



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

Volume 81

(21 January 2013 to 10 February 2013)

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Bell, Jonathan (Strangford)
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Bradley, Ms Paula (North Belfast)
Brady, Mickey (Newry and Armagh)
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Minister for Social Development	Mr Nelson McCausland
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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

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	Ms Jennifer McCann

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Official Report (Hansard)

Assembly Sitings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 21 January 2013

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In your capacity as chairman of the Assembly Commission, can you inform the House whether it has met to discuss the confidence-building measure of increasing the flying of the Union flag on this Building? If it has not met, why is that and how far has the business relevant to the House been disrupted by the failure to meet?

Mr Speaker: First, that is not a point of order. Secondly, these are issues that the Commission is dealing with. We should leave the matter where it is.

Inclusivity, Mutual Respect, Peace and Democracy

Motion proposed [15 January 2013]:

That this Assembly reaffirms its commitment to the principles of inclusivity, mutual respect, peace and democracy; condemns all acts of violence and intimidation against police officers, elected representatives, other members of society, homes and property at all times; and calls on all political parties to support the spirit of the Belfast Agreement. — [Mr Nesbitt.]

Amendment proposed [15 January 2013]: Leave out all after "times;" and insert

"and calls on all political parties to give full effect to their commitment to the consent principle, which recognises Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom." — [Mr Campbell.]

Mr Speaker: The votes deferred from last Tuesday because of a petition of concern will be the first item of business this afternoon. *[Interruption.]* Order. I remind Members that only the vote on the amendment, which will be the first vote, will be on a cross-community basis.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 47; Noes 52.

AYES

Unionist:

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.

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

NOES

Nationalist:

Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon,

Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms McCorley, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Molloy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Unionist:

Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea.

Other:

Mr Agnew, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dickson, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Rogers and Ms Ruane.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>99</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>47</i>	<i>[47.5%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>[0.0%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>49</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>47</i>	<i>[95.9%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>[0.0%]</i>

Question accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 64; Noes 33.

AYES

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

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Kinahan and Mr Nesbitt

NOES

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

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Clarke and Mr G Robinson

Main Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly reaffirms its commitment to the principles of inclusivity, mutual respect, peace and democracy; condemns all acts of violence and intimidation against police officers, elected representatives, other members of society, homes and property at all times; and calls on all political parties to support the spirit of the Belfast Agreement.

Executive Committee Business

Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Act (Northern Ireland) 2013: Royal Assent

Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2013: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: Before we move on with the rest of today's business, I wish to inform the House that both the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Act (Northern Ireland) 2013 and the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2013 have received Royal Assent and became law on 18 January 2013.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership: Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Speaker: The next two items on the Order Paper are motions on Committee Membership. As with other similar motions, they will be treated as business motions. There will, therefore, be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Robin Swann replace Mr Danny Kinahan as a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. — [Mr Swann.]

Committee Membership: Committee for Employment and Learning and Committee on Procedures

Resolved:

That Ms Bronwyn McGahan replace Mr Barry McElduff as a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning; and that Mr Barry McElduff replace Mr Phil Flanagan as a member of the Committee on Procedures. — [Ms Ruane.]

Assembly Commission: Membership

Mr Speaker: As required by Standing Order 79(4), I wish to inform the Assembly that Mr Barry McElduff has given notice of his resignation as a member of the Assembly Commission, with effect from 18 January 2013. A vacancy, therefore, exists on the Commission, and the next item on the Order Paper is a motion to fill that vacancy. As with similar motions, this will be treated as a business motion. There will, therefore, be no debate.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That, in accordance with Standing Order 79(4), Ms Caitríona Ruane be appointed to fill a vacancy on the Assembly Commission. — [Mr G Kelly.]

Ministerial Statement

Telecommunications

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on telecommunications in Northern Ireland and to take the opportunity to inform the Assembly of my Department's continuing efforts to improve our telecommunications infrastructure across Northern Ireland and to remind you of our successes to date.

When it comes to broadband or mobile services, I am well aware of the importance of good access for the public and for businesses. It is an important and essential asset for the way that we now live, whether it is for shopping online, booking holidays, young people doing homework, farmers completing government forms or folk e-mailing friends and colleagues at work or home. That is certainly reflected in the significant volume of correspondence that I receive from the public, business and public representatives. I recognise that when people write to me it is because they are struggling to receive a service that is acceptable and meets their needs. Indeed, while living in and representing a rural constituency, I know the particular difficulties that rural dwellers face, whether it is lack of coverage or the cost of incurring unnecessary roaming charges.

Telecoms is one of those sectors where, as the technology develops, so does the demand. These all offer new and exciting opportunities for our local businesses and home-grown entrepreneurs to exploit. It is estimated by the telecoms sector that it has generated £39.7 billion of revenue in 2012.

One of the things that I have observed is that the days when we used our mobile phones only to make calls are long gone. These devices are now used to access the internet, update social networks and listen to music. That all requires faster broadband connections at home, at work and on the move.

Cities have recognised the value of facilitating users and meeting demand, and I was very pleased that Belfast and Londonderry were successful in securing public funding to help make them superfast cities. However, I am equally mindful that, while initiatives like that can help them to become economic drivers in the region, it should not leave other parts of Northern Ireland behind. For my part, while the telecoms industry is privatised, I have continued to lobby, encourage, cajole and, where possible, offer investment to the sector that would allow it to meet that demand, improve coverage, widen the range of services and enhance our infrastructure.

Members will be aware of what my Department has sought to achieve against a background where policy rests with the Westminster Government and it is not a devolved matter. My Department has limited powers to intervene, and we have a private telecoms sector that makes its investment decisions on a commercial basis. Against that background, my Department has, over the last number of years, provided public investment for a number of significant telecoms projects. They have made a major contribution to improving Northern Ireland's telecoms infrastructure that makes us leaders not only in the United Kingdom but across Europe. You do not have to take my word for it: Ofcom, the independent regulator, recently

reported that the percentage of premises with access to superfast broadband services in Northern Ireland stands at 95%, which is the highest in the UK. England is the closest at 68%, and the UK average is 65%. The average speed at which consumers in Northern Ireland access the internet has more than doubled in the last year from 6.3 megabits per second to 14.4 megabits per second. In fact, Ofcom acknowledges that one of the reasons for that growth has been the intervention that my Department has made. However, I do not think that DETI alone can take credit for that improvement. I have to recognise the leadership and commitment shown by companies such as BT, their willingness to work constructively with us and, most importantly, the additional investment that they have put into the region to enhance the services that they offer here — for example, their investment in the UK City of Culture and accelerating their deployment of superfast services into Northern Ireland. Of course, other companies have made and continue to make investments in the region, including Eircom, Everything Everywhere, Vodafone and many others.

I am conscious that to nurture economic growth we need to have a telecoms infrastructure that meets the needs of business and allows it to be competitive, to access new markets and to promote its services and products. Over the past few years, my Department and, indeed, the Northern Ireland Executive have invested some £45 million in improving our telecoms infrastructure, and some £21 million has been specifically used or earmarked to support the improvement of networks in rural and remote locations where there is no likelihood of private sector investment.

We have provided investment to stimulate superfast broadband services; given Northern Ireland its first direct international telecoms link to North America; ensured continued access to a broadband service at a reasonable cost for business and residential consumers who are unable to get broadband by a wire-line solution; and established the free advisory service log on.ni for all businesses to help them understand how they can exploit the new services. However, we are not resting on our laurels or becoming complacent. I know that our infrastructure is not perfect and there is more to be done. The Ofcom report indicates that there are still some broadband "not spots" and that, despite the availability of services, Northern Ireland has the lowest take-up of basic broadband services in the UK at 63.9%. I want to address that, and my Department has plans to further improve broadband coverage. This is of interest and importance not just to me as Minister but to other Executive colleagues, the UK Government and the European Union.

The UK Government, through Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK), have made funding available to allow a basic broadband service of 2 megabits a second that is available to all premises and to further improve the availability of superfast services. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) is also interested in improving broadband services for farming and rural communities, and I acknowledge the contribution from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. The improvement of broadband services is also a priority of the EU, and, again, we have secured funding from that source.

Some £19 million of funding has been earmarked, and we have conducted a public consultation to help identify the areas where we need to intervene. My Department

received over 700 responses, which are being analysed. I thank the public and their representatives for their contribution and obvious desire to be included in the exercise. It is important that we accurately identify the area of intervention, and it is my intention to publish the outcome of the analysis on the Department's website shortly. My officials are also finalising the tender documentation to allow suppliers to bid for the work in the next few months. I expect that the industry itself will also contribute to the project. I am certain that all Members will welcome that support, particularly in these times of economic constraint and pressure on the public purse. With such support from such a range of stakeholders, it should come as no surprise that I want to ensure that what and how that is delivered presents the best outcome for Northern Ireland.

On the question of mobile phone services, I am disappointed that Northern Ireland has the third lowest outdoor coverage of 2G mobile services from all operators of the four UK nations at 88%, which is just above Wales at 84.1%. On 3G services, we have the second worst outdoor coverage at 55.9%, which is just above Wales at 52.4%. This is a priority for me. The mobile market, however, has not remained static and continues to evolve. Providers are consolidating their services and preparing for the introduction of 4G services.

The analogue TV switch off last year created space for more mobile traffic, and an auction has commenced for that space across the UK. I successfully lobbied for Northern Ireland and secured a regional target of 95% coverage here when licences are awarded. There is a lot going on that should see our mobile infrastructure dramatically improve. However, when the dust settles, there may still be gaps. I intend to review the situation later this year, when the position will be clearer.

I have met representatives from the industry and welcomed the investments they are making here. I will continue to encourage them to provide services as widely as possible, especially close to the border, and to draw to their attention any obvious gaps. Looking forward, I want to see them not just complying with but exceeding their roll-out obligations for the new 4G services in Northern Ireland. That provides us all with an opportunity to improve the consumer experience of mobile in the near future.

12.45 pm

It is worth reminding everyone that there are a number of players in the telecoms sector delivering a range of competitive products using various technologies at various prices. Those technologies are evolving, and I want to dispel the perception that broadband can be obtained only through a fixed telephone line and that any other option is inferior. That is not the case. We are seeing lots of new ways to access the internet, whether by satellite, wireless or mobile. I believe that the market across Northern Ireland is largely competitive, and the number of providers is increasing on a regular basis. That should result in lower prices and better choices for many consumers.

I fully understand the expectations and, at times, frustrations of people who do not receive an adequate service, and I and my officials are ready to assist whenever we can. However, Members will recognise that telecoms providers are commercial organisations that make decisions on economic viability and financial return.

We all need to be mindful that what may make sense for one company may not make sense for another. Today, however, I extend a challenge to the whole telecoms industry to step up and meet the increasing demand, to offer value-for-money services and to improve the overall customer experience. Where there is unmet demand, consumers can, in my experience, be very loyal to a good supplier who successfully meets that demand.

It strikes me that there is an opportunity, when the G8 summit comes to Fermanagh and the media spotlight falls on the Province, to positively showcase what we have already achieved across Northern Ireland. No doubt, demand for communications services will increase in certain areas, and, although temporary solutions may be deployed for the event, it gives the industry an opportunity to leave a permanent legacy for the local community's benefit. I would be very pleased to see that happen, and I encourage the industry not to waste the opportunity but to seize it positively.

We should be proud of our telecoms infrastructure and recognise the part it plays in improving our people's lives and contributing to our economic growth. There are still challenges to overcome, and, although telecoms is not a public utility, I realise that Members and the public at large will continue to draw my attention to any shortcomings. I will continue to lobby the industry to do more and intervene when it is sensible to do so. I know that collectively we can make that difference to all the people across Northern Ireland.

These are exciting times for telecommunications with the scope and services ever expanding. I wanted to make this statement to recognise the success we have had to date and to mark the start of a new chapter. In the next year, we will see further investment made to expand the reach of broadband and deliver faster services and significantly improve the coverage of mobile services. I want business to better use the infrastructure we have and every citizen to enjoy the benefits of better access. As Minister, I want to continue to ensure that Northern Ireland is best in class. I commend the statement to the Assembly.

Mr McGlone (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire chomh maith as a ráiteas. Thanks very much, Mr Speaker, and I thank the Minister for her statement.

I was not aware of the scale of it, but I, too, am disappointed by the figures that the Minister gave us about the 2G mobile services here in the North. That is very disappointing. As regards the potential arising from the roll-out of 4G services, the Minister stated that she had successfully lobbied for Northern Ireland and secured a regional target of 95% coverage. Is that indoor or outdoor? Also, did the firms themselves, during their conversations with the Minister, give us any time frame for the roll-out of that project?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Chairman for his question. It is disappointing to see that coverage, but the 2G coverage problem arises from the fact that we did not have those regional targets in place. Therefore, the national targets, which were set by Ofcom, meant that they did not have to do as much in Northern Ireland as we would like to have seen. We now have the 4G target for 95% coverage, and it is my understanding that it is an outdoor target, although

that will vary in relation to indoor. However, I am asking the industry to exceed that target and saying, "Let's do that together". We have got the most out of telecoms infrastructure in Northern Ireland when the industry has worked with government intervention as well, so we have added value. Others, not just in the UK but across Europe, have looked to the way we have been able to deliver that in Northern Ireland as best in class.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for her statement. It is a welcome position, particularly at this time of economic constraint. Indeed, the figures generally are extremely encouraging. I do not think that any other part of the UK with a population of 1.7 million or thereabouts has two cities that have graduated to the position of superfast cities. If that were the case, they would be extremely pleased.

The Ofcom report indicates that there are some problems with basic broadband services —

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

Mr Newton: How will the Minister address that issue?

Mrs Foster: We have a number of projects. We want to look at 3G and 4G coverage and at areas where there are gaps in basic broadband. The broadband improvement project is aimed at delivering 2 megabits per second broadband services to all premises. We have another target for superfast services: 24 megabits per second services or better to at least 90% of premises by 2015, which is in line with the UK broadband strategy. One benefit of having moneys available from Europe, BDUK and the industry is that there is quite a lot of investment at present. We need to see where that investment is going. If there are any gaps, we can intervene with the money that we have put in place. It is a question of all of us working together to make sure that we get the maximum out of all this.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas a thug sí dúinn agus as an obair atá aici agus ag a Roinn go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for her statement and genuinely commend her Department and the wider Executive for their efforts to date to improve the telecommunications infrastructure.

I turn to the G8 summit and the much-heralded legacy that it will leave Fermanagh. Will the Minister further inform us about the permanent improvements that will be made to mobile phone and broadband coverage in rural Fermanagh, particularly in areas such as Boho and Derrygonnelly, instead of the inevitable temporary benefits that many of us envisage will serve only the great and the good of the world powers who will visit Fermanagh in June?

Mrs Foster: Are we not delighted to see the great and the good coming to Fermanagh for the G8 summit in June? Well, some of us are delighted to see them coming.

The Member makes a fair point about temporary installations that may be used at that time. I have told the industry — Everything Everywhere, Vodafone and British Telecom; I have not had the opportunity to speak to Eircom yet — to take the opportunity to put in legacy infrastructure. We are determined that there should be legacy infrastructure after the event. The cross-

departmental group set up to ensure that the event is a success and to deal with all those issues knows my views well on the issues. We have commenced discussions with the relevant stakeholders about venues and telecoms providers and with the national Government about telecom requirements. I will keep pushing and I trust that the Member will keep pushing for legacy investment. Together, I hope that we can make it happen.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for the statement. Telecommunications is an important aspect, and it is of great concern to businesses and consumers across Northern Ireland. The Minister mentioned that the achievements include Northern Ireland's first direct international telecoms link to North America. At a recent meeting in Omagh, the great benefits that businesses there already experience because of fast broadband were outlined to me.

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

Mrs Overend: Sorry, Mr Speaker. Will the Minister outline how her Department has used that to Northern Ireland's advantage in increasing business in the west of Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. Having visited the Innovation Growth Centre in Omagh, I know very well the advantages that have come from its direct link into Project Kelvin. Indeed, Invest Northern Ireland uses the fact that we have that direct connectivity all the time. I am hopeful that we will see some tangible evidence of that in the near future.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for her statement. The section about broadband delivery and the commitment to a basic speed of 2 MB per second interests me. The speed is lower than that in the rural areas around Lisburn — in fact, it is not worth having at all because of the state of the exchanges in the area. Will the £19 million make a significant difference to that situation, given that what most people want is a service through their telephone line, particularly for their children?

Mrs Foster: I accept that that is what most people want. However, sometimes, it may not be the best answer for them. I have already said that a fixed line is not the only answer. Many of us use mobile technology to download broadband as we move around our constituencies. Fixed satellite and wireless are other options. We will very much engage, and I am pleased by the level of answers to our consultation: 700 people took the time to respond. That indicates that there are issues. The interest is absolutely huge, so we need to be able to address those difficulties. We will use a range of technologies to provide those answers; I will not stand here and say that it will all be fixed line. I ask Members to work with me and their constituents in educating people about the fact that it may not be possible to have a fixed line. We have other answers for them, and the broadband that they receive will be just as good.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for bringing this positive statement to the Assembly today. The telecoms industry has, over the past years, been very profitable. Does the Minister have any indications from meetings with the industry that it will contribute to the £19 million already earmarked?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his perceptive question. That is a key element. I must be fair to the industry: in the past, when we have put in government money, it has come alongside and invested extra money. I am hopeful that that will be the case in this instance as well. I will certainly push the industry because, if we are going to put in infrastructure, the industry will benefit, so why not put in extra money and get the maximum benefit from it? There is a good pot of money from BDUK, European funds and my core budget. I hope that the industry will recognise that and move forward with us.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the statement from the Minister this morning. It is important that we all welcome the investment in telecommunications. Where do 2G and 3G fit into the overall strategy given that you are talking now about a 95% target for 4G? I do not want to sound negative, but can you explain whether we need to continue to invest in 2G and 3G while looking at that target for 4G?

Mrs Foster: That is another good point. I have had the opportunity to discuss that with the industry so that, when it looks at the targets for 4G, it will also consider how it implements 2G for customers. It is looking at innovative ways to deal with that. It is a key point that many people will not benefit from 4G and 3G in the near future, so we need to make sure that they have the minimum coverage of 2G. We need to allow time for the industry to put in place its infrastructure. If there are gaps around Northern Ireland, we will then try to intervene to help with those 2G not spots. I accept that those are mostly rural, but some of them are quite close to towns.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for her positive statement. I want to ask her about DARD involvement with the farming community. We all know about the increasing demand for and pressure on the farming community to use the internet and computers to help with their business efficiency and to fill in forms from DARD. Will the Minister detail some of the operations by her Department and DARD to encourage farmers to use the internet?

Mrs Foster: Sometimes, we in government are criticised for not working cross-departmentally. This is a good example of working across Departments to make a difference for rural dwellers.

1.00 pm

Of the £19.3 million of funds that are available, £2.75 million comes from my core budget in DETI, £4.4 million comes from BDUK, £7.15 million comes from the European regional development fund (ERDF) and £5 million comes from DARD. So, that is a significant amount of money from DARD, and I think that it is a good investment for rural dwellers, particularly those farmers who have to access computers to fill in forms online. I think that it is money well spent. Hopefully, the rural community will recognise the investment.

Mr Beggs: I also thank the Minister for her statement. When the Chancellor made his announcement of additional moneys to improve broadband, he mentioned that funding would be made available in particular for the A2, which runs through a major part of my constituency. Is she able to advise yet what broadband improvements will be implemented in that regard? What will be done

to ensure that some business parks that do not have superfast broadband will be able to benefit in the future?

