Supply Resolution for the 2010-2011 Excess Votes

Proposed:

That this Assembly approves that resources, not exceeding £13,004,918.26 be authorised for use by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department for Social Development, for the year ending 31 March 2011, as summarised for each Department in Part II of the 2010-2011 Statement of Excesses that was laid before the Assembly on 11 June 2012.

Minister of Finance and Personnel

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support *nemine contradicente*.

6.3 First Stage - Budget (No.2) Bill (NIA 8/11-15)

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 year ending 31st March 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 (including accruing resources) for the year ending 31st March 2013; to authorise the use for the public service of excess resources for the year ending 31st March 2011; and to repeal certain spent provisions.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

7. Committee Business

7.1 Motion - Appointment of the Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards

Proposed:

That this Assembly, in accordance with section 19(1) of the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, appoints Mr Douglas Bain as the Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards, for a term of five years from 17 September 2012.

*Chairperson, Committee on Standards and Privileges
Mr B McElduff, Assembly Commission*

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

8. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 4.14pm.

**Mr William Hay
The Speaker**

18 June 2012

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 13 - 18 June 2012

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
 - Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill (NIA Bill 7/11-15)
 - Budget (No.2) Bill (NIA Bill 8/11-15)
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
 - NIAO Retention and Disposal Schedule (DCAL)
5. Assembly Reports
 - Review of the Number of Members of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly and on the reduction in the Number of Northern Ireland Departments - Part 1 - Number of Members of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly (NIA 52/11-15) (Assembly and Executive Review Committee)
6. Statutory Rules
 - S.R. 2012/239 Pre-School Education in Schools (Admissions Criteria) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DE)
 - S.R. 2012/240 The Automatic Enrolment (Earnings Trigger and Qualifying Earnings Band) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DSD)
 - Draft SR 2012 The Tobacco Advertising and Promotion (Display of Prices) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DHSSPS)

For Information Only:

 - S.R. 2012/236 (C.21) The Pensions (2008 No.2 Act) (Commencement No.8) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DSD)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
 - Reducing Offending: Towards a Safer Society (DOJ)
 - Consultation on the Designation of Provisions of EU Regulations No.714/2009 and No.715/2009 as Relevant Requirements (DETI)
 - Noise Mapping and Action Planning Technical Guidance for Competent Authorities drafted pursuant to the Environmental Noise Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 (DOE)

9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 19 June 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 - North South Ministerial Council Plenary meeting

The deputy First Minister, Mr Martin McGuinness, made a statement regarding the North South Ministerial Council Plenary meeting, held on 15 June 2012, following which he replied to questions.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

2.2 Statement - Inter-Governmental Agreement on Co-operation on Criminal Justice Matters

The Minister of Justice, Mr David Ford, made a statement regarding the Inter-Governmental Agreement on Co-operation on Criminal Justice Matters, following which he replied to questions.

2.3 Motion - Statistics and Registration Services Act (Disclosure of Social Security Information) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

Proposed:

That the Statistics and Registration Services Act (Disclosure of Social Security Information) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be affirmed.

Minister of Finance and Personnel

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

2.4 Second Stage - Budget (No.2) Bill (NIA 8/11-15)

The Second Stage of the Budget (No.2) Bill (NIA 8/11-15) stood on the Order Paper in the name of the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson.

The Deputy Speaker advised the House that the Second Stage of the Budget (No.2) Bill (NIA 8/11-15) could not be taken because the provisions of Standing Order 42(2) had not been met.

The sitting was suspended at 11.52am.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Speaker in the Chair.

3. Question Time

3.1 Finance and Personnel

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson.

3.2 Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr Edwin Poots.

4. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 3.00pm.

Mr William Hay

The Speaker

19 June 2012

Northern Ireland Assembly

**Papers Presented to the Assembly on
19 June 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
- For Information Only:**
7. Written Ministerial Statements
 8. Consultation Documents
 - Consultation on Policy Proposals for an Energy Bill (DETI)
 9. Departmental Publications
 10. Agency Publications
 11. Westminster Publications
 12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as at 19 June 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	28.02.12
Pensions Bill NIA Bill 3/11-15	23.01.12	31.01.12	13.03.12	08.03.12	27.03.12	24.04.12	08.05.12	01.06.12
/Budget Bill NIA Bill 4/11-15	13.02.12	14.02.12	N/A	N/A	20.02.12	21.02.12	27.02.12	20.03.12
Marine Bill NIA Bill 5/11-15	21.02.12	05.03.12	06.07.12					
Superannuation Bill 6/11-15	12.03.12	26.03.12	28.09.12					
Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill 7/11-15	12.06.12							
Budget (No.2) Bill 8/11-15	18.06.12							

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