Mrs Foster: I know that the Member has written to me about the very specific issue of the business park in Larne. As I indicated to him, that really is a commercial decision for BT. However, I would encourage BT to work with the business park to find a solution. Obviously, we want to encourage as many businesses as possible to take up broadband in Northern Ireland. We have sometimes been disappointed by the uptake, so we put Logon.ni in place so that we could go out to small and medium-sized businesses and help them to avail themselves of broadband services.

I am sorry, Mr Speaker, but I will have to come back to the Member on his question about the A2. I am not aware of the detail of that.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I note that the Minister referred to the North American cable link, and particularly to Project Kelvin. I also note that she referred to tangible evidence of results in the near future. Will the Minister give us an assessment of the impact of the Project Kelvin facility, specifically where foreign direct investment is concerned?

Mrs Foster: I think that it is a great tool to have, particularly when we are talking to IT and financial services companies. It is very difficult to say what specific impact it had on some of our big announcements over the past number of years. I am thinking specifically of the likes of the New York Stock Exchange and the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. However, there is no doubt that those companies benefit from Project Kelvin and the direct link to the US, because, of course, they work with the US all the time. It obviously adds to the mix of our skills, our geographical position and all the other reasons why people invest here.

When we talk to investors, there is no doubt in my mind that they are very interested in the fact that we have our own direct link to the US with a latency of 70 milliseconds, as well as guaranteed pricing, availability and latency until December 2018. It gives us the opportunity to have something very tangible to go to companies with, and it definitely adds to our proposition whenever we go out to companies in the US and across the globe.

Mr A Maginness: I commend the Minister for her statement and for the work that she has done over a long period in this area. It has borne fruit.

The Minister referred to the G8 summit in Fermanagh, an event that, I think, is close to her heart. Will she explain how we can use that event to showcase telecommunications in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: Hopefully, we will be able to use it to showcase Northern Ireland for a number of reasons, not least telecommunications. I hope that we will very much be able to look at how we, as such a small region, compare with the rest of the UK and Europe. I also hope that it will show the way in which government investment has been matched by industry investment and demonstrate that that is a good model to use in other jurisdictions. So, I very much hope that we will have the opportunity to do that.

Of course, to my disappointment, the G8 summit is not entirely under DETI's control. We will have to work with other partners in Westminster —

Mr A Maginness: It is still in Fermanagh.

Mrs Foster: It is still in Fermanagh; that is very critical. We are aware that there are some gaps in the provision of certain services. They have been flagged up early to the relevant providers.

We are working closely with event organisers to scope the demands and needs for the event. However, as I said, it is about not just the event but its legacy.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she advise what is being planned to deal with coverage black spots, such as the Holywood hills at Craigantlet? They are located just behind Parliament Buildings, which is obviously the centre of communication. However, a few hundred metres away from Parliament Buildings, there is poor coverage for homes and local businesses.

Mrs Foster: The prize for today must go to the Member for his constituency references, although others came close.

Again, we will be looking to see where there are black spots, after the industry has invested and we have put in the money from BDUK and other sources. I am sure that his constituents took part in the consultation that has just finished. Therefore, we will be looking at the not-spots to make sure that we can intervene.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister will not be surprised by my referring to the rural communities in my constituency, of which she is more than aware, because I take the opportunity to raise them with her.

The Minister referred to the other technologies that are available for broadband provision, and more so for rural areas. Does she agree that it is important that the companies that provide such alternative technologies become better at marketing their products, to ensure that people who depend on BT to sell them its product but are unable to get it become aware of alternative technologies?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his comments. I do not disagree that some of those companies need to get out and promote their products as being good for the customer. I recognise that some of the companies are small and may therefore be restricted in the manpower or, indeed, womanpower that they have to go out there and sell their products. However, I appeal to them to market their goods more proactively so that people are aware of the available options.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá ceist áirithe agam ar an Aire.

Where, based on their commercial interests, telecoms providers deem it unviable to provide broadband solutions to a particular rural community, what duty has the Department, working with DARD, to resolve those difficulties? What can the Department do when telecoms providers do that? The Minister will be aware of my strong interest in continuing problems —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to finish.

Mr McElduff: — in Greencastle, Broughderg and other parts of mid and west Tyrone.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for raising those issues. He and everyone else in the Chamber continue to lobby me on the areas that are challenged in their constituency.

Under European rules, the Department can intervene only when there is market failure. He is right: we first have to see whether there is a commercial solution to the issue. We then fund, as he is aware, other providers, such as Onwave and North West Electronics, to come into the market. We subsidise them to provide another type of solution, whether that be wireless or satellite. They then come in and offer the solution, which hopefully is able to sort out the difficulties. However, I recognise that there is still the residual desire to have fixed/wired broadband, but we really need to try to move our constituents to a place where they are content with other technologies. Hopefully we can move to that position with some of the new money that will be made available in areas that have suffered difficulties.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement. I ask the House to take its ease before we move to the Consideration Stage of the Business Improvement Districts Bill.

Executive Committee Business

Business Improvement Districts Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister for Social Development, Mr McCausland, to move the Consideration Stage of the Business Improvement Districts Bill.

Moved. — [Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development).]

Mr Speaker: Members will have a copy of the Marshalled List of amendments detailing the order for consideration. The amendments have been grouped for debate in the provisional grouping of amendments selected list. There is a single group of amendments. The debate will be on amendment Nos 1, 2 and 3. Those deal with the definition of “eligible ratepayer” and the approval of related regulations. Once the debate on the group is completed, any further amendments in the group will be moved formally as we go through the Bill, and the Question on each will be put without further debate. The Questions on stand part will be taken at the appropriate points in the Bill. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

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

Mr Speaker: It is vitally important, Members, when we are dealing with a Bill, that we have clear Ayes and clear Noes as we proceed.

Clause 6 (Entitlement to vote in ballot)

Mr Speaker: We now come to the single group of amendments for debate. With amendment No 1 it will be convenient to debate amendment Nos 2 and 3. I call the Minister for Social Development to move amendment No 1 and address the other amendments in the group.

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): Before I move on to the detail of the proposed amendments, I thank the Chair and the members of the Social Development Committee for their effective scrutiny of the Bill and for the timely publication of the report.

The first amendment seeks to bring clarity as to who exactly would be eligible to vote in a ballot on the business improvement district (BID) proposal, as the original wording did not, perhaps, make that explicit enough. My officials advised the Social Development Committee of this possible amendment on 4 December last year.

The need to make the amendment was identified during Committee Stage, when Committee members asked a number of questions concerning who would be entitled to vote on the BID proposals, and, in particular, whether charity shops, which have an exemption from paying rates, either partial or full, would be included. It is my intention that all non-domestic properties can be included within a proposed BID area, whether or not they have exemptions from paying rates. Therefore, the tenant or the owner, as appropriate, would have an entitlement to vote on the BID proposals. It would be up to the BID proposer to decide which properties to include in the final proposals for ballot.

The proposed amended clause would state explicitly that liability to pay rates is not a prerequisite for having eligibility to vote. That would mean that, where exemptions to paying rates are in place, for a variety of reasons under the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977, a tenant

or property owner would not be excluded from the pool of those potentially entitled to vote. If the amendment is accepted for inclusion in the Bill, I believe that it will help to remove any potential confusion surrounding which non-domestic properties may be included in the BID area.

The two remaining amendments to clause 19 were discussed and agreed during the Committee's scrutiny of the Bill. They relate to the provisions of the Bill that delegate legislation-making powers. The Department prepared a delegated powers memorandum for that purpose, which was considered by the Examiner of Statutory Rules. He advised the Committee that those clauses relating to eligibility to vote in the BID ballot should be subject to draft affirmative resolution, rather than to negative resolution as the Bill stands. Both the Department and the Committee accepted the advice of the Examiner of Statutory Rules on that point and agreed clause 19, subject to the amendment being accepted.

That concludes the amendments that I have tabled at Consideration Stage. I request Assembly approval on the basis that they are non-contentious and will enhance the framework laid out in the Bill for the establishment of statutory BIDs in Northern Ireland.

Passing this legislation will bring us into line both with other United Kingdom jurisdictions and the Republic of Ireland, where BIDs have existed for a number of years. It is part of a toolkit of measures to help boost our local economy and offer assistance to our beleaguered traders, many of whom are struggling to keep afloat in these tough times. Importantly, it is a scheme that allows businesses to help themselves as well, and to find innovative solutions to local issues in local areas.

In conclusion, I commend the amendments and the Bill to the House.

1.15 pm

Mr Speaker: I ask the Minister to move the amendments just to have them on the record.

Mr McCausland: Apologies, Speaker. Admittedly, I failed to do that at the start. I beg to move amendment No 1: In page 3, line 1, leave out subsection (3) and insert

“(3) In this Act ‘eligible ratepayer’ means a person who on the prescribed date occupies or is entitled to possession of relevant property, whether or not rates are payable by that person in respect of it.”

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 2: In clause 19, page 7, line 26, at end insert “() section 6(3);”. — *[Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development).]*

No 3: In clause 19, page 7, line 27, at end insert “() section 17(2)(b);”. — *[Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development).]*

Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Obviously, the debate today is really around the amendments, and I want to put on record immediately that the Committee supports them. I am advised that, since this is the first opportunity for debate since the Committee concluded its consideration of the Bill at Committee Stage,

you may give me a bit of latitude to outline some context on behalf of the Committee, and I thank you for that.

I thank the Minister for bringing the Consideration Stage forward. I appreciate that, at this stage, it is mainly to consider amendments. I will, as briefly as I can, set out some of the issues considered by the Committee.

The Committee received 16 responses to its call for evidence, and took oral evidence from five stakeholders and the Department. While some had minor reservations about the Bill, it was evident to the Committee that the Bill was very much welcomed by all the stakeholders, particularly retail organisations such as the Northern Ireland Retail Consortium and the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association, who wanted the Bill to be progressed as quickly as possible. I place on record our thanks to the Minister, the Department and all the stakeholders who assisted the Committee in its deliberations.

The Committee heard that the BIDs concept is a proven one, as the Minister alluded to. Many have argued that this is because it has been business led or, at least, led by the businesses involved as direct stakeholders. That is important given that it is enabling legislation and further regulations will have to be produced in due course in direct consultation with and considering the views of the key stakeholders.

The Committee agreed that, in this instance, whilst the Bill is an enabling one and we have regulations to come down the line, the balance is probably right in so far as we need to have a Bill that is clear for all concerned but that has enough flexibility built in so that we can build on the improvements as they emerge and develop.

Some members were concerned about the mandatory nature of the BID proposal. Should eligible participants vote for a BID, businesses within that area must pay the associated levy. Members referred to the current economic circumstances, which, again, the Minister alluded to, and the possibility that any additional cost might be enough to force some retailers to close. The Committee was, however, reassured by the democratic nature of the process and the various checks and balances built into the BID proposal process. Fundamentally, if businesses do not feel that a BID proposal is in their best interest, they do, of course, have the option of voting against the proposal. We believe that experience shows that common sense generally does prevail.

The Bill does not force businesses to establish a BID; it provides a framework to support the development of a BID by relevant and affected businesses. The mandatory payment of a levy, should a proposal be successful, will apply to all businesses within the area defined in the proposal, and the Committee recognises that that is, indeed, only fair. It would not be acceptable to have some businesses not contributing a levy yet benefiting from being in a BID area.

The Committee was further reassured that BID proposers will have wide scope to determine the level of the levy and whether they will apply a reduced levy or, in some cases, no levy for certain types of businesses; for example, charity shops. Again, that will be underpinned by a democratic vote.

Members were also concerned about the possibility of duplication of services. Some members suggested that there may be some areas where initiatives have been taken, perhaps via the local council. There are a good number of examples of that nature. It would never be intended that a BID proposal would seek to duplicate those services; that would not make sense. It was also a matter of concern to members that all the BID proposals should obviously have to take on board all other existing statutory frameworks. The Committee was eventually satisfied with the Department's assurances around that. For example, when you move to the review of public administration basis of community planning, the BID proposals will have to take on board the wider consultation exercises in their respective areas.

The Committee also voiced concerns about the inclusion of residents in the consultation process on the BID proposals and, in particular, the inclusion of residents who live close to business areas. We actually do have some areas where there would be residents living within a BID proposal area. There are some main streets and some town centres, for example, where there are residents who live on the front of the street. Obviously, they would not be formal BID members and would not have to pay any levy, because they are domestic, but by the same token they would be directly affected by any BID proposal, so it is important that they are included in all considerations. Again, the amendments that have been introduced clarify the issue of who is an eligible ratepayer, and that has been resolved by the Minister.

One of the other concerns was to do with the level of buy-in from people involved in a BID proposal. Some people felt that the 25% turnout of those eligible to vote was not high enough. We have been advised that there are probably no BID proposals that were not endorsed by a minimum of 40%. However, under the proposed legislation, each of the BID proposers will have the ability to increase that eligibility threshold if they so desire.

On the basis of some of these — and there were other concerns that were raised by members, and we sought clarification from stakeholders and the Department — the Committee is content to support the rules. That also applies because we did seek, following discussions with the Examiner of Statutory Rules, that future regulations would be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure rather than negative resolution.

Ms P Bradley: As a member of the Social Development Committee I support the Bill and the amendments at Consideration Stage. I declare an interest as a member of Newtownabbey Borough Council.

The BIDs scheme will allow local businesses to take charge and decide how to act for their mutual benefit in improving their respective areas. I believe that BIDs offer local businesses and entrepreneurs the chance to improve their areas for the benefit of local businesses and, of course, local people.

The scheme provides local businesses with a level of autonomy and a means of funding in order to take their own ideas forward and better the communities in which they operate. I believe that the BIDs will produce and harness better relationships between councils and local businesses in a BID area. Therefore, I welcome the Bill at Consideration Stage.

Mr Durkan: I support the Bill and the amendments. The Minister and the Chair have explained the amendments, and we in the SDLP welcome them, particularly the amendment to clause 19 that increases the scrutiny function of the Assembly.

I have previously expressed some concerns about the BIDS legislation — the Chair touched on them as well — and I still think that, in order for it to be truly successful, BIDs will need to be supported financially, at least in the early stages, by the Department or by government. However, I am satisfied with the assurances that the Committee has received that there are safeguards and flexibilities in the Bill to ensure protection of businesses, residents and other stakeholders.

I am glad to support the passage of the Bill with the amendments as a small, but hopefully significant, step towards helping members of our business community help themselves, and each other, in these tough economic times.

Mrs Cochrane: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill today. Having seen the relative success of existing BID schemes in other cities throughout the UK, and having discussed the potential for BIDs here in Northern Ireland at length with a number of key stakeholders since beginning my term in the Assembly, I view this legislation as a positive step forward at a time when economic and social factors forced on our local business community are at their most critical.

When we consider that, in 2011 alone, over 1,000 small shops closed across Northern Ireland and that Northern Ireland has the highest high street vacancy rate in the UK at almost 17%, it is clear that there has been a palpable decline in community footfall and prosperity across Northern Ireland.

In my constituency, and particularly in the immediate area surrounding my constituency office, such decline is evident for all to see. Recent independent research has identified high street regeneration as having the most potential benefit for local trading environments.

Established traders' associations in east Belfast, such as the Ballyhackamore Business Association, have already begun to plant strong seeds of communal development and co-operative improvements, engaging local residents and harvesting a renewed sense of community in difficult times. This legislation will surely strengthen such initiatives.

I support the proposed amendments. They are largely technical in nature, but they will help to further clarify the procedural aspects of how such schemes will function in practice.

In conclusion, business improvement districts legislation will provide a formal opportunity for joined-up thinking between businesses that can benefit precincts across Northern Ireland. It is, however, only one of a series of measures that can secure the future of our traders. We need to get out there and support our local businesses. The recent campaign to get back into Belfast must be commended. I also take this opportunity to encourage all listening to shop locally and to put your money where your house is.

Mr McCausland: I thank the Committee Chair and Members for their contribution to the debate on the proposed amendments. There is clearly broad agreement

across the Chamber for the Business Improvement Districts Bill and for the proposed amendments, and I am grateful for that.

The Chair touched on the issue of the legislation having clarity and flexibility, and he is absolutely right. He also touched on the regulations that will come forward in due course. Those regulations will be transparent and unambiguous. However, they will also have the necessary flexibility required to allow different areas to implement their own local solutions. The regulations will be subject to full public consultation. The Chair stated that the other issues will be resolved by the amendments, and that is an indication that we have got the legislation right.

I am delighted with the response this afternoon. Once the Bill has progressed through the Assembly and received Royal Assent, it will represent the enabling framework for the establishment of statutory BIDs in Northern Ireland, which I am sure businesses will welcome.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: Yes.

Mr Allister: Can the Minister clarify one issue? I note the amendment to clause 6(3). If I understand it correctly, it means that the occupier of a property, who, in other circumstances, would be a ratepayer, may, in fact, not pay rates — it may be a charity or something else — but will be eligible to vote in any proposition nonetheless. That seems a bit dubious to me, but there it is. How does that sit with clause 6(2), which allows the BID proposers to determine which eligible ratepayers are entitled to vote? How will that be policed to ensure that there is no cherry-picking as to which ratepayers can vote? Obviously, it may be in the interest of someone with a proposal to make sure that they include all those who do not pay rates, such as charity shops, to boost the yes vote? What policing will there be of the selectivity that is possible under clause 6(2)?

Mr McCausland: The legislation enables the proposer of a BID to include those who do not pay rates; there is that potential. However, as the Member has rightly said, it is up to the proposer of the BID to decide whether or not they should be included. Ultimately, as with all these things, it will come down to the vote of the member businesses of the BID proposal to decide whether to move forward on the basis that is determined.

Charity shops are the sector most affected by this question. It is true that there are more charity shops than there were in the past; we see that in many parts of the Province. However — I am open to correction on this — I am not aware of any area in which, when you consider the totality of businesses, the number of charity shops is of such a scale that it would be possible to determine, almost, the outcome of a vote in the way that someone might want. There are significant numbers in some areas, but not on the sort of scale that would alter the outcome. One of the points made earlier is important: when the votes are taken, there is a 25% minimum threshold, but that can be raised. In practice, it generally does not go below 40%, but it is possible to raise the threshold. We will be watching carefully to see how this is taken forward.

1.30 pm

It is important that these things are done on the basis of consensus and that there is goodwill all round. Generally,

from what I have heard so far, the desire is there among traders to take these things forward. They really want to see it be a success, and I do not foresee a scenario where people are in an area where there is such a proliferation of charity shops. You are dealing with significant areas. There might be a proliferation in one street, but you are dealing with quite significant areas, so I do not foresee that situation arising.

Amendment No 1 agreed to.

Clause 6, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 7 to 18 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 19 (Further provision as to regulations)

Amendment No 2 made: In page 7, line 26, at end insert "() section 6(3);". — [Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development).]

Amendment No 3 made: In page 7, line 27, at end insert "() section 17(2)(b);". — [Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development).]

Clause 19, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 20 to 22 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Business Improvement Districts Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Committee Business

Statutory Committee Activity on European Issues May 2011 to August 2012: COFMDFM Report

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 15 minutes to propose and 15 minutes to wind. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Nesbitt (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the report of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (NIA/81/11-15) on Statutory Committee activity on European issues May 2011 - August 2012.

The report that the Committee is today asking the Assembly to note is the second of its type and provides an overview of the engagement of Statutory Committees with European issues and consideration of European policy and legislation between May 2011 and August 2012.

Periodic reporting of Committee work on European issues was one of the key actions on foot of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's inquiry into the consideration of European issues that was approved by the Assembly on 26 January 2010. Action 2 of that report stated:

"The Assembly's statutory committees will be responsible for the scrutiny of all European issues of relevance to the committee. In the autumn of each year statutory committees will be requested to provide a report of activity on European issues to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will formulate all contributions into one report to the Assembly which will be submitted to the Business Committee for Plenary debate."

As a newly devolved European region, Northern Ireland is naturally interested in developments at a European level, and many laws and policies of the European Union have a direct effect on the people of Northern Ireland. The European Union has greatly contributed to economic development in Northern Ireland and to the reconciliation process, including measures through INTERREG and Peace funding. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) has overall responsibility for the development of Northern Ireland's strategic approach to Europe. The OFMDFM Committee has responsibility for scrutinising the Department's work on Europe and takes great interest in the Executive's strategic approach to ensuring that Northern Ireland improves its interaction and engagement with the various institutions and makes the most of the opportunities afforded by the European Union. In July last year, the Committee wrote to all Statutory Committees requesting information on their engagement on European issues between May 2011 and August of last year. The report collates the work of Statutory Committees on all EU issues.

I shall now briefly outline the work of my Committee on EU issues in the period from May 2011 to August 2012, and I look forward to hearing other Committee Chairs and Members speak to the detail of the work of their respective Committees. In June 2011, the Committee established a European advisory panel to help to inform consideration of European issues by Committees and by the Assembly. The panel comprises Northern Ireland's three MEPs, our representatives on the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, as well as officials from the EU Commission office in Belfast, the Executive's office in Brussels and local government. Chairs of Statutory Committees were also invited when the subject of the panel meeting related to their Committee work. They made valuable contributions.

In November 2011, the panel focused on the Commission's CAP proposals for 2014 to 2020, which the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development is considering. In March 2012, the panel considered regional transport and cohesion proposals and, in particular, the possibility of Peace IV funding. In June 2012, the panel focused on the opportunities available in research and development through the proposed Horizon 2020 programme. The panel meetings were welcomed and well attended by participants, and I thank Committee Chairs for their contributions and all stakeholders and departmental officials who participated.

In October 2011, the Committee visited Edinburgh and Brussels. During the visit, the Committee gained a useful insight into key EU issues, particularly on structural and cohesion funds, by meeting those with expert knowledge of those issues. Members found the visit beneficial and will seek to build on the contacts and networks established. The visit also helped the Committee to gain an understanding of how countries holding the rotating presidency of the EU developed the agenda for their six-month presidency and the possibilities of influencing that agenda or benefiting from it. That was timely in the run-up to the current Irish presidency of the EU and our membership of the EC-UK forum. In January 2012, the Chairperson attended a meeting of that forum in Edinburgh. The EC-UK forum is a twice-yearly meeting of the Chairs of UK Committees with responsibility for European issues. At that meeting, a number of issues were discussed, including the euro zone crisis, the European Commission's work programme and subsidiarity. I hosted the most recent EC-UK forum meeting here in Parliament Buildings, and, with the agreement of other Chairs, we invited the Chair of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on European Affairs, Mr Dominic Hannigan TD, to attend as an observer. At the same meeting, Chairs were briefed by the Irish European Minister, Lucinda Creighton TD, on the forthcoming Irish presidency. On foot of this engagement, the Committee intends to visit Dublin in the near future to meet the Joint Oireachtas Committee on European Affairs, and I have been invited by Mr Hannigan to attend as an observer the meeting of the Conference of European Affairs Committees (COSAC) that he is hosting in Dublin on 28 January. COSAC is the conference of the EU committees of the national Parliaments of EU member states.

During the reporting period, the Committee played a key role in the review of the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive and the Executive's work in Europe, including the work of the Barroso task force, and considered and responded to the Executive's draft European priorities

for 2012. The Executive have appointed four new desk officers in Brussels to take forward the thematic areas set out in their European priorities, namely competitiveness and employment; innovation and technology; climate change and energy; and social cohesion. In July 2012, the Committee sought an update from the head of the Executive's office in Brussels on the progress of the four desk officers and the work of the Barroso task force. The work of the task force, at Commission level and at working group level, remains an area of interest for the Committee, and it will focus on this area when it visits Brussels at the end of this month and meets the head of the Brussels office and those four desk officers.

The Committee, in its report on the draft Programme for Government, agreed that the PFG should make greater reference to Europe and the opportunities that it offers. In particular, it should reference the Executive's commitment to increasing the uptake of European funding by 20% over the period up to 2015. The Committee also agreed that it would like a commitment in the Programme for Government to greater engagement in Europe and with the European institutions. It also agreed that the European priorities document would provide the milestones and outcomes for that commitment. The Committee was pleased to note that the Department included a commitment to increase the uptake of competitive funds by 20% across all Departments.

Between March and June 2012, the Committee considered the Race Relations Order (Amendment) Regulations 2012, brought forward on foot of the threat of infraction proceedings by the European Commission. Similar regulations were introduced at Westminster by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. The regulations would remove the right of employers employing seafarers to pay them different rates on the basis of a seafarer's home port. The differentials in pay on the basis of nationality amounted to indirect discrimination, as most of those affected were migrant workers. The Committee raised with the Department two main concerns about the proposed order. The first concern was the lack of an accurate estimate of the cost of implementing the order or, indeed, broadening its scope and the lack of information about its possible effect on the fishing fleet. The second concern was the scope of the order in that it would still leave some foreign seafarers without protection, specifically those beyond the European Economic Area (EEA). Given the imminence of EU infraction proceedings, the Committee agreed that it was content with the order, and the Department's commitment to come back to the Committee in the new session with further information on the issues was welcomed. Indeed, we are scheduled to have that briefing at this week's Committee meeting.

On the general issue of the timing of the Department's introducing draft regulations to give effect to EU legislation or, indeed, decisions of the European Court of Justice, as recently was the case with gender-neutral insurance premium regulations, the Committee has now written to the Department to ask for details of areas where the Department is aware that such regulations will be required this year and next. It is important that such draft regulations are brought forward in a timely manner so that Statutory Committees have sufficient time to consider them and their full implications.

1.45 pm

Following on from the Committee's inquiry into the consideration of European issues in January 2010 and from the Northern Ireland Assembly's European engagement strategy of February 2011, the Assembly appointed a European project manager to consider the Assembly and Committees' engagement with the European Union and to develop options for improving our work. That work is ongoing, and a report to the Assembly Commission is due in June of this year.

As part of that work, Committees are considering the Research and Information Service's analysis of the European Commission's work programme. It was published in early November and includes details of proposed actions for the year ahead and provides an early indication of forthcoming activity. As a pilot project, the OFMDFM Committee commissioned an analysis of the work programme by the Research and Information Service and asked it to prioritise items falling within the remit of each Statutory Committee on the basis of significance for Northern Ireland, the potential for the Committees and the Assembly to influence or engage on an issue and Committees' current areas of interest. The relevant section of the analysis was sent to each Committee in December, and it is envisaged that Assembly researchers will engage with Committees this month and early next month to discuss the analysis and to facilitate Committees in setting their own European priorities for 2013. Following consideration of that analysis, Committees are asked to identify and agree EU priority issues, as well as the steps that they plan to take to engage on those issues. The OFMDFM Committee looks forward to hearing back from Statutory Committees on their European priorities.

Throughout this process, we look forward to seeing the Assembly and its Committees enhance our engagement with the European institutions and ensure that our respective Departments and their arm's-length bodies work effectively both in Europe and at home, so that Northern Ireland seizes the opportunities afforded by Europe and European funding programmes and realises concrete benefits for them.

I thank the members of my Committee and Committees generally for their input to the report, and I look forward to hearing from Chairpersons and members on their Committees' work. I commend the motion and the report to the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: Mr Moutray has five minutes.

Mr Moutray: I wish to contribute to the debate concerning the work that has been done and continues to be done with Europe. Obviously, the period that we are specifically looking at is outlined in the motion: May 2011 to August 2012.

The report outlines clearly the work that each Committee is doing. This form of reporting back to OFMDFM has given each Member a clearer picture of the ongoing work. It also allows us to see gaps in the system and issues that need to be explored further.

At the outset, I highlight my party's belief that our position in the EU should be voted on, given that the last time that the people of the United Kingdom had their say was some 37 years ago. We contribute extortionate amounts to the EU, and unfortunately the return is a far cry from the investment. It is time to give the people a say in this

important matter. However, while we are in the EU, it is vital that we in Northern Ireland ensure that we extract as much financial benefit as possible.

I support the call to note the report and continue with the ongoing work. I intend to keep my remarks to a minimum, but I wish to mention a few pertinent points in the report.

Europe cannot be discussed without our immediately thinking of the rural dwellers, particularly farming families, who very much depend on their single farm payment, especially at this difficult time, when banks are not lending as they once did. I commend the Committee for its focus on this matter and particularly that on the financial corrections levy. I also note with interest from the report that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development has been working hard to familiarise itself with the CAP reforms and is in a strong position to fight the corner for our farming community. That Committee has been engaging with all the relevant stakeholders and gathering evidence so that it can be in a strong position to respond. I also believe that the evidence that it has gathered will undoubtedly assist the Committee when it lobbies Simon Coveney, the Irish Agriculture Minister, on the Irish presidency's agriculture policies. At present, this is the biggest issue facing us from Europe, and, if it is not handled correctly, it will have a serious impact on all our rural communities.

The report from the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure notes clearly the need for further interaction, and I support that. However, I welcome its more recent work in this regard. I will be asking specific questions around the creative industries matter highlighted in the report, given the focus of the Programme for Government. I also believe that the Committee should continue to work with local government to ensure that it maximises funding and utilises its position to the maximum.

In many ways, the Department of the Environment is one of the Departments that has the most interaction with Europe, because of the fact that many of the rules and regulations around the environment emanate from Europe. The House is all too aware that European legislation underpins much of what is enacted here whether we like it or not. I note that the Committee for the Environment has been active in contacting the Department regularly to find out how much money has been drawn down from Europe and what it is doing to help other applicants. That is certainly welcome, and all Committees should take note of that point and carry out a similar activity.

I commend the Committee for its scrutiny of the Strangford lough special area of conservation and for its report on the approach that DOE and DARD have taken over the years and the fact that a restoration plan for the lough had not been put in place. That left Northern Ireland facing an infraction fine from Europe. That situation highlights the need for a more joined-up approach.

The Environment Committee's report also notes the wild birds directive and the fact that the Committee felt that the Department was not doing enough to meet the requirements. Given the directive's importance, I welcome the fact that the Committee has been working on that matter, as we do not want an infraction fine.

As regards the report from the Committee for Finance and Personnel, the most pertinent point that it is pursuing is its work with DFP on the development of future Peace

and INTERREG programmes, given the problems that there have been in the past and the need to make improvements.

As I draw my remarks to a close, it would be remiss of me not to mention the fact that threaded throughout the report is the need for further work from the House and from each Department on the drawing down of funding from Europe. Let us not shelve the report. Let us build on it and continually review it.

Mr Lynch (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá mé ag labhairt inniu mar LeasChathaoirleach. I am speaking as the Deputy Chair.

The Committee for Regional Development is a very strong advocate of engagement in the European Union. The Committee has engaged in and sought to influence the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) programme and the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), particularly as the proposed policies would have seen the island of Ireland further isolated in Europe, with the very real potential of our being unable to access the significant transport budgets that were and still are being negotiated. In my opinion, it was just as well that we did.

On visiting the European Parliament and the Commission, members of our delegation were shocked to discover how little was known or understood about the North of Ireland and its transport infrastructure. There was a belief that, because the North is seen to be part of Britain, we could be easily accessed by rail from mainland Europe through the channel tunnel. Members had to resort to unfolding an AA road map to show that Ireland was geographically separated from the rest of Britain by the Irish Sea. On top of that, the rail gauges in Europe, the rest of Britain and Ireland differ significantly.

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

I stand to be corrected, but I believe that, for the first time, representatives of a Committee of the House were afforded the opportunity to talk directly to the rapporteurs gathering evidence for TEN-T and CEF proposals. Following that initial contact, the Committee was invited to attend a rapporteurs' stakeholder event, which was attended by Mr Moutray and me and afforded us full opportunity to influence the rapporteurs and other members of the EU Transport Committee. We were then able to feed our experiences and contacts into the Department. The Committee is aware that, since then, the Minister has had at least two visits to Brussels and Strasbourg to meet other key European politicians.

I am delighted to conclude this contribution to the debate by advising the House that this engagement, along with that of our MEPs and Ministers, has brought about changes to key parts of TEN-T and CEF proposals that are of benefit to the North and to the rest of Ireland. We will be exempt from having to meet costly rail infrastructure standards, specifically because the island of Ireland has an isolated rail network. This represents a significant saving to our future budgets. Secondly, we have increased our potential for accessing CEF funding opportunities for projects that will improve hinterland connections to the ports of Larne and Belfast. These successes would not have been achieved without a collaborative approach by the MEPs, the Minister and members of the Committee for Regional Development. They are an example of what can

be achieved for the benefit of our infrastructure and, most importantly, for the benefit of our constituents.

I encourage members of other Committees to go to Brussels, meet the politicians and discuss the issues that are important to us. We do not intend to rest on our laurels, because there is still much that needs to be done, but we are encouraged that what we do and what we say gets listened to, gets acted on and brings benefits. The Committee for Regional Development commends the report.

Mr Eastwood: The report is a detailed demonstration of the breadth and depth of the influence on and relevance to our own politics of European issues. There are those — some of them are in the House — who would suggest that the European project is a malign influence and an intrusive interference in our decision-making. This report sweeps away such uninformed ignorance. The substance of the report gives clear evidence that, on the major themes of infrastructure, agriculture, Peace moneys and business development, the EU and its impact play a massively positive role for the people of the North. Access to a single market, the continued audience that we receive at the highest levels in Europe and the various funds that we avail ourselves of ensure that we are massive net beneficiaries from the EU. The evidence of all those benefits can be seen across the North today. Many of our highest profile projects, such as Derry's Peace Bridge and the Maze/Long Kesh, have sought and received European moneys for their implementation.

The SDLP has been the only major party consistently advocating for 30 years the benefits of the European Union. The Euro-scepticism of others has not helped in this legacy of all-round benefit. Of course, there are directives that appear and undoubtedly are, at times, cumbersome, restrictive or even irrelevant, though such is the nature of any institution of such size and complexity. Amidst the speed of change currently engulfing the EU, there should be a chance to solve some of the negative aspects of its bureaucracy.

The overall picture of the report is of European opportunities that we have only begun to discover. If grasped, there exist many avenues of co-operation that could act to significantly improve our economic and social fabric. We have some way to go in our expertise of applying for European funds. The recent failure in the application for the Titanic Quarter is a very high-profile and high-cost example of that. There is not a Department in the Executive that should not be preparing to submit applications to the Horizon 2020 fund, for example. As evidenced from the recent IDA report, the South is already a long way along that road. My SDLP colleagues will speak in more detail later about the issues in their Committees, such as CAP reform, the common fisheries policy, single farm payments, structural funds, TEN-T and other issues.

As the British Prime Minister intends to instigate a possible long goodbye from the EU, it is all the more important that we emphasise the great benefits that the EU has provided for this part of the world. David Cameron and the Tory Party's assessment of the EU is very much an English analysis based on the English experience. The Irish experience is one of infrastructural investment, huge advancements in agriculture and consistent commitment to the principles and policies of peace. At these times of crisis and change for the EU, it is all the more important that our experience and voice are heard.

2.00 pm

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): On 5 October 2012, the Committee for the Environment provided a report to the OFMDFM Committee on its activity on European issues between May 2011 and August 2012.

The Committee wants to see more done to secure European funding. Members are particularly disappointed by the poor uptake of LIFE+ funding, which is available for major environmental projects. The Committee also maintains pressure on the Department to avoid European fines by requesting quarterly updates on potential areas of infraction and monitoring the Department's implementation of the required EU legislation. With that in mind, the Environment Committee has maintained a watchful eye on the Strangford lough special area of conservation, which, I think, Mr Mouray mentioned. The failure of DOE and DARD to implement a restoration plan for the lough left us on the brink of huge fines. Last January, Members tabled a motion to voice their concerns, and I am pleased to report that a new restoration plan has been prepared, which the Committee will continue to monitor.

Ensuring that EU legislation is introduced and implemented properly is only one aspect of Committee scrutiny. Over the past year, the Environment Committee has become increasingly engaged in trying to get involved in and influence European proposals at a much earlier stage so that they deliver the benefits intended by the Commission in a way that minimises any detrimental impact here in Northern Ireland. The Committee has been advised that there is an early warning system to let Assembly Committees know about new EU proposals, but that is clearly failing, as the Environment Committee has been receiving information far too late to influence EU policy through official channels.

Last July, the Assembly's EU scrutiny co-ordinator told the Committee that the European Commission was introducing proposals that would radically change MOT testing here. The proposals were aimed at improving road safety across Europe, but, as drafted, they would have seen small businesses in Northern Ireland incur significant costs, while probably not reducing road deaths at all. The Committee was disappointed that the Department had failed to inform it about the proposals, because it left the Committee insufficient time to make its concerns known through OFMDFM. Instead, the Committee spoke directly to the Chairperson of the House of Lords EU subcommittee dealing with the proposals. Our concerns were subsequently referenced in its report to the Secretary of State for Transport, thereby contributing to the official UK position on the proposals. I am pleased to say that a working group has since amended the proposals, and they now largely address our concerns. That shows that Northern Ireland Assembly Committees can influence European policy, provided that we are given sufficient notice. Accordingly, the Committee welcomes and supports the work of the Assembly's European scrutiny officer, who is currently looking at methods of improving the processes for early engagement. In the interim, the Committee will continue its rigorous scrutiny of the Department's uptake of EU funding and the implementation of EU legislation and, most importantly, will monitor closely forthcoming EU policy at an early stage.

Mr G Robinson: The junior Minister Mr Bell informed me during OFMDFM Question Time last week that the drawdown of European funding for Departments is well on track to meet, if not exceed, the £53 million target. I welcome that positive news. That shows that Departments are seeking full use of available European funding that is relevant to them. A drawdown of £53 million over the four-year period 2011-15 provides a much-needed financial injection for our economy.

One of the pillars of our economy is agriculture. While the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) has been subject to financial corrections over single farm payments, it is essential that we maximise the work done to support our farmers. The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) has examined EU directives regarding agency workers. The Assembly supported the Committee's position of ensuring that temporary workers are treated in an acceptable manner and that the costs to business are minimised.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) has continued to work on drawing down regional aid. That, again, is a practical issue as it directly reduces Executive costs in some capital expenditure projects.

The Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) has also had direct dealings with EU bodies on Peace III and INTERREG programmes, and the development of Peace IV. Those are just a few examples of how the Executive continue to seek the best for Northern Ireland through Europe. I urge all Ministers to keep their eye on all possible funding for their Departments. I support the report and urge a continuation and expansion of all existing efforts.

Ms McGahan: This report provides an overview of the Statutory Committees' engagement with European issues and consideration of EU policy and legislation.

In January 2010, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister issued a report on its inquiry into the consideration of European issues, calling for enhanced engagement and improved communication with European institutions. That was approved by the Assembly.

OFMDFM has overall responsibility for the development of the North of Ireland's strategic approach to Europe. Twelve action points were brought forward by the Committee relating to the Statutory Committees, and 17 recommendations for the Speaker, all about gaining a better understanding of the mechanics of EU programmes and policies, and being proactive in seeking opportunities for Ministers to be actively engaged.

This is an important area of work, as many laws and policies of the EU have a direct impact on the people in the North of Ireland. The EU is making decisions that affect us. I read that 70% of legislation that the Assembly deals with originates in Brussels, so it is important that we are in there shaping and influencing decision-making in Europe and not, as someone said, gold-plating legislation.

Some of the reports show in a tangible way the improved interaction with EU institutions. Playing a more active role in shaping EU policy will enable us to benefit from the opportunities it provides. One good example regarding the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) keeping a watching brief on the 'Creative Europe' programme 2014-2020 was that it was notified of a creative industries funding call and informed the Arts Council of that

opportunity. It was grateful for the Department highlighting that important issue.

To have an effective route it is important that Statutory Committees are developing and fostering that channel available to us via the Executive office in Brussels. We have to ask ourselves how we harness and use that important position in Brussels. How do we engage more effectively with that office, which is vital? Statutory Committees need to identify which policies are the most pertinent and useful and have most impact. We need to move from being reactive to being proactive to shape and influence. Obviously, that will be very difficult and demanding.

The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has implemented a number of actions in its European report. The Committee argued for the Executive to increase the uptake of European competitive funding by 20% across all Departments. That was agreed.

Integration, co-ordination and communication are vital to making an impact. It is important that Statutory Committees keep evaluating how their relationship can be improved and how to maximise and improve communications with the Brussels office regarding matters that are relevant to their Committees. The Assembly Committees have to be responsible for all EU issues of relevance, as is their duty. What you put in is what you get out. I commend the report.

Mrs Hale: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion on the report into Statutory Committee activity on European issues. The report illustrates just how much local business, farming, health and everyday life are impacted by decisions made in Europe, and how vigilant this House must remain to ensure that Northern Ireland plc is fairly represented.

The report displays the amount of work taking place in our devolved Administration around EU development and the significant role of OFMDFM in ensuring that we deliver on actions and recommendations, as well as in putting a vital voice into future policy. Various issues are covered in the report, and I wish to highlight just a few that I believe require additional focus.

I am sure that many farmers in my constituency, Lagan Valley, will welcome the fact that my party has been fighting in Europe to ensure that Northern Ireland's agrifood sector is adequately funded. There is still a need to continue to argue that CAP reform must promote policy that encourages profitable food production with less EU red tape. There are still many issues around the single farm payment, as has already been raised today. Like, I am sure, those of many other Members in the Chamber, my constituency office has been inundated with farmers who are either receiving incorrect payments or no payments at all. We must continue to push that issue and ensure that our local farmers are getting the correct entitlement during these difficult times. The Minister must ensure that her Department makes speedy and correct payments. While I must acknowledge that targets are being met, the process for inspected farms must be expedited.

Although not mentioned in the report, there is a need to further understand and readdress the plight of agriculture on a pan-European basis. That is in the light of the failing summer weather, cash flow and profit issues, suppressed farm gate prices, and the topical issue of fair pricing,

especially in relation to what many large retailers are prepared to pay for local produce.

I have some issues with the lack of EU funding being accessed to help support the development of medium- to large-scale environmental projects. While it is important to note that bureaucracy impinging on the fund may be off-putting, more needs to be done to ensure that potential applicants are fully supported throughout the entire process. This is a time when we are looking for environmental projects that will help raise recycling rates and promote landfill reduction and much-needed innovation in relation to the potential infraction fines. That fund could be vital, now and well into the future.

Looking to future developments, it is vital that all Departments, their respective Committees, this Chamber and elected EU Members push the EU on the issue of the potential Peace IV funding, regional transport and cohesion proposals, and the Horizon 2020 framework programme. I believe that Horizon 2020 may provide much-needed help to our Government in tackling societal challenges by bridging the gap between research and the market, helping innovative enterprises to develop their technological breakthroughs into viable products with real commercial potential.

An injection of further Peace funding would allow us to invest in more projects that promote integration and social cohesion among our local communities. While previous funding has been warmly received to help tackle social deprivation and promote a shared future, I am sure that many will agree that the establishment of a future fund would help to tackle some of the difficult challenges in our society, cementing greater peace and stability amongst those who are striving to create a lasting legacy.

I welcome the report. I note the great work that has been done to date. However, we must ensure that we strive to maximise the potential for Northern Ireland and our citizens within the European Union.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Chairman for bringing the report on European affairs to the Assembly. Potentially, a very important range of issues is being debated at this time. The SDLP has always been in favour of EU growth and development. Indeed, the SDLP would contend that Europe has been good for Northern Ireland.

There are some points I would like to raise, regarding agriculture in particular. Given that Ireland has taken up the presidency of the EU for the next six months, the current negotiations on CAP reform are crucial for Northern Ireland agriculture and, indeed, the regional economy. We are lucky at this stage that Ireland has started its six-month hosting of the presidency. Hopefully, the negotiations will go in favour of our interests.

2.15 pm

Agriculture contributes £378 million directly into our local economy. That is over double the UK GDP average for the region. Nearly 47,000 people are employed directly in agriculture. The single farm payment is crucial for farmers; it is one of the most important EU farm support grants that pertain. Many depend on it; none more so than those in the less-favoured areas. The LFACA, which is the less-favoured area compensatory allowance, has always been important to farmers from Northern Ireland, particularly those with higher level ground and less productive land.

There is a need to retain a connection between area-based support, such as the single farm payment, and actual farm production, such as the LFACA.

The cross-compliance issues in the proposed discussions from Brussels regarding greening and environmental factors are a cause for concern. There is concern about increased bureaucracy. It could result in many leaving farming, which would affect our wider agrifood sector in Northern Ireland. We cannot allow greening to take over. Farm production must be allowed to grow. Greening could affect the diversity of agriculture. Farmland across Northern Ireland varies in quality and productive capacity. Therefore, CAP support needs to be tailored and tweaked in the interests of the Northern Ireland farming community as a whole across the region. Some of the environmental issues of pillar 1 are already achieved through the agrienvironmental measures of pillar 2. That could be built on to provide enough safeguards for the environmental issues alongside farm production.

Food security is an important part of the agenda, as we need to sustain our own food production. It is important for Northern Ireland, in particular, as its agrifood sector is central to the economy. It is the biggest contributor to our local economy: the agrifood industry, overall, totals a £4 billion industry. It is a very big GDP contributor. Food safety is also very important for consumers at home and abroad. The recent controversy about beefburgers and the horse DNA that was present in some products that were tested is a reminder of the importance of food safety and security.

Some of the wording of the draft proposal from Brussels is open to interpretation. One example is "permanent pastures". The soils are designated as carbon-rich, and thus permanent pasture would not be able to be ploughed. That could lead to a contraction in the range and extent of farm production here in Northern Ireland.

The common fisheries policy is also very important to Northern Ireland. The recent conclusion of the 2012 discussions on fishing for 2013 has been relatively good for Northern Ireland. The prawns increase by 6% means that a £17 million industry in Kilkeel can have some certainty for the next number of years. We want to see a stronger common fisheries policy that meets the needs of the regional economy here in Northern Ireland to make sure that the three fishing ports are sustained and can grow into the future.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that the strong representation that was made by representatives of the fishing industry, along with our Agriculture Minister, brought results this year? That is in contrast to other years, when it was always the other way around.

Mr Byrne: I thank Mr McCarthy for his point. I accept that those with fishing interests who operate from Kilkeel have developed a very strong lobby. That has been important for Northern Ireland.

Rural development is crucial for Northern Ireland. There have been some excellent rural development projects through EU funding over a number of years. The countryside management scheme has also been important. However, I think that it is fair to say that farmers feel that the modulation moneys that are attributed to them have been used for some community development

projects that they would question the merit and value of to the farming industry. CAP reform negotiations are a major issue, and the interests of the farmer must be protected. As all MLAs who represent rural areas will verify, much of their caseloads are taken up by farmers and the single farm payment problem —

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

Mr Byrne: I commend the report. We hope that, over the next six months, the negotiating strategy of the Executive will benefit our regional economy to the maximum.

Mr Givan: I am pleased to speak to the motion today on behalf of the Committee for Justice. Since the Committee was established, it has consistently and diligently scrutinised European issues relating to justice and home affairs matters. The Committee has welcomed some of those interventions from Europe. However, Europe makes other interventions, particularly in respect of human rights, that we regard as interference in the sovereignty of the United Kingdom and that we do not like or appreciate. That is why we support the changes that need to be made in Europe so that it properly takes account of the sovereignty of this kingdom.

Members will be aware that the Lisbon Treaty, which was ratified by all 27 member states of the EU in December 2009, established the principle of increased legal co-operation based on mutual recognition. That is predicated on member states acknowledging that the decisions adopted by other legal systems in other member states are valid and applicable. The treaty also enables the European Union to develop and propose legislation that relates to civil and criminal justice and security measures. Once a measure is adopted, member states will be bound by it and will be required to implement it nationally. The aim is to enhance mutual legal assistance between member states and provide a minimum standard of protection to EU citizens in civil and criminal proceedings.

The United Kingdom Government negotiated an opt-in protocol in the Lisbon Treaty that enables them to decide, within three months of an EU initiative relating to justice and home affairs being published, whether to opt in. When considering whether to opt in, they seek the views of the devolved Administrations, and the Minister of Justice consults with the Committee on any proposals. To assist with the consideration of proposals, the Committee has asked the Department of Justice to provide relevant information on the likely implications for Northern Ireland. EU proposals for legislation that the Committee has considered during the period being reported on include a proposal for a European procedure for freezing bank accounts in civil proceedings with a cross-border element; a proposal for recognition and enforcement of judgements in civil and commercial matters; a proposal on the freezing and confiscation of the proceeds of crime in the European Union; and a proposal relating to the 1980 Hague convention on child abduction.

As well as considering proposals for EU legislation, the Committee has spent considerable time looking at the legislative and other changes that are required as a consequence of the decision to opt in to the EU directive on human trafficking. The Committee recently completed the Committee Stage of the Criminal Justice Bill and supported the inclusion of two new offences that are

necessary to ensure compliance with the EU directive. The new offences cover UK residents who have not previously been trafficked into the UK being trafficked within the UK — for example, from London to Belfast — and allow for the prosecution of UK nationals who have trafficked someone anywhere outside the United Kingdom. The Committee also continues to scrutinise and discuss the approach being adopted by the Department of Justice to implement other aspects of the directive, and our consideration has been informed by a research paper that we commissioned on the legislation and procedures that are in place, or being taken forward, by other EU countries to implement the directive.

The Committee also looked at the framework decision on the mutual recognition of probation measures, licence supervision and alternative sanctions across member states of the European Union. Following a consultation exercise, the Committee agreed that the Minister should legislate —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: In one second. The Committee agreed that the Minister should legislate in the next justice Bill to permit the mutual recognition of judgements and probation decisions. I will give way to the Member.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. I have listened intently to the range of very important issues across child safety and child protection that the EU has the potential to act on. I welcome their inclusion. Does the Member share my disappointment that none of the four Ministers who could have been here to answer the Committees' enquiries and respond to the report is present?

Mr Givan: Are any of those Ministers from my party? If not, those Members should, quite rightly, have been here. If they are from other parties, Members should, quite rightly, be annoyed, but if any of them are from my party, I take it all back. *[Laughter.]* Other issues that the Committee considered include the initial implementation plans for the 2007 Hague Convention on the International Recovery of Child Support and Other Forms of Family Maintenance; a statutory rule to amend the Carriage of Explosives Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010, to take account of an EU directive; and a proposed consultation to limit costs for environmental judicial review applications, to meet the requirements of the EU public participation directive. The Committee also explored what measures the Department of Justice has taken to target EU funding streams and what engagement it has had with the Barroso task force.

As I have illustrated, the Committee has demonstrated a keen interest in EU issues relevant to justice, and it recognises the importance of scrutinising them to identify any particular implications for Northern Ireland. The Committee will, of course, continue to place great importance on this aspect of its work.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until then. This debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Dolores Kelly.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Regional Development

A5: Funding

1. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister for Regional Development for a breakdown of how the funding for the A5 will be allocated within the project. (AQO 3164/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development):

The Member will be aware of the ongoing legal challenge to the A5 project. I can advise, in that regard, that a substantive hearing is due to commence on 12 February, which is in the middle of next month. I recognise fully the importance of the A5 project to the Executive's key objective of growing the economy. I also recognise the benefits that the project will bring for journey times and jobs, both in the short to medium term and the longer term. Roads Service will, therefore, continue to robustly defend the legal challenge.

A total of £330 million has been allocated to construct the sections of the A5 between Londonderry and Strabane, and those between Omagh and Ballygawley. However, my Department will have to await the outcome of the legal challenge before the levels of funding that are needed in each financial year can be determined. I am pleased to confirm that co-operation between my Department and Department of Finance and Personnel officials has enabled some reprofiling of expenditure, which will allow for the deferral of the A5 allocation until it is required.

In addition, at my prompting the Finance Minister has secured flexibility from Her Majesty's Treasury to carry forward £50 million of reinvestment and reform initiative borrowing power into 2014-15. That additional flexibility is immensely helpful in managing the ongoing delay to the A5 project.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's response, and I certainly welcome the commencement of the judicial review. In the light of that, should the legal challenge be protracted, what steps are being taken to ensure that money that has been ring-fenced for the job goes to that specific project?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Minister — sorry; I thank the Member for his supplementary question. That is an early promotion for you in January, but not at the expense of the Ulster Unionist Party.

The short answer is that we are maintaining a strong defence of our actions on the A5 project, and we very much hope that that will successfully conclude and allow us to move forward.

Mr McAleer: Thank you, Minister. Recent figures that were produced through a freedom of information request showed that, during the period 2005-2010, there were nine deaths on the A4. That figure became zero after the road was dualled between 2010 and 2013. Does the Minister believe that the proposed A5 western transport corridor will help to reduce the number of road accidents and improve safety for road users?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I sympathise with those who have known the tragedy of loss in recent days as a result of road accidents or, indeed, related incidents. I certainly think that there is substantial proof that safety issues are helped where we improve the overall road infrastructure, wherever that may be. One of the reasons I continue, and want to continue, to bring forward projects all over Northern Ireland, is so that we can not only enhance the strategic road network but improve safety at key locations.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for his responses so far. Given the A5 legal challenge, has any preparatory work been able to have been undertaken?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I am pleased that, after the preliminary hearing in December on the A5, advance works, including fencing, vegetation management, archaeology studies, service diversions and ecology works, commenced and recommenced to prepare for the overall scheme. If things go well with the legal matters, we hope to begin the scheme in April this year.

Mr Dickson: Minister, further to your answer, do you think, given the protracted delays in the legal challenge, that it would be appropriate for your Department to bring forward projects — for example, the A6 at the Dungiven bypass or the A55 dualling at Knock — that have been approved?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary. Of course, he will be aware that works have commenced on the A8 scheme and, within a relatively short period, they will commence on the A2, which, of course, he will know about.

I continue to bring forward schemes, and I encourage and instruct my officials to bring forward schemes, such as those that he mentioned, in preparation for the next round of available finance. I am looking beyond spending the money on the A5 that has been allocated. As roads Minister, I want to see the infrastructure improved overall. To that extent, I am keen to bring forward projects, such as the ones that he mentioned, and others.

A6: Dungiven Bypass

2. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether the proposed funding for development work on the A6 project will prioritise the Dungiven bypass. (AQO 3165/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Northern Ireland Executive Budget 2011-15 allocated funds to continue development work of a dual carriageway from Londonderry to Dungiven, including a dual carriageway bypass of Dungiven, as one overall project. I am highly supportive of that particular scheme and, indeed, of a number of other significant projects, including the A26 Glarryford dualling, the York Street interchange and the A6 Randalstown to Castledawson.

I can confirm that planning development work for the complete Londonderry to Dungiven project is well advanced. Following the publication of draft orders for the overall scheme in December 2011, I approved the holding of a public inquiry to give objectors, supporters, Roads Service and others a fair opportunity to be heard and to put the case for and against the scheme. The public inquiry sat for six days between 24 September and 2 October 2012. The inspector expects to complete his

report before the end of March 2013. Having given careful consideration to his findings and recommendations, I will, in due course, issue a response in the form of a departmental statement.

Construction of the Londonderry to Dungiven project, including the Dungiven bypass, will be dependent on other competing priorities, such as those that I referred to earlier and future settlements.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he give any overall indication of any of the delivery time frames for any of the component parts of the A6, including the Dungiven bypass and the Castledawson to Randalstown stretch?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary. As I stated, planning for the scheme is well advanced. I hope to have all scheme development issues resolved by early 2014. The next stage would be to move to the procurement phase. It normally takes at least one year to go through the assessment procedures required to appoint a contractor.

The focus of the strategic road improvements in the current Budget period to 2015 is on the delivery of the A8, A5 and A2 dual carriageway schemes. Therefore, the A6 will be dependent on other competing priorities and subsequent budgetary settlements. As I said, I am a firm supporter of it and other schemes. There is clear logic and proof that if you improve the overall road infrastructure, it helps business, helps move tourists and helps everybody else.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister clarify whether he is aware of the impact on health and well-being that any delay to the Dungiven bypass will have on the local and wider commuter population?

Mr Kennedy: I am, and I thank the Minister — sorry, I thank the Member. There are a lot of Ministers floating about today.

Mr McNarry: There are a lot of vacancies now.

Mr Kennedy: There are no vacancies, by the way.

There will be substantial benefits from the Dungiven bypass scheme, not least the improvement of air quality and a reduction of something like 60% in the heavy vehicular traffic that goes through Dungiven.

For all those reasons, I am aware of the representations that have been made by Members, Limavady Borough Council and others. The scheme would be well worth doing. If the Member wants to approach the Minister of Finance and Personnel to assist me in delivering it at the earliest possible stage, I will not stand in his way.

Mrs D Kelly: Is the Minister willing to reverse the decision of the previous Minister for Regional Development to decouple the Dungiven bypass?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary question. We have made it clear that, if necessary, we can and will decouple it. We are not yet at that stage; there are processes to go through, and we will continue to progress both elements of that scheme, realising the potential benefits.

Car Parking/Public Transport: Christmas Support Package

3. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the impact of the relaxations on parking restrictions in town centres during the Christmas period. (AQO 3166/11-15)

9. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the success of the Christmas support package for shoppers and traders which he announced in November 2012. (AQO 3172/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will reply to questions 3 and 9 together as they concern similar or related issues.

I remind the Member that my Department did not introduce any measures of the type implied in his question. However, on 5 November 2012, I announced a package of measures aimed at providing assistance to shoppers and traders in the run-up to Christmas. In the main, those measures related to park-and-ride services in Belfast, Lisburn, Newry and Londonderry as well as public transport provisions.

In Belfast, the Metro £2 Saturday offer led to significant increases in patronage. For example, on Saturday 22 December 2012, Metro buses carried over 64,000 passengers, which was an incredible number. That was a clear signal that passenger journeys were up, in the run-up to Christmas in Belfast, by over a half, and revenue was up by over one third compared to the corresponding Saturday in 2011. Belfast was well and truly open for business, as it continues to be.

The park-and-ride offers also led to an increase in the usage of facilities, especially in Belfast, on Saturdays. In addition, the extra trains on the Belfast to Coleraine railway line proved very popular and resulted in increased usage. In Belfast, the success of the Christmas package added to recent improvements in the city, including the first phase of the Belfast on the Move project. So, compared to October and November 2011, Metro passenger journeys increased by around 1,500 a day and the use of Belfast-based park-and-ride sites increased by approximately one sixth.

Mr McNarry: The Minister has given an interesting answer, which I hope will be taken note of. In light of what he has just said, would he look favourably at new fare concessions to attract shoppers into Belfast at a time best suited to benefit the shops, cafes, restaurants and businesses in general, as well as stretching himself with selected relaxations on parking restrictions in Belfast and in our other town centres?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I have highlighted the very clear success of the reduced Saturday Metro fares. That is an operational matter for Translink, but were it to ask me, I would advise that if there is a way to continue the £2 promotional ticket, the traders in Belfast would certainly welcome it.

We continue to look at positive measures whereby we can help not only traders in Belfast but those in the towns and cities throughout Northern Ireland. We are in the business of making government work and making town centres work.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Danny Kinahan for a supplementary question.

Mr Kinahan: Are you calling me? I am sorry; I was not here.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You have been called because it is a grouped question.

Mr Kinahan: Yes; I was not aware that it was grouped.

When the Minister was looking at parking plans for our towns and villages, he quite rightly decided not to have special parking schemes for certain areas. How has that performed?

2.45 pm

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary — I think. [Laughter.] We brought forward a package of measures that were clearly designed to encourage trade in Belfast and other key centres. The Member will know that we have already announced that we will not be implementing on-street parking charges in towns across Northern Ireland; that remains the case. Indeed, I battled very hard and argued very strongly, and was very pleased that the Executive accepted my arguments that there should be a moratorium on price increases at car parks until 2015.

All those measures, combined with our special Christmas measures, particularly in relation to park-and-ride and Metro services in Belfast and other places, shows the commitment of myself, my Department and, I hope, the Executive to seek to do whatever we can to encourage trade in towns and cities the length and breadth of Northern Ireland.

Mr Campbell: Is the Minister prepared to convene a meeting of Translink senior officials and his own officials to look at a package of measures in the run-up to Christmas 2013 — now is the time to do it — whereby car park charges are not just frozen but reduced to give hard-pressed town-centre traders right across Northern Ireland a break at the busiest time of year?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary. I am happy to meet, of course. However, I suggest respectfully that we should also ask the Finance Minister to come along so that he can write the cheque for that. I am not against the idea in principle, but there are reasons why parking charges are applied. They help with the movement of traffic and avoid block parking and gridlock. The range of measures that we brought forward in 2012 were taken in clear consultation with chambers of commerce and other business organisations. We will continue to seek to do that as we move forward in the coming year.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Has the Minister consulted with chambers of commerce on the matter?

Mr Kennedy: I am not clear which chamber of commerce the Member is referring to. However, I can tell him that there are ongoing exchanges with members of Belfast Chamber of Commerce, other chambers of commerce and business organisations. My door is open. I am always pleased to meet and speak to representatives from the business community, whether it is Belfast Chamber of Commerce or other chambers of commerce throughout Northern Ireland. It is important that I, as a member of the Executive, listen to the concerns that are out there and try to do something about those to alleviate some of the

pressure that small businesses, in particular, are clearly under.

Car Parking: Lagan Valley

4. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister for Regional Development what revenue his Department received from parking enforcement notices issued in the Lagan Valley area in 2012. (AQO 3167/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Effective parking enforcement provides important traffic management benefits in cities and towns right across Northern Ireland. It contributes to improved road safety, helps reduce congestion and increases the availability of parking spaces in town and city centres for shoppers, promoting economic vitality in town centres.

I advise the Member that although revenue figures for penalty charge notices (PCNs) are not compiled on a town or constituency basis, the total 2011-12 PCN revenue figure for the whole of Northern Ireland was some £4.6 million. I also advise that the total cost of providing parking services exceeds the income generated from parking charges and PCNs. Figures for 2011-12 show a deficit of some £7 million in the provision of the service.

The main aim of the increase in the cost of a penalty charge notice, which I announced last year, was to deter illegal parking. In Lisburn, early indications show that the measure is having the desired effect. The number of PCNs issued in Lisburn reduced to 6,125 in 2012 from 7,626 in 2011, which is a reduction of 1,501.

Mr Craig: Given the high number — and it is quite a high number — of people being charged for parking offences in the town, can the Minister not look at some reduction measures? For example, making the first half an hour or hour of parking free in the city of Lisburn. The town centre is going through a very hard period, with high numbers of shops not being occupied, as the Minister well knows from his visit to the town.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I well remember that I paid a visit to Lisburn at the latter end of last year. I met traders and local representatives, and very useful it was, too.

Happily, the trend in the overall number of PCNs being issued is downwards. In 2012, from January to December, there were something like 112,700 penalty charge notices issued. That is a reduction on the 125,900 issued the previous year. So, the number issued is down 13,200 overall, it is down in Lisburn, and there is a consistent downward trend in the number issued in a great many of our town centres across Northern Ireland, including Belfast.

The Member suggested that we make the first half hour or first hour free. It is possible to do that, but there are costs involved in it. Obviously, we could not just do it in Lisburn; we would have to extend it across Northern Ireland. The envisaged cost of that would be £2.5 million, but there would also be a reduction in revenue to the tune of £3 million per year. When all those services already cost £7 million for taxpayers in Northern Ireland, we have to balance that against either adding to those costs or providing opportunities whereby, at least, we can point to significant success in that the overall numbers are down.

Mr Gardiner: The Minister gave figures for the number of PCNs issued in Lisburn in 2012 compared with 2011. Was

there a decrease in Northern Ireland as a whole? If so, by how many?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for that supplementary. I just covered that point. Obviously, I am pleased to get it out there that the number of PCNs issued is down by 11% — over 13,000. That is good news, and it proves that we are not simply in the business of putting tickets on cars or vehicles for no reason at all. There is a genuine attempt here to regulate traffic: it is not simply to cause nuisance or inconvenience. I very much hope that those figures continue to fall and that people will park properly and not illegally.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Following on from what the Minister has said, is any of the revenue generated through parking enforcement used for the likes of road maintenance or road safety measures? Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary. Generally, the income that is derived is fed back into the parking services that we provide, the upgrade and maintenance of car parks and other such measures. The Member will know that the road maintenance budget is something that I am particularly keen on enhancing, and I anticipate and hope that the Finance Minister, when he makes his statement on January monitoring, will give some alleviation and assistance to road structural maintenance.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister agree that enforcement penalty charges annoy a lot of people, particularly in provincial towns? Does he agree that an exchange rate of 57 pence sterling to €1 is a very heavy penalty for those paying in euro in car parks?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. He made a representation to me expressing his concern about the current exchange rate. That has not been looked at or reviewed for quite some time, and I will be in correspondence with the Member about that issue.

Ballywillan Road, Larne

5. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister for Regional Development why the decision was taken to close the Ballywillan Road in Larne. (AQO 3168/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Officials in Roads Service, having due regard for the safety of road users and contractors working on its behalf, took the decision to close the Ballywillan Road on Monday 7 January 2013 to allow urgent repairs to be carried out to the verge and carriageway that had subsided. The full road width was required to provide a safe working area for the contractor and his equipment and to allow excavations to be made without causing further damage to the already weakened roadside verges and carriageway. The Member will be aware that works were completed and the road was reopened to traffic on Thursday 10 January 2013.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his detailed answer. The Ballywillan Road forms the main arterial route between Carrickfergus and Larne, and because of the nature and positioning of that route, it is open to many environmental issues. Can the Minister and the Department give an assurance that the future stability of that route will be a priority?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. Safety is paramount, and I am grateful to the staff in my party colleague Roy Beggs's office who informed Roads Service of the subsidence on that section of road. The Department moved quickly to deal with that, and as maintenance issues arise on any road, be it Ballywillan or others, we have a duty and a responsibility to ensure that repairs are made as quickly and effectively as possible.

Mr Beggs: Closures of roads, such as Ballywillan Road, may be necessary on occasion to protect the public safety, particularly where there are geology and geography issues at hand. Can the Minister provide an update on road closures in another part of Larne, at Garron Point, where other challenges have effected possible road closures?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. As he will well know, the A2 coast road in Larne at Garron Point closed on Thursday 3 January for 12 weeks to accommodate the installation of rock face containment netting. That work involves a specialist rock netting contractor and aims to install a further 7,000 square metres of netting at two areas off Garron Point. Roads Service apologises for any inconvenience that the road closure may cause to road users during the works, and to minimise disruption, the adjacent Tower Road is signposted as a diversionary route. Roads Service will ensure that all works are completed in a sensitive manner that is appropriate for that area of outstanding natural beauty, and I understand that the works completed earlier this year were well received by elected representatives and the public, and no complaints were received about the 10-week road closure or the site works.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister comment on another type of road closure, namely permanent road closure and the abandonment of roads? Does he consider the process in place for abandonment to be unnecessarily cumbersome and a bit too long, or is he satisfied with the process as it is today?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member. We are a very long way from Ballywillan Road or, indeed, Garron Point in Larne. I assume that the Member has not been on horse burgers.

The issue is important, and I am looking at whether there are ways and means by which we could shorten the length of time and the processes involved. However, as the Member knows, in a democracy, people have to have the opportunity to put forward objections in a particular area for a particular reason, and that can potentially lead to a local inquiry.

So, all those things have to be carefully considered, and I will write to and update the Member on my current thinking on it.

3.00 pm

Social Development

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 4 and 6 have been withdrawn, and written answers are required.

Fort George: Redevelopment

1. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the current and future development of the Fort George site. (AQO 3178/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): There is much current and planned work for the Fort George site in Londonderry in 2013 and, indeed, in future years. My Department is continuing work with the North West Regional Science Park in the delivery of a 50,000-square-foot office complex that will establish a commercial and research centre in Londonderry as a satellite of the internationally acclaimed Northern Ireland Science Park. On the current programme, the science park expects to start construction work on the new facility in June 2013. My Department is also working with Roads Service in the delivery of a park-and-ride car park facility at Fort George, which will help to make a positive contribution to the UK City of Culture parking requirements for 2013. Work is currently under way and is scheduled to be completed by the end of February 2013.

Remediation work is expected to start on the site in spring 2013. The precise timescale for this work will, of course, be dependent on when the Northern Ireland Environment Agency agrees the remediation strategy for the site. In July 2012, Ilex submitted the development framework for Fort George to the Planning Service as an application for outline planning permission. The consideration of the planning application is ongoing. The implementation of the development framework will involve infrastructure works and the engagement of private sector partners to construct the planned development. The Department plans to begin this implementation phase in 2014, when the remediation work is complete.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his answer, and I welcome the commencement of work at Fort George. The success of the development of the Ebrington site, as seen by so many last night, shows exactly what potential exists at Fort George. What, if any, business interest has there been in the site and the science park, and what is being done to promote it to investors?

Mr McCausland: I think that the Member was at the launch of the North West Regional Science Park, which I also attended, in Londonderry some time ago, and he will be aware that we are some distance down the road yet from development. The remediation work has been completed, and construction work is to start in June. That will take a period of time, so, in due course, I will keep the Member informed about any business interest. As yet, my Department has not been involved in that.

Mr D McIlveen: What is the current position with the planning application for the development framework?

Mr McCausland: Given the significance of the site and the development proposals, the application is being processed as an article 31 project. This means that it is with DOE Planning Service headquarters for assessment, and I await the decision of the Minister of the Environment in that regard.

Fuel Poverty: Gas Network

2. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of tackling fuel poverty

for people in Northern Ireland Housing Executive homes by connecting them to the gas network where available. (AQO 3179/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive's current heating policy is to install gas central heating where gas is available. Where gas is not available, oil is the preferred option. The Housing Executive currently has a total of 36,394 properties with gas central heating. A review of the Housing Executive heating policy is currently being prepared for consultation. Any proposed changes to the heating policy must be approved by the Housing Executive board and by my Department.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he advise whether the phase 2 scheme at Hospital Lane in Limavady will include heating installation?

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that the planned phase 2 heating installation scheme for 57 dwellings at Hospital Lane is programmed for June 2013, with an estimated duration of 12 weeks. Subject to consultation with the tenants, all the properties will then have had gas central heating installed, which will complete the Housing Executive heating programme for Hospital Lane. You may wish to note that phase 1 of the scheme for Hospital Lane, for 45 dwellings, went on site in October 2012 and was completed in December 2012.

Mrs Overend: Does the Minister agree that the recent reduction in the overall proportion of households currently considered as being in fuel poverty from 44% to 42%, which is still significantly more than the 34% in 2006, is so insignificant that it is hardly worth boasting of?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we have a question, please?

Mrs Overend: Does the Minister agree that it is now clear that the direction he has taken and the strategies that he has often spoken of are failing to tackle the substantive causes of fuel poverty?

Mr McCausland: I do not agree. If the Member pays more attention to the issue and looks into it in more depth, she will come to understand that we are doing some important things with regard to fuel poverty.

As the Member is aware, fuel poverty results from three things: the energy efficiency of a home; the cost of fuel; and the level of income in a home. A number of things contribute to a higher level of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland, one of which is the high level of dependency on oil, and the work that my colleague in DETI is taking forward on the extension of the gas network is fundamental to addressing fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.

As well as continuing to deliver mainstream schemes — the warm homes scheme, the Housing Executive's heating replacement scheme, the benefits uptake campaign and the winter fuel and cold weather payments — my officials are working on other projects. In September, I announced the new boiler replacement scheme for owner-occupiers, following on from a successful pilot that ended in March last year. It offers up to £1,000 towards the cost of replacing an old, inefficient boiler to owner-occupier households with an income of less than £40,000. The Housing Executive has already received thousands of expressions of interest in the scheme, and applications are being processed. So a huge amount of work is being done on boiler replacement, which is extremely important for energy efficiency and fuel poverty. In one case, I visited

a home in which an elderly gentleman was able to tell me that the scheme had reduced the number of his fills of oil a year by one entire fill. That is very significant. On top of that, we have undertaken work to ensure that all Housing Executive properties by the end of this Assembly's mandate will have double glazing. That also improves energy efficiency, and more than 6,000 double-glazing installations —

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

Mr McCausland: — had been started by the end of December.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his responses so far. Has he taken on board and considered the fuel poverty report produced by the Social Development Committee?

Mr McCausland: Yes. The Department is looking at many of the things that the Committee looked at. It is clear that everyone, right across the Assembly — my Department, the Social Development Committee and the wider membership of the Assembly — recognises that the issue is a priority. We are already working on many of the suggestions and proposals and are keen to work further on them with the Committee's support.

Personal Independence Payments

3. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister for Social Development whether the assessment procedure for transfer from disability living allowance to personal independence payment will be monitored and scrutinised to avoid the difficulties experienced with work capability assessments. (AQO 3180/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I fully understand and appreciate that existing working age disability living allowance claimants may be anxious and concerned about the introduction of the personal independence payment. My Department, through the Social Security Agency, will be working to support people fully as they encounter the new benefit. I can confirm that the assessment process will be subject to robust monitoring arrangements to ensure that we get it right from the outset.

As I had previously called for a delay, I therefore publicly welcomed the recent decision by the Department for Work and Pensions to postpone the reassessment of existing disability living allowance claimants with indefinite awards for personal independence payment from January 2014 to October 2015. This delay will give the new benefit time to bed in and will ensure that the most vulnerable in Northern Ireland are properly protected. The first independent review of how the personal independence payment assessment is working will be completed by December 2014, long before commencement of the managed reassessment of existing DLA claimants. That will provide an additional safeguard and ensure that any emerging concerns about how the assessment process is working can be addressed prior to the reassessment of existing DLA claimants commencing.

I recognise the importance of ensuring that what is in place in Northern Ireland delivers a positive experience for claimants, and I am committed to having a transparent and empathetic claims and assessment process for the personal independence payment.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he give a guarantee to the Assembly that medical evidence will have primacy in the new assessments?

Mr McCausland: I believe that the new arrangements will produce a good outcome for claimants. I mentioned that it is our intention that there will be an empathetic approach to assessing claimants. As for the issues that will be looked at during the assessment, of course, medical evidence forms a crucial and central part of that. That has to be the case. However, it is also about the impact that the particular circumstances of the individual will have on that person's life. The core of this is about ensuring that we take into account fully the impact that a person's condition has on them. I noticed from newspaper cuttings over the weekend that people had raised issues about that and asked whether enough account will be taken of people with mental health problems and so on. Some of the things being said about the way forward are unnecessary and unfounded. In fact, one cutting from a north Belfast newspaper at the weekend did not know about the postponement that I just referred to. It was not even on their radar. Yet, after an interview with a community worker, that newspaper put out information that was totally wrong. So it is important that we get the information right and take the utmost care in moving forward.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a chuid freagraí go nuige. I am definitely intrigued by the Minister's assessment that there will be a good outcome for claimants. What assessment has been done by his Department of the impact of the mobility component of the personal independence payment and the proposed changes to the eligibility criteria, reducing the minimum from 50 metres to 20 metres, and of how many people are likely to be affected?

Mr McCausland: The change from 50 metres to 20 metres is intended to clarify the criteria after strong feedback in the consultation that the moving around activity in the final PIP assessment was unclear. We have taken that clear and strong feedback into account and noted it. Individuals who can move more than 20 metres can still receive the enhanced rate of the mobility component if they cannot move that distance safely, reliably, repeatedly and within a reasonable time. That provides a significant protection for individuals. Although these terms are not in legislation, they will apply to all activities in the assessment and will be included in guidance for the decision-makers and assessment providers.

3.15 pm

Mr Campbell: The Minister alluded to misinformation that is being circulated on the changes. Will the Minister undertake to examine the degree of misinformation that is out there and perhaps look at the Department's establishing very clear guidelines that could be distributed to people to ensure that they are clear about the changes, who they will impact and when they will take effect?

Mr McCausland: I welcome the Member's question. We have devoted quite a bit of time and effort to trying to ensure that good information is put out there. We have had strong engagement with stakeholders, and there has been regular communication with them throughout the process.

There has also been engagement with the media. That is dependent on the media taking that up and disseminating the information accurately. Unfortunately, as the Member indicates, a lot of totally inaccurate information is going out. That is a challenge, because it creates unnecessary and unfounded fears. I saw that particularly when David Freud was over some time ago and we met people from the victims' sector. I am glad that we have been able to make a response to them, and there has also been a response from the Victims' Commissioner. So, a lot of work is to be done to get accurate information out there about all aspects of welfare reform. That is difficult, because, unfortunately, there is a tendency for some folk to be rather cavalier with information.

Ms Lo: Has the Minister had any discussions with Westminster about the difficulties experienced with the work capability assessment?

Mr McCausland: Professor Harrington has reviewed the work capability assessment regularly. Virtually everything that he said should be done has been done, but I think that one or two issues that he raised are still being worked on. In fact, he has been quite positive about the way in which we have responded to his recommendations. He is the independent expert. We are dependent on his advice, and it is right that we have proper professional expertise and a proper review of the process. So, virtually everything that he has said should be done has either been done or, in one or two cases, is still in progress. That is the method by which you get change, and these are things that we can do ourselves. We need to have strong engagement with Westminster on the forthcoming changes, but work on the current work capability assessment has been ongoing through the contact with Professor Harrington.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Boiler Replacement Scheme

5. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the number of applications received for the boiler replacement scheme. (AQO 3182/11-15)

7. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the total number of approved applications for the boiler replacement scheme. (AQO 3184/11-15)

Mr McCausland: With the Deputy Speaker's permission, I will answer questions 5 and 7 together, as they raise similar issues.

There have been 10,040 applications received and 2,364 applications approved for the boiler replacement scheme.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his brief answer. Why is there such a differential between the number of applications received and the number of approvals that have been issued?

Mr McCausland: Whenever the Housing Executive receives an application from the householder, it carries out initial checks to verify income and home ownership before it can proceed to the next stage of the application process, which is to issue a boiler installer form. Of the 10,040 completed application forms received by the Housing Executive, 6,651 have moved to the second stage of the process; that is, the Housing Executive has issued installer forms to applicants. Some 2,829 of those have

been completed by the installer and have been returned to the Housing Executive, which verifies that the boiler being replaced is over 15 years old. The Housing Executive will then issue an approval form to the applicant to carry out the works. Currently, 2,364 approvals have been issued.

Mr Beggs: I notice that the successful early advertising for the replacement scheme, along with the latent demand, has created a backlog. When will that backlog be fully dealt with? When will the Minister be able to concentrate further on ensuring that the most vulnerable, who will benefit from more efficient boilers, are aware of the scheme and how it will benefit them?

Mr McCausland: The scheme has been in operation for only four months, so it is in the very early stages. As the Member notes, it is significant that there has been such a tremendous response to it. That says to me that it was the right scheme and the right way to spend that money. Every application is an endorsement of the scheme. I am quite confident that the funding allocated to the scheme for this year will be spent, owing to the number of applications already received. The scheme will run over a number of years, and I believe that we are making good progress.

On the timescale for an individual to get a response, what you find with these sorts of schemes is that, because they are so popular, there is a sudden surge of interest at the very start. We are making good progress, but a number of factors lead to delays. As the Member will be aware, there may be an issue if people who are offered a replacement boiler have to come up with some additional money or find the balance themselves.

At this early stage, it is hard to know exactly how the scheme will progress over time. However, the clear indication is that the money will be spent this year, and that is the priority.

Mr Agnew: Has the Department calculated the payback period for owners of, say, an average three-bedroom house who receive different levels of grant? That will obviously be a factor for homeowners when deciding whether it is in their interest to take up the scheme.

Mr McCausland: I do not have detailed figures for the payback period, because that will obviously depend on so many different things. A person's level of income will determine the level of grant that they receive and therefore the amount that they have to make up. It will also depend on other factors to do with the nature of the house in which the boiler is being installed. I gave the example earlier of what is effectively a one-third reduction in someone's oil bill. The Member will be well aware of the cost of oil at present. Therefore, if you save one third in a year, you will quickly get a payback.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn, and question 7 has already been dealt with.

Housing Executive: Staff

8. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister for Social Development, following his announcement on the proposals for the future of the Housing Executive, to outline how many jobs in the different business areas might be lost as a result. (AQO 3185/11-15)

12. **Ms McCorley** asked the Minister for Social Development what steps his Department has taken to

ensure the rights and entitlements of Housing Executive staff during the proposed process of change. (AQO 3189/11-15)

Mr McCausland: With the Deputy Speaker's permission, I will answer questions 8 and 12 together, as they raise similar issues.

My proposals for new housing structures are about providing a better service for tenants, better housing and a structure and system that ensures good value for money for the taxpayer. In essence, it is about creating a system that is sustainable. This is not about reducing staff, cutting back or saving money. In fact, the Member, who sits on the Social Development Committee, will be aware that the review was never about cutting jobs or saving money but about getting the structure right for Northern Ireland moving forward.

It is important to realise that there is still a need within the new structure for the functions that the Housing Executive performs, and staff will be required to continue to deliver those functions and services to tenants, albeit potentially within different organisations. NIPSA will be consulted as a key stakeholder representing the views and rights of staff throughout the process at a local and higher level. We must be cognisant of the fact that we are at a very early stage of a major project and there is still much work to be done on the design of the new structures and the impacts on staff. That is high on the agenda of the programme board, of which the chief executive of the Housing Executive is a member.

Let me be clear: it would be pre-emptive and totally wrong to start speculating at this stage. The fact is that I have stated repeatedly that this is not and never has been about culling jobs.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for his answer. After I submitted my question, he came to the Committee last week and provided a bit more clarification on the statement, for which I also thank him. I am sure that he understands that people fear for their job when there is such major change.

Will he give a bit more detail on the potential benefits of the new landlord function being outwith the public sector?

Mr McCausland: The Member will be aware that this affords an opportunity to address a major problem: we need more houses built, and we need better quality. Some Housing Executive stock — the older properties — need a tremendous amount of work done to them. We are talking about £1 billion of work in the short term to get all that stock up to the standard that we should be able to expect and that tenants should be able to expect. That sort of money is not available at the moment, but, if we move the stock eventually over to, effectively, the housing association sector, it will enable them to borrow money so that the work can, therefore, be funded.

I want to come back to one point: the concern of staff. I understand that. I have written to every staff member in the Housing Executive already, and there will be communication with the trade unions. I know that the chief executive of the Housing Executive has been writing to staff as well. What does not help is misinformation, and this comes back to the issue of welfare reform, which was raised earlier. If somebody had picked up one of our local newspapers on Saturday, they would have read that I had

announced that the Housing Executive is to be broken up and its range of roles transferred to housing associations. In actual fact, that is not the case. If we go down this road, we will create a regional housing body, staffed by housing professionals to carry out the regional services and roles. It is total misunderstanding. That sort of misinformation going out does not help and creates fears. If someone working in the Housing Executive reads that nonsense, I can understand why they would be concerned. There is a responsibility not just on politicians but on the media and others to get their facts right about these things. I am sure that the Member would agree with me in that regard.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuiochas a thabhairt don Aire as ucht an fhreagra. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Minister for his answers. Will he keep the trade unions fully informed of what implications there will be for staff throughout the process of the Housing Executive changes?

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for the question. Following the release of the written statement, my permanent secretary wrote to the general secretary of NIPSA advising that the Housing Executive will be asked to work with my officials in the development of this programme and that there will be consultation with trade union side representatives throughout the process. Indeed, work on this has already begun. Shortly after the issue of the written statement, my officials held an initial meeting with the chief executive and the Housing Executive's director of personnel and management services to address primary staff concerns and to agree to work jointly to allay staff anxieties. An invitation has also been issued to Alison Millar of NIPSA to discuss staffing concerns and anxieties with me, the DSD and Housing Executive officials.

Mr Dunne: Does the Minister recognise the good work done by Housing Executive staff, especially at district office level? Perhaps he will give us some assurance about what impact the changes will have at district level.

Mr McCausland: I hesitate to respond to that question in that we are at the very start of a long journey and there is a lot of work to be done over the next couple of years. It would be premature, presumptuous and pre-emptive of me to make categorical statements, because the work has not yet been carried out so that we know exactly the final shape of this new architecture or structure. What I will say is that the sort of functions that are being done by the Housing Executive now will still have to be done, and there will have to be engagement between people at local level and their housing provider. So, there is a need for us to be patient before we get to the point where we can actually spell out things in detail. As soon as we have information, it will be communicated, and there will be ongoing consultation with the Housing Executive at all levels and with the trade unions.

3.30 pm

Committee Business

Statutory Committee Activity on European Issues May 2011 to August 2012: COFMDFM Report

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the report of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (NIA/81/11-15) on Statutory Committee activity on European issues May 2011 - August 2012. — [Mr Nesbitt (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister).]

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate, and congratulate the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on bringing the motion to the House.

As other Members have said, over 70% of legislation here is influenced by or a direct result of the European Commission. Therefore, it has huge relevance to the lives of everyday people. A number of Members highlighted in their contributions the influence that the EU has across the environment, agriculture and, indeed, a number of justice and child safety issues.

I join my colleague Mr Joe Byrne in wishing the Irish Government well with their EU presidency in the six months ahead. Like other Members, I believe that that presents us in the North with an opportunity, particularly at this time, when the CAP proposals are being examined. The debate around the budget is critical, not least to our farming community.

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

Like others who contributed to the debate, I am somewhat disappointed at the lacklustre and, indeed, derogatory comments some Members made about the European Union. It was, after all, an historic agreement, which resulted in an absence of conflict on the scale that had been seen in the previous century. We would do well to remember why and how it came about. Many Members will know the influence of the European Convention on Human Rights. Over the past decades, a number of individuals in the North of Ireland have had to take their cases to Europe to get support. The European Union has had a significant contribution to make to the lives of ordinary men and women.

There is a great opportunity in the work of the EU, through Horizon 2020. Unfortunately, under the seventh framework programme (FP7), we did not see enough of a take-up in some of the research and development opportunities that were available to us. An awful lot more has to be done, in the Civil Service in particular, across all Departments. However, that has to be led by Ministers. As a previous member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I recall the welcome that the Barroso task force got, and the comments Mr Barroso made on the opportunities presented to us subsequent to the restoration of devolution. It is unfortunate that those opportunities have not been maximised by the current

Executive. I reiterate my disappointment that, even though there are four Ministers in OFMDFM, none of them has chosen to make themselves available for the debate.

The other experience I have had of the work of the EU was as a member of INTERREG organisations, which produced quite good results on a North/South and east-west basis. One of those opportunities was to build relationships, not only on the island of Ireland but between Ireland, North and South, and Great Britain; in particular, the axis with the coast of Scotland, where there are specific programmes. Again, I do not think that those opportunities have been maximised, partly because of the recession and the difficulties some Governments have in finding match funding. Indeed, some of that has been within the private sector. That is something that ought to be exploited. I would like to think that our MEPs are taking that particular case to Europe, to show ways in which, at this time of recession, other methodologies can be used to draw down funding.

Like, I am sure, all other parties here, it is fair to say that we remain very optimistic that Peace IV will be realised. We should all be singing off the one hymn sheet in so far as the Peace IV objectives are concerned, particularly when we look at how fragile —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Could the Member draw her remarks to a close, please?

Mrs D Kelly: — our peace process is. I hope that the message from this place to the EU is that we value the relationship and want to build on it.

Mr McGlone (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis na cainteoirí eile as páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht seo. My thanks to other Members who have contributed to the debate. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment considers European issues in areas relating to the economy and tourism. It is often difficult to consider European issues in isolation because they are integrated into the wider activities of the Department, Invest NI and the Utility Regulator. Indeed, because of the difficulties with recession, many of us look positively to Europe for some of the support and some direction as we seek to provide a positive future for many of our young people.

During the course of the past year, the Committee undertook its inquiry into innovation, research and development. The inquiry considered the programmes and opportunities that exist locally, on an all-island basis, from Britain, and, of course, on an EU and international basis. From an EU perspective, the Committee highlighted the need to increase involvement in EU programmes, such as what has already been mentioned: the seventh framework programme for collaborative programmes in research and development. During the course of that inquiry, we saw the reduction in red tape — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask Members to check that there are no phones on, even on vibrate mode. There is an irritating noise that is distracting Members. I ask Members to check their phones. There should not be any phones on in the Chamber.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will repeat that: from an EU perspective, the Committee highlighted the need to increase

involvement in EU programmes, such as the seventh framework programme for collaborative programmes in R&D. Throughout the course of that Committee inquiry, there was the requirement for a reduction in red tape, increased access to information, and making it generally more workable and accessible, especially for the small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector and microbusinesses.

The Committee also identified and highlighted the need for an integrated and focused approach to Horizon 2020, which is the next framework programme for R&D. It commences in 2014. Some of us have already spoken to Commissioner Geoghegan-Quinn in respect of Horizon 2020. She has sought further research and information around some of the difficulties that people had in accessing the first tranche of funding.

Following the announcement of a network of EU envoys to support the interests of small and medium-sized enterprises, the Committee took oral evidence from the office of the SME envoy and held an event for SMEs to engage with representatives from the office of the envoy. That resulted in an Assembly research paper to highlight the local perspective and inform the EU SME envoy of the particular needs and issues that are faced by local SMEs. The Committee has taken a particular interest in the revision of the Industrial Development Act 1982, and responded to the consultation from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

From the energy perspective, the Committee has closely followed the implementation of the EU third energy package — IME 3 — which is designed to support the integration of gas and electricity markets. The Committee recognises that many difficulties may arise as a result of the proposals, both locally and on a cross-border basis. That includes the need to strengthen the electricity grid and improve interconnection for gas and electricity. Since August 2012, the Committee has followed up on its actions in those areas, and it will continue to do so.

Mr Lyttle (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I am very grateful to all the MLAs and Committee Chairpersons who have contributed to the debate on the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's report on European engagement. It has been a very helpful debate. I place on record the Committee's thanks to the Northern Ireland representatives in Europe, including the MEPs, the members of the European Economic and Social Committee, and the members of the Committee of the Regions. The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and, I am sure, all other Committees have had the benefit of briefings from a wide range of key European bodies and stakeholders. I thank them for their input also. They include the European Commission's office in Belfast, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, the Northern Ireland European Regional Forum, OFMDFM's European division and Belfast City Council's European department.

I now turn to Members' contributions to the debate, and I think that we heard a large degree of consensus on the importance of engagement with Europe across a number of key issues. The Chair of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister stressed the importance of engagement with Europe for economic

development and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. He detailed the Committee's visits to Edinburgh and Brussels, which were particularly helpful in seeing how other Parliaments appoint at least one staff member to monitor European issues closely and at an early stage. We now have four desk officers for the Northern Ireland Executive in Europe and, of course, the Barroso task force. I also think that the appointment of the Assembly's European engagement officer will be useful in helping MLAs and Committees to engage with issues in Europe at an early stage.

Stephen Moutray MLA referred to the single farm payment and its importance. He also said that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development had paid particular attention to CAP reform and stated that that was the single biggest issue facing Northern Ireland from Europe at the moment. He also mentioned the engagement that had taken place with the Irish Agriculture Minister. From the perspective of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, he referred to the importance of Creative Europe 2014-2020, and he stated that the Environment Committee's scrutiny of Strangford Lough and the wild bird directive had been particularly helpful.

Seán Lynch MLA, the vice Chair of the Regional Development Committee, stressed how important engagement with Europe was for European transport policy and budgets. As he has done previously in the House, he referred to the relatively poor knowledge of the geographical location and infrastructure network of Northern Ireland in Europe. He also said how important it was for the Regional Development Committee to engage with Brussels to gain access to improved funds for transport and better policy for this region and our citizens.

Colum Eastwood MLA, a fellow member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, referred to the way in which European funds had contributed to some vital projects in Northern Ireland, not least the Peace Bridge in Derry. I want to take this opportunity to congratulate the city on the launch of the City of Culture 2013 last night. Unfortunately, I did not receive an invitation to the 'Sons and Daughters' concert, but it seemed to be a fantastic night. I wish everyone in that city and in Northern Ireland who is going to be involved in that well for the year ahead.

Colum also referred to the Maze/Long Kesh project and how important European funding for the peace and conflict resolution centre at that site could be to ongoing efforts to bed down a shared future in Northern Ireland. He also mentioned Horizon 2020, and I know that the Minister for Employment and Learning, our universities, our colleges and our businesses are collaborating to access improved funding from the research and development funds that are available from Europe.

Anna Lo MLA, the Chair of the Environment Committee, stressed how important Committee scrutiny of our Departments' engagement with Europe is. She detailed how scrutiny of the Department of the Environment had shown that the area of special conservation in Strangford Lough was in danger of being damaged and how, through that engagement, the Committee was able to instigate work with DARD and DOE to put an appropriate restoration plan in place and ensure that that area was preserved.

Anna Lo also stated how important it was to have early warning systems for EU proposals to make sure that we

can influence policy on behalf of people across Northern Ireland in a positive way. She gave another example of changes to MOT legislation that had the potential to cost SMEs across Northern Ireland and the work that her Committee did to connect with a House of Lords EU subcommittee and the UK Secretary of State for Transport. That demonstrates how Committees in the Northern Ireland Assembly can influence European policy in a constructive way.

3.45 pm

George Robinson MLA stated how £53 million of EU funding had been targeted for 2011-15 and that that funding was on track. He said that there was an opportunity to support our farmers and to make our employment practices consistent with those across Europe. He cited the example of overseas agency workers gaining improved conditions of employment as a result of directives from Europe.

Bronwyn McGahan MLA said that EU policy has a direct impact on all citizens across Northern Ireland and, indeed, that some 75% of legislation that affects us originates in Brussels. She said that the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee had examined the Creative Europe funding pot from the EU and was able to connect the Arts Council to that vital funding. She stated that we should be much more proactive rather than reactive in our approach to Europe.

Brenda Hale MLA stressed the importance of engagement with Europe to our farming and agrifood sector and said how important CAP reform will be to this region in making sure that we have profitable food production with less red tape but speedy and correct payments. From keeping in close contact with my Alliance Party colleague in Castlereagh Borough Council, Councillor Tim Morrow — himself a farmer — I know that it is hugely important to ensure that those payments are speedy, correct and put the least possible pressure on our farmers at this difficult time. Mrs Hale also said that elected representatives must work together to maximise funding from potential streams, such as Peace programmes and research and development funds.

Joe Byrne MLA emphasised, again, the significance of Europe to farming in this region, how vital CAP reform will be to the region and the need for us to influence it to meet the needs of farmers, their families and the wider Northern Ireland economy.

Kieran McCarthy, Alliance MLA for Strangford, spoke of the importance of EU engagement by MLAs to this region's fishing industry and of how positive outcomes were achieved for fishermen in this region by MLAs working together to lobby Europe on that issue.

Paul Givan MLA and Chair of the Committee for Justice started by raising concern about European Union human rights legislation and then welcomed the adoption of EU-wide directives on human trafficking by Alliance Minister David Ford. He spoke of how that had improved action taken against that heinous crime in Northern Ireland.

Dolores Kelly MLA raised the matter of her disappointment that none of the four Ministers at OFMDFM was available to respond to the many substantive issues that have been raised today. She also echoed the words of Jane Morrice, of the European Economic and Social Committee, about the vital role of the European Union as a living, breathing,

conflict-resolution project and spoke of the benefit that she had gained from working on inter-regional social and economic projects across the UK and Ireland.

Patsy McGlone MLA and Chair of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee referred to the Committee's inquiry into research and development. As Chair of the Assembly and Business Trust, I had the pleasure of meeting EU Commissioner Geoghegan-Quinn and seeing the great work that the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee did to raise key points on how we could improve our engagement with and drawdown of research and development funds, by working in co-operation with the commissioner and the rest of the European Union.

In conclusion, then, Europe clearly has a significant impact on lives across Northern Ireland. It is important that Assembly Committees engage with our own Northern Ireland Executive Departments to ensure that Northern Ireland's voice is heard on issues that directly affect this region. I assure the House that the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will continue to work and co-operate with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, with a view to improving our engagement on European issues and fulfilling its responsibility for European issues. Indeed, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will very much rely on the work of other Statutory Committees at the Assembly in scrutinising their respective Department's work in Europe. I, therefore, reiterate the Chairperson's thanks to the Committees and encourage them to continue their hard work in that regard.

I will speak briefly as an MLA and member of the Alliance Party. European engagement — social, economic and environmental — is vital to the future of all in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland has benefited significantly as a result of European engagement and assistance; not least, as we heard today, via vital EU Peace programmes that have made a unique and leading contribution to building peace and addressing divisions in Northern Ireland. Indeed, it is hard to see what other level of investment has been made in that field, not even by our own relevant Department, OFMDFM.

Despite DUP scepticism about Europe, its party leader and First Minister will be in Brussels next week to support the work of EU Peace programmes in Northern Ireland and, I presume, to support calls for an EU Peace IV programme.

European freedom of movement and the European market have also allowed many local businesses to address skills gaps and assist trade and export in our region. My party colleague Employment and Learning Minister Stephen Farry will continue to work on European social fund projects, of which, I understand, there are approximately 82 in Northern Ireland at this time, dealing with vital projects such as apprenticeships and youth employment schemes, and engaging with those furthest from the labour market.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that Northern Ireland has an excellent opportunity at present, simply because of our neighbour's presidency of the Council of the European Union for the next six months? There is enormous sympathy for us not only south of the border but across the UK, and this is an opportunity that Northern Ireland simply cannot afford to miss.

Mr Lyttle: I absolutely agree, and I welcome the fact that all Assembly Committees appear to have been preparing for the Irish EU presidency in the preceding months and years. It is important that we take advantage of that to keep all the key issues that have been raised in today's debate on the agenda of the Irish presidency to see whether we can make progress and engage with Europe as much as possible to the benefit of Northern Ireland.

The Alliance Party believes in the importance of promoting Northern Ireland as an active region of the European Union, where we not only enhance the benefits and the drawdown of funding for Northern Ireland but become more involved in the development of important legislation and policy that has a direct impact on all our citizens, sharing our experiences and learning from other regions in Europe.

As Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and an Alliance MLA, I recognise the key role that Assembly Committees play in that process. I commend the report to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the report of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (NIA/81/11-15) on Statutory Committee activity on European issues May 2011 - August 2012.

Private Members' Business

Historic Environment

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

Mr Hamilton: I beg to move

That this Assembly welcomes the publication of the report 'A Study of the Economic Value of Northern Ireland's Historic Environment'; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to work with Executive colleagues to examine ways in which the report's recommendations could be implemented.

I thank the Business Committee for selecting the motion. I thank the Minister in advance for his presence and, more importantly, his reply. This is a great opportunity for all of us to celebrate something special and positive about Northern Ireland: our rich historic environment. Although the report referred to in the motion was published in June last year, and it is now January 2013 and several months have passed, it is a significant and valuable work that is still worthy of debate and discussion in the Chamber today.

What I probably like best about the report — never mind the detail, which I will get into momentarily — is the fact that it shows that the environment and the economy are not mutually exclusive. All too often, debates in the Chamber, in the media and in wider society pit the environment, on the one hand, against the economy, on the other hand, as if people make a choice for the environment against the economy or for the economy against the environment. The report shows that if things are done properly, the environment can reap significant economic benefits for Northern Ireland. There have been opportunities, and no doubt there will be in future, to talk about how renewable energy and waste management can reap economic benefits, but our historic environment has a huge economic benefit for Northern Ireland, and perhaps we did not realise or appreciate its extent.

We all know that we in Northern Ireland are blessed with an exceptional historic environment. We could all probably talk about our own constituency. In my Strangford constituency, sites such as Nendrum, Greyabbey and Scrabo are landmarks known not just in the area but further afield across Northern Ireland. Scrabo in particular is instantly recognisable to everybody in Northern Ireland, no matter where they are from. We have wonderful historic buildings, castles and sites right across Northern Ireland. We have Carrickfergus castle, Dunluce castle and others too countless to name in the time available during this debate. We all know that they are fantastic sites. We all know that they are very valuable. We all know that we are very blessed in Northern Ireland to have them, the history and heritage that go with them and the many stories that they all tell. However, I do not think that, until the publication of this report, we would ever have appreciated the annual economic contribution that they make to Northern Ireland. That is why the research is incredibly valuable.

Obviously, there are headline figures. There is, for example, the £532 million annual economic output that is

attributable to all those sites. There are 100,000 full-time equivalent jobs that can be accounted for by the historic environment in Northern Ireland. Everybody likes to talk about the multiplier effects of the investment of public sector money. The fact that there is a multiplier effect of between £3 and £4 from the private sector for every £1 of public sector money spent on the historic environment shows that this is something worthy of consideration for investment in the longer term.

The historic environment also has broader policy implications. It underpins our economic strategy and particularly our tourism strategy for Northern Ireland, especially in respect of signature projects. I mentioned Greyabbey and Nendrum in the Strangford constituency. They are part of the Christian heritage and St Patrick's Trail. Other sites will feed into other aspects of our signature projects and our tourism strategy as the latter is developed and pushed across Northern Ireland.

Our historic environment also adds value, in many cases, to regeneration schemes in towns, villages and cities across Northern Ireland. It can, because it differentiates us from other places, help to attract businesses to Northern Ireland. Businesses make investment decisions on a raft of considerations — principally on skills, taxation, and so on, but people also like to see that the country that they are coming to in order to invest or work has something about it culturally, and the historic environment plays a small part in that, too.

It is very clear from the report that the potential for more economic value from our historic environment is there. We only have to look at the experience of our near neighbours. If you compare Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland or Scotland, it is clear that even though there is significant economic value from our historic environment, it is not as good or high as the others. If you look at economic output per capita, you will see that it is estimated at £160 in Northern Ireland; in the Republic of Ireland, its output is closer to £500, at £491; and in Scotland, it is higher again at £943. In Northern Ireland, the historic environment accounts for three jobs per thousand of the population, but the figure is 8·1 in the Republic of Ireland and 11·8 in Scotland.

The GVA — gross value added — contribution per capita is £75 here, £270 in the Republic of Ireland, and £496 in Scotland. Although we can celebrate the fact that half a billion pounds of economic output is being gleaned from the historic environment annually in Northern Ireland, it is clearly not as good as it is in the Republic of Ireland or in Scotland. I would not argue that our historic environment is better than theirs or that they are without heritage in their built environment, but I think that ours is every bit as good. Therefore, there is something not quite right about the output that we in Northern Ireland get versus that of our near neighbours.

We know that we have a good historic environment. So when we look at the experience of our near neighbours and the economic value that they get from their historic environment, how do we get to the same level or close the gap between us and the Republic of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, England and others?

There are four broad areas in which that needs to be done. The first is that a strategy that sets out how to do that needs to be developed. Obviously, that lies within the

Minister of the Environment's purview, but there is a lot of connectivity between his responsibilities and those of other Ministers, hence the terminology and the language in the motion. I think in particular of the Department for Social Development (DSD) and its work on regeneration, as well as the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and its responsibility for tourism. There is also a role for local councils and other organisations and bodies, such as the National Trust, which would also have an input.

4.00 pm

The second area is, undoubtedly, resources. We cannot develop, implement or promote any strategy without having sufficient resources behind it. Sometimes the arguments for doing things that are good environmentally are made just because they are good environmentally. There is so much focus on the economy now and on creating growth and generating new jobs. The good thing about the report is that it is a piece of evidence that says that, if we invest in a part of our environment — in this case, the historic environment — we can create economic output and growth, as well as jobs and employment. So, there is a compelling case to be made by the Minister in his discussions with Executive colleagues about investment in this area.

The third area that I want to talk about is branding and marketing, which is incredibly important. The research in the report shows that there is an urgent need to enhance the presentation of sites and to have clearer signage at sites. The connections between sites need to improve so that, instead of just going to one site, visitors can be directed to others in the immediate vicinity and can take part in a wider range of activities. Websites, literature and social media also need to be improved. I have gone to quite a few of the sites that I have mentioned, and I have to say that the interpretive signage at them is not always as good as it could be. It could be improved by increasing the number of languages used, and the use and accessibility of modern technology such as apps to interpret sites could also be improved.

Activities are important. By that I do not mean the "Disneyfication" of sites, but some sites have been very successful. I commend the Down County Museum in Downpatrick, for example, which has actors performing stories about prisoners who were in the jail in the past. That brings it to life for adults and children. It is an enjoyable experience, and people get a lot more out of it.

In the time that I have left, I will talk about the fourth area, which is structure. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) is currently responsible for thousands of sites, including all those that I mentioned at the beginning. The agency does sterling work under its environmental protection remit, but I am not convinced that it is the right vehicle to take forward our historic environment, if we are to use it as a part of our tourism offering and to create the economic output and employment that I talked about. The evidence suggests that it is not. The agency's website is not bad, but the built and historic environment is very much a secondary issue for the Department on that website. Access to it and the opening for sites shows that the agency does not have the budget or the capacity to do the job properly. Let us look at other jurisdictions. Scotland has the levels of output and employment that I talked about. It has Historic Scotland, which is doing this job —

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

Mr Hamilton: It has a brand that is seared into the local consciousness, the national consciousness and beyond. So, we need to look at having a new body that is in either the private sector or the public sector or has trust status.

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

Mr Hamilton: This has huge potential, and I ask the Minister to look at it in conjunction with his Executive colleagues.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacú leis an mholadh seo. I welcome the motion and support it.

It is funny, because when I looked at the report, I automatically thought that there should already have been a proper tourism strategy that included the historic environment. Having read the report's recommendations, I can see the potential that lies in it and how we can move forward with it. However, I do not think that we can move forward unless we look at how we can gather all the groups together. Local authorities operate in silos on their own, as does NIEA, although I know that it has the responsibility for these matters. I can only talk about my experience of Armagh City and District Council and how it has tried to encourage tourism in the district and use its assets to their full potential. The report, with its six recommendations, has great economic potential. I will refer to some of the recommendations.

The first recommendation is the strategy. I would like to hear from the Minister how he proposes to tie all the groups together to formulate a strategy. We have a good opportunity, but we have missed a trick. Last year, we had the promotion of Our Time Our Place. That should have been done on an all-island basis and should have taken into consideration "The Gathering", which has serious potential. The report talks about the USA, Canada and everywhere else. We need to look at the diaspora and try to encourage all that. We also need to look at what is in the motion about the historic environment, both natural and built. I hope that the Minister will make some reference to that.

The second recommendation concerns private sector investment. I have to mention Armagh jail, because it would be a good signature project for the area. It will not go ahead unless there is serious private investment. I would like to think that the Executive will look at that, because it would create jobs and boost the North. I would like the Minister to outline in his response whether there are any ideas in that regard.

Next is recommendation 3. Mr Hamilton referred to signage and everything else. I saw enough signage in a small area of the Lake District to cover the whole of this island. I hope that we can be more imaginative on the whole idea of advertisement and signage. I hope that we can have more than just a brown sign stuck at the end of a road pointing in the direction of a certain thing.

I do not propose to go into recommendation 4, which concerns social media. There are a lot of opportunities there, and we need to work with other bodies and other Departments on those.

I have talked about recommendation 5, which is about expanding linkages. We need to look overseas and to historic monuments across the world and try to tie those in.

I want to talk about Armagh city and district in my last 50 seconds. We have huge potential with Emain Macha, the Navan fort. I also want to draw the Minister's attention to a wee village outside Armagh called Milford. It has a serious built heritage. It is a lovely wee setting, but there is a proposal to build an anaerobic digester in the middle of it. I do not know how, but we have missed a trick over the fact that William McCrum invented soccer's penalty kick in Milford. Football generates billions of pounds across the world.

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

Mr Boylan: Every man, woman and child knows what a penalty kick is. I am just using Milford as an example. We have an opportunity to promote Milford village and the penalty kick. We have a multibillion-pound industry, but we are not making good use of that.

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

Mr Boylan: I would like to hear the Minister's views on that.

Mr Kinahan: I welcome the chance to speak to the motion and to support it. I welcome the comments that have been made so far. As you all know, this subject is close to my heart. I have to declare an interest — a financial interest, albeit often a negative one — given that I live in a 400-year-old house. I also declare an interest in that, until a few years ago, I had been chair of the Historic Houses Association for Northern Ireland for five or six years. That body represents privately owned houses throughout the UK. I also worked for Christie's for 18 years, going around historic houses and art collections and dealing with antiques and other things on both sides of the border. I thought that I ought to share my comments on this matter.

The historic environment is not just buildings, and it is not just art and antiques. It is everything that goes with those things. It is the woodlands, it is the gardens, but, most importantly, it is the people. It is the families, the communities and how they all work together. Those are the stories, and that is very much part of what we should look at in the future.

Others have touched on the approach being a disjointed one, with the Departments and the councils working in different ways. Minister, I want to see the approach being pulled together so that we have a body that pulls together the history that intertwines everything and pulls us together. That way, we will not just be relying on the figure that we hear today but will be able to improve on it well into the future. So, it is really asking for a partnership and a body that will pull it together. It goes wrong occasionally. In Waringstown, there was a debacle over the developer getting rid of the heritage stone that was going to be the key to the centre. That is why we have to pull everything together in one line and under one story, giving every community a future.

I welcome the far-sightedness of the Minister in increasing funding to houses and to maintenance and seeing the importance of that to our economy. I congratulate the Department on all its hard work. However, there is a well-established principle that I am sure many are not aware of: if you receive money or grant from the Government, you have to open your house or make it a benefit to the public. So, although what is given with one hand is not taken away, you have to do your share in return. I ask that that is kept through everything that we do.

I go back to my point that the environment is the living family, the community and the history that comes with it. If you look at today's debate and see the £532 million benefit to our economy, with a possible £230 million added to that, you see that it is vital that we get the balance right.

Whether it is a historic site, whether it is Celtic, Irish, British, Northern Irish or more, our history goes back hundreds, if not thousands, of years, and we should look at all of it and pull it all together. That way, we might find that we all have much more in common than we thought we had. Could it be a cabin, a farm, a chapel or a mill? It is the woodlands, it is the rivers, and it is the environment. It is the areas of outstanding natural beauty, the Ramsars etc. It is gardens, and it is libraries. It is also collections. One council has a toy collection, another has a machinery collection, others have books and another has clothes. All of those are just little parts of that web. Most important are the people, whether they are academics, soldiers, writers, painters, industrialists and even politicians. All of the above are part of a story. So, Minister, I hope that we will see a web of tourism, with the themes pulling everything together.

In Antrim, they had a clever string of pearls linking the lough shore to Junction One to the courthouse and much more. We need to go out and find the people, find the houses, find the history and build on what we have got today. We need to look at the problems, whether they are in finance, health and safety or insurance, because there are a whole lot of things out there stopping a mass of our historic buildings and their gardens being opened. It is about pulling everything together and actually going out to them. That is what I would like to see happening in our policy. So, we need joined-up government that is proactive and goes out and tries to improve Northern Ireland's environment.

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

Mr Kinahan: Thank you.

Mrs D Kelly: I congratulate Mr Hamilton on bringing the motion to the House. It is very timely, particularly when we see a new series on television, 'Ulster Unearthed', coming to the fore. As Members will know, the Minister has been a champion of built heritage for a considerable time. It was only today that the website for the preservation of townland names was launched in this very Building. So, a sense of place is something that, for many, goes down to our bone marrow; it is nearly innate genetically. So, this is a timely debate, and, as many Members have already said, it presents economic opportunities that have, thus far, been underestimated and undervalued. Therefore, this debate is very timely.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way. You mentioned the townland names. Will the Member or perhaps the Minister assure the Assembly that his Department uses townland names when replying to —

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): We do.

Mr McCarthy: Good, excellent.

4.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute. Keep to the topic under discussion, please.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the Member's intervention. I can assure him that the SDLP has been at the forefront of townland name preservation. I recall many difficult meetings in Craigavon council at one stage, but now everybody is on the same page on townland names.

Northern Ireland-wide, there is a plethora of sites that deserve investment. The motion calls for Ministers to work together, but I am unclear about the budget that has been set aside in the four-year term of this Assembly and whether or not there is sufficient flexibility to move money across as opportunities arise. I spoke to the Minister, and he met campaigners for the Gilford mill. Indeed, I hope that he will soon visit the Hilden mill in the neighbouring constituency of Lagan Valley because there are opportunities there. One of the obstacles to developing those sites is when there are community group-led initiatives or it is in the hands of private developers, because the ceiling at which moneys can be drawn down demands a huge investment from the promoter of the project, and that is unrealistic in today's economic climate. I hope that the Minister can persuade colleagues to allow a greater percentage of grants so that there is less private investment, at least in these recessionary times.

It would be remiss of me not to use this opportunity to talk about Ireland's rich Christian heritage, particularly the fact that the grave of St Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, is in Downpatrick. Members will know that Margaret Ritchie has, for many years, been a very strong campaigner and champion for that investment to be realised. In my town — Lurgan — Brownlow castle merits consideration as a building that could be used for greater investment. Unfortunately, there are difficulties with the trustee board and how the money can be drawn down because of some of the rules and regulations that apply.

I know of some places where there are ancient raths on private land, and many people who live outside the immediate vicinity do not even know that those places exist. Therefore, there is a need, as Mr Kinahan says, for greater collaboration and co-operation not only across Departments but from local government and central government. Some time ago, I had occasion to ask the Department about the ownership of some sites, and I was referred to a website. It needs more than that. There needs to be a concerted effort from local and central government to maximise any opportunities that exist, either through lottery funding or, if there is any such funding, through the EU.

Some Members attended last night's City of Culture 'Sons and Daughters' event in Derry. The Committee for the Environment recently visited Derry, and we were very impressed by the rich heritage. We visited the walls of Derry and saw the opportunities around the deanery basement. There is still a need for investment in that area. I do not think that there is a visitor interpretation centre, but that was an idea to link the two. I understand that there is a dedicated officer for Derry, but it was of concern to the people in Derry that that officer was based in Belfast. The Minister might give an undertaking to look at that situation, because it is clearly not what the people and the promoters of the Derry project want. I urge the Minister to use his influence and to look at a better model for delivery.

Ms Lo: I support the motion and commend the Members for bringing it to the House. The report provides quantitative evidence to support what many people have instinctively recognised for years: Northern Ireland's

historic environment is a precious asset that contributes to our social and economic well-being. Over the past couple of years, I have seen and heard of a number of examples where this is the case. For example, last year, I was invited to the launch of a book about the excavation of the 17th-century town at Dunluce. The Minister was also there. Unfortunately, due to the terrible weather and ongoing work, I was unable to see the dig for myself, but I was told all about this ambitious, exciting and engaging project. The excavation, interpretation and conservation of this early town will certainly add to Northern Ireland's already rich heritage. I am sure that it will draw people to visit and stay and spend, creating much-needed jobs, and I commend the Minister and the Department for his approach to this project.

Similarly, I am looking forward to a visit to the excavation of the Drumclay crannog in Fermanagh, and the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee is coming with us. Due to its location, this may never become the same focus of attraction as Dunluce, but the magnitude of the discovery will leave a legacy of information and artefacts that will revise understanding of early settlements in the area. Last year, I participated in a debate on a motion seeking policy changes to ensure that archeological artefacts were recorded and stored for the benefit of this and future generations. How much better if we can draw in tourists and generate revenue and jobs at the same time?

As this report clearly identifies, there is still much more untapped potential for our historic monuments to contribute to the economy. Last year, I visited the largest monument in state care in Northern Ireland — the city walls of Derry/Londonderry — which Dolores Kelly mentioned. During the visit, I was informed that, although the Northern Ireland Environment Agency maintains the walls, they are not promoted as a monument in their own right. In fact, it was suggested that NIEA took a "detached" approach. Planning rules protect the walls from destruction, but decisions are based on the view from the walls not of the walls, and this has led to developments that obscure the walls from view or are used, as we saw only too well, as a legitimate billboard for road signs. This is an clearly an example, probably among many, of where we are letting the potential of Northern Ireland's historic environment slip through our fingers. I recall visiting the Great Wall of China with busloads of tourists travelling for miles, taking hours, to get to the Great Wall and, obviously, bringing huge economic benefits to the area. It is such a brand name that people visiting Beijing feel that they have to drive for so many hours to go out and see it.

I support the call for the Minister and his Executive colleagues to examine the ways in which this report's recommendations can be implemented to maximise the economic potential of all our historic monuments.

Mr G Robinson: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. My constituency relies heavily on its historic past to attract visitors and tourists, hopefully to all other areas of Northern Ireland so that we can all benefit from the financial spin-off that most tourists contribute to our hard-pressed economy. Within half an hour of Limavady, we have the electricity power house in Roe Valley country park, Mountsandel fort in Coleraine, the Martello tower in Magilligan, Hazlett House in Castlerock, the Limavady workhouse, Mussenden temple in Downhill and Cutts House in Coleraine. Of great tourism importance to the

Limavady area would be the return from Dublin of the much-acclaimed Broughter Gold, either on a temporary or a permanent basis. There is also the training dome of RAF Limavady at Aghanloo and the many historic attractions in the city of Londonderry.

We have an area that is rich in history, but I argue that it is sometimes underappreciated for the value it can bring to our local economy.

In the report 'A Study of the Economic Value of Northern Ireland's Historic Environment: Summary Report', I welcome recommendations 1 and 2, especially as the other recommendations are dependent on those being in place. Recommendation 1 addresses the need for:

"a coherent strategy and implementation plan"

to maximise the economic value of our historic environment. That is much needed, as many of our historic gems are not fully utilised. Recommendation 2 is perhaps more problematic in the current economic climate, as it calls for greater public expenditure. Although I appreciate that there is great potential for growth in this sector, I am mindful that funding will always be an issue for the Executive. However, I ask the Minister to see what he can afford to address the recommendations, as that would have an impact on employment in the construction, tourism and retail sectors.

Considering those issues, I hope that the Minister will do what he can, so that Northern Ireland gets full value from its historic sites as a way of helping us out of these harsh economic times and helping us to move forward towards the future. I support the motion.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The report that is the focus of the motion identifies the significant contribution that our historic environment makes to the economy in the North. Similarly, the Heritage Council report, which relates to the rest of the island of Ireland and is entitled 'Economic Value of Ireland's Historic Environment', was released in May 2012 and emphasises the many thousands of jobs supported by our historic environment nationally.

I refer to the two reports together from the outset of my contribution because I want to make the case for shared marketing and promotion of our historic environment on a single-island basis. Our historic environment on this island certainly predates partition and knows no borders. The benefits of our historic environment are cited in both reports as being direct and indirect. Direct benefits include expenditure by core organisations with a particular role in managing our historic environment; the building trade or the construction industry in repairing and maintaining monuments and the built environment; and the money spent by visitors and tourists coming here primarily because of our historic environment. Other benefits are more indirect and are induced, and the value of those is not always understood or fully appreciated.

Other Members have, quite rightly, drawn attention to rich historic environmental assets within their constituencies, and in this NIEA report, I would like to have seen greater emphasis on the rich historic environment in County Tyrone. On page 11 there is reference to Lissan House. However, on page 13, table 2.1, which lists, details and outlines 21 separate examples of heritage assets that provide wider economic benefits, could have mentioned,

but did not, the beautiful landscape of the Sperrins or the ancient inauguration chair of the O'Neills, which is the northern equivalent of the Hill of Tara. It has recently come to my attention that, following direct lobbying from MLAs, including Francie Molloy, Minister Michelle O'Neill has handed over land near Tullyhogue to the Department of the Environment for the purpose of developing the ancient inauguration chair of the O'Neills.

We have, of course, the Beaghmore stone circles; Lough Fingrean, near Loughmacrory, where a crannog is visible on a dry day — *[Laughter.]*

Mrs D Kelly: When is that? Once every 1,000 years?

Mr McElduff: We do not get many dry days — *[Laughter.]* — but for those that come along, we are very grateful, because you can see the crannog in Lough Fingrean. I commend Loughmacrory Community Development Association and Declan McAleer MLA, my West Tyrone colleague, for all the work that they are doing to take forward that initiative.

In Carrickmore, we have the Nally Stand, which used to sit overlooking Croke Park, and which now overlooks St Colmcille's Park. We have other assets, including Castle Hill in Dungannon and the headstone over the grave of the poet Alice Milligan in Drumragh old graveyard. I personally fought to oppose the delisting of that headstone or monument — the things that would happen if you were not watching. *[Laughter.]*

4.30 pm

I am drawing attention to two reports on the value of the historic environment, one of which was produced in the South. In the west, people promote places such as Westport House and the Ring of Kerry, and Kilmainham Gaol hosts schools and tourists. There are very many privately owned and National Trust buildings in the North, along with the Sperrins and the Mourne, Glenveagh National Park and the Giant's Causeway. We should not market those separately, and there are reasons for that. We should take advice from the Our Time to Shine conference in Belfast last March. The chief of the Seattle-based Destination Development International, Roger Brooks, said:

"I had to type in the city so I typed in Belfast and then I put in the address of the Merchant Hotel and then do you know what it said? It said there is no Belfast in Ireland. So then I went: let me type in Belfast, United Kingdom, and it said there is no Belfast in the United Kingdom. But we found one in Ohio."

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

Mr McElduff: We need to market these things singly throughout the island of Ireland.

Mr D McIlveen: "Follow that" is what I have to say.

I welcome the opportunity to speak. It is probably fair to say that during the past seven weeks of the regrettable scenes that we have seen on our streets, the question that has been coming out again from businesses is this: what are the Assembly and the Executive going to do to help us? Unfortunately, when it comes to some of those questions, we have to rely very much on anecdotal evidence. However, with regard to this report, we have hard facts to work on and clear direction can be given

as to how we can move forward with its proposals and findings. For example, one analysis point is that for each £1 invested by the public sector in the historic environment, £3 to £4 will be spent by the private sector. That is something that we cannot ignore and something that provides a very clear reason for giving the matter our full and serious attention. We can also note from the report that Northern Ireland is, at best, at a third of its capability in this sector, and, in some cases, we could be at an eighth if we compare ourselves with Scotland. When that is transferred to the analysis of where we are currently, 11% of that money goes to the Northern Ireland construction industry — an industry that is on its knees. If we could increase that 11% to 33% through increasing our capabilities — even at the worst possible increase, comparing us with the Republic of Ireland — we should do so. We must seriously consider what the Executive can do under the guidance, instruction and advice, I am sure, of the Minister of the Environment, and we have to look very seriously at how we can do that.

It is important not to underestimate the economic value of our historic environment. I will try not to veer into an advertisement for my constituency. Mr McElduff felt that his area had been neglected. However, unlike him, we were quite included in the report, and I am glad that areas such as Dunluce, Glenariff, Bushmills, and so on, were given recognition. I want to see that continue.

However, we have to be realistic. Some of what has been suggested in the recommendations is incredibly simple to deliver: recommendation 3 suggested that clear signage should be used on the way to and in a site. That is really basic marketing that we could probably deliver at a very small cost to the public purse.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Member for giving way. While we are on signage, does the Member agree that limiting brown signs often prevents sites from getting the numbers of visitors that they need to improve them?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for his intervention. I absolutely agree, and I will give a real-life example. In my constituency, the Dark Hedges at Stranocum has been the set for a number of film and television productions, and it has been the cover story of a number of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's advertising campaigns, yet it was only after representation to Moyle District Council from me and a number of my colleagues in the past few months that we have managed to get brown signs. That site is arguably becoming one of our most famous tourist attractions. It is something that we have to get a hold of. We have to step up to the mark and be positive about Northern Ireland. People are hearing so much around the world about the bad things that can happen in Northern Ireland, and those are issues that we will have to deal with more and more in the future to get this issue moved on, but we have a lot of positive things to promote. Our Time Our Place was very successful, and as we move through 2013, we will have many events, such as the World Police and Fire Games and the G8, that we have a reason to be positive about in Northern Ireland.

What do we have to do? The buzzword of the day is "cross-departmental", and we use it a lot in this place. Coming back to this issue, I believe that a bigger conversation has to take place in the Executive. We have

to get hold of the benefits of this and make sure that we do not miss opportunities and that for every pound that the public sector invests, ultimately, there is a return to it. I believe that we have the proof in the report that that will be the case.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat. First, I congratulate those who tabled the motion. It is a very important one. The report is very good, and the six recommendations present the way forward. Hopefully, the next stage is to move into the operation of it. It is an ideal time because the new councils coming into operation is an opportunity to link historic environment tourism with the councils, with them maybe being involved in the maintenance and preservation of some historic sites.

It is very important that the council has a role to play in that, and we may need a different policy than we have at present for looking after some of the sites. I was down South visiting Fingal council some years ago. It rebuilt Swords Castle and reinstated the timberwork and structure of the building using apprentices and skills that are often lost. Here, we have a policy where you cannot put a brick or stone back into place if it has been moved out of place. To some extent, a lot of historic monuments are falling apart because there is no proper maintenance. What is wrong with restoring them to their original state, instead of allowing them to continue to deteriorate and without making a modern building out of them? We need to look at the trades and skills that can be brought in before those trades and skills are lost and to use it as a training scheme, as well as bringing new ideas into operation.

We also have the opportunity to use European funding, and, unfortunately, I understand that Britain has not signed up to the European heritage label. Maybe we should use our subsidiarity issue of the Assembly being a regional Assembly to draw down funding from Europe to support the environmental heritage for the future and to move into a different era of looking after the environment and looking after those sites. As Barry McElduff said, there are a number of sites that are not listed or labelled. We need to look at what is here at present and at how we list that to preserve it for the future. Rather than just looking after a site that has been here for the past 1,000 years, how do we create a new set of structures, with a realistic view of change in design, structure and activities, so that it will be there for future recognition? That is very important.

It is the same with signage. In England, Scotland and Wales, there is signage on the motorways for nearby locations. We cannot get Roads Service to do that here. It will not allow signage on motorways indicating that historic monuments, fixtures or features are close by, even though that would be of benefit because it would draw people to such places.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member for giving way. He mentioned that we were in the Lake District. Does he agree that we saw an overabundance of signage there that spoilt the countryside and that we need a more balanced approach to where we put signage? Also, should we not have a proper advertising strategy to promote these sites?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Molloy: Yes; we must have a plan rather than sticking signage all over the place. In the Lake District and other national parks, as they are termed, we saw a multitude of signs all over the place that destroyed the area. That is

one of the arguments against national parks, although I am sure that the Minister does not want to hear that.

On the issue of directional signage, which is used to direct people to a site, along the M1 at Dungannon, for instance, they will not allow a sign that points to O'Neill's castle and the site on which Dungannon council spent £5.5 million. They will not allow that to be indicated so people do not know to go there and see that. They did not even allow signage on the motorway for the hotel when that was open. We want to give people the opportunity to visit some of those sites so we need to give them directions and signage.

Simon Hamilton mentioned signage and bilingual signs. Unionism needs to look at the role of the Irish language in the use of signs. It is historic. It is also an environmental issue. We need to use that in a multilingual and bilingual situation to ensure that we have proper signage. Across in Scotland, where Ulster Scots and all the rest came from, Scots Gaelic is used on signs to identify streets. Even in the Parliament, it is widely used. Let us get over these wee blips, move to a new situation and accept that that is where it is. Let us all benefit.

The one thing about our historic environment is that it is shared, and we cannot change that. There is no point in rewriting history, but we should take the most out of it. We might not have benefited much from it previously, but let us now try to see whether we can benefit our communities and the environment by creating tourism attractions that will draw people in to look at our historic environment —

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

Mr Molloy: — and maximise that in the future.

Mr Agnew: When seeking to double the tourism revenue that Northern Ireland generates, there is no doubt in my mind that putting our historic environment at the heart of the tourism strategy is key and that that should be the unique selling point of Northern Ireland. We have a place that is rich in natural and built heritage and that offers a genuine attraction to tourists. If we promote it, they will come.

I welcome the report and the degree of consensus around the Chamber that we should promote these aspects of Northern Ireland and what are sometimes seen as valuable natural environments in and of themselves, and recognise the economic potential that our historic environment holds. I do, however, have a few words of caution. I ask the Minister and the Executive to ensure that in seeking to maximise the economic potential of our historic environment, we do not destroy, damage or harm it. Protection of that environment has to be maintained if we are to promote it.

4.45 pm

We must also ensure that we do not create a Northern Ireland for tourists and forget about the people of Northern Ireland, the people who truly value and care about this place. Ultimately, they will be the ones who will sell this place when they travel abroad and tell people to come to Northern Ireland. Again, I just urge caution. The proposer of the motion mentioned the term "Disneyfication". We should be wary of that. When we promote our environment, we should do so in a way that is sensitive, considered and not overly commercialised, although we should realise its economic potential.

The marketing of our environment is important. That may be the area in which we are lacking, but we can do more to preserve our natural environment. The valuable and rich built environmental heritage in our public Departments is an area that they should highlight. I raised concerns with the Minister about, for example, the courthouse in Bangor, which will soon no longer be used by the Department of Justice. I share the concerns of conservationists and Bangor residents for the future of that listed building. Our public Departments must lead the way in properly preserving and protecting our historic environment. When a building is no longer of use for one purpose, we must find a new purpose for it to ensure that it is preserved and that we are not just maintaining a derelict building.

The proposer welcomed the report and said that it shows that there does not have to be a conflict between those who care about the environment and those who want us to promote our economy. I agree with him to a large extent and, indeed, have been making that point for a number of years. However, there will be conflicts. One example is my disagreeing with the Minister on the proposal for a golf resort at the Giant's Causeway. I believe that the proposed hotel and golf resort does what I warned against: putting the realising of economic benefit over and above the need to preserve and protect our heritage. That is where the planning system will be the key. Indeed, although there is a degree of consensus —

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

Mr Agnew: — around the Chamber, we will see when the Planning Bill plays out that we are, to some extent, agreeing two different things.

Mr Attwood: I very much agree with David McIlveen, Simon Hamilton and others that this is a very timely debate. This is a debate that says what is best about Northern Ireland, which contrasts with the images of what has been the worst of this part of Ireland over recent weeks.

Simon Hamilton, in his opening remarks, said that our heritage was "every bit as good" as that of the Republic of Ireland and Scotland. I do not want to contradict him, but I believe that the scale, wonder and beauty of our built, natural, archaeological and Christian heritage are unsurpassed in any parts of these islands. However, that is not only my view. Coming as I do from a democratic nationalist and republican tradition, in June last year at a public event in Armagh planetarium, I asked an important person whether he agreed with me that the scale and wonder of our built and natural environment in this part of this island were unsurpassed in these islands.

I left the podium, and Prince Charles stepped forward. Although he avoided answering the question in the first instance, at the end of his speech, he answered affirmatively that the scale and wonder of what we have here is unsurpassed. I am sure that the Member will stand corrected on that. That is what I believe. If you look at the report, you will see that the scale of the natural, built, Christian and archaeological heritage that we have is unsurpassed.

I agree that we have not, either around the Executive table, in the Chamber or beyond, fully acknowledged that the Department of the Environment's role is, to go back to what Mr Agnew said, to be the leading environment Ministry. However, it is also a leading economy Ministry. It

is around our built and natural heritage that we will be able to grow our tourist industry to a £1 billion-a-year industry. Compared with Scotland, the Republic of Ireland or Wales, we have a lot of catching up to do. Six of the 10 most popular visitor attractions in the North are in the built and natural heritage, so it is around that product that we will grow our £1 billion-a-year industry, as well as opportunity and jobs. As we do so, decisions will have to be made that, among other things, recognise that economic advantage is one of the features that give rise to planning decisions. Without prejudicing the environmental need in planning applications, there will be times and places where the particular economic advantage will make a difference in making decisions. As Mr Hamilton outlined, you can reconcile the environmental and the economic. In my view, people outside the Chamber do not fully recognise that. Go and look at SeaGen in Strangford lough. Those are the most protected waters in Europe, yet you have there the world birthplace of modern tidal power. That is what SeaGen tidal plant is: the only plant of its scale in the world that feeds into a national grid anywhere in the world. What has it been able to do? It has been able to reconcile economic and energy needs with environmental requirements. If we can do it there, we can do it in a lot of other places as we make the argument going forward for the built and natural heritage.

Mr Hamilton captured June's document in four themes. I want to touch on those four themes. First is the need for a strategy across government. I could not agree more fully. That is why, in response to the document, in October and November I circulated two papers to my Executive colleagues. The purpose of those papers was to argue for a greater joined-up strategy in the principle of heritage-led development as a key economic driver going forward and to protect the heritage that everyone in the Chamber spoke about today. To go back to what Mr Boylan said, part of the 21 proposals in that document was the regeneration of Armagh jail. The idea was, on the one hand, to protect the heritage of the jail, and, on the other, to be an economic driver. So, in taking forward the report, we took forward 21 different projects. I said to my Executive colleagues that we should embrace heritage-led development in a much fuller way going forward because of the economic opportunities that that would produce. It would also protect the heritage that is so much part of the character of our lives in this part of the world. That is still a work in progress. Although there has been some shift of resources into DETI and a little into DOE through grants for listed buildings, a vast area of work is yet to be taken forward to put facts and figures and strategy behind those proposals. However, the argument has been engaged and made around the Executive table.

At the same time, I circulated two papers on the built environment, arguing for money to go into all council areas across the North so that the decay and dereliction that could affect the quality of heritage in each council area could be dealt with. That is a strategy to improve the look of places, improve trading conditions and create economic opportunities going forward.

Although I have been taking forward the report's recommendations, we will, as I have done in many other instances, convene a summit that will gather together all the relevant interests inside and outside the Department, including green NGOs and others, in an effort, on the built and natural heritage side, to do what we did with the good

beach summit, heritage crime summits and so on and take forward all that is needed in the ways that I said.

If we are to achieve that objective — this is the second theme that Mr Hamilton touched on — it must deal with resources. To do that, there is a need for a strategic shift, which has three dimensions. First is a strategic shift in law. If we believe that the quality and character of our built and natural heritage is unsurpassed in this part of this island compared with any other part of these islands, we need to have law in place that reflects that principle. That requires innovative and different thinking when it comes to the protection of heritage. That is why I continue to make the argument — I hope to do so this Thursday — for a marine management organisation (MMO) as part of the Marine Bill going forward. That is why I believe in an independent environment agency. The law should reflect the importance of our heritage and protect, best promote and positively develop it.

Secondly, it will require a strategic shift in policy. That policy has to be informed by the ambition of this part of the world being a world leader in carbon reduction. That means that we need to have waste strategies, ambitions when it comes to emissions, and a renewables strategy and energy policy that reflect that. In that way, we will protect our heritage and use it positively. Thirdly, there will be a need for a strategic shift in money. There needs to be money to protect the natural heritage and grow the jobs that we have been speaking about.

The third theme that Mr Hamilton and many others touched on was branding and marketing. You will not have any argument from me that the NIEA and government generally need to up their game to have coherence around our branding and marketing. However, it seems that the indicators are good and strong in that regard. Look at how DOE and the NITB have joined up on the Causeway coastal route and St Patrick's Trail. Look at how, over the past three years, there have been new exhibitions at Dunluce, Greyabbey and Nendrum. Again, the NITB, DETI, the NIEA and DOE have worked together. Look at the fact that, over the past year —

Mr McMullan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a second. Look at the fact that, over the past year, 28 of our 175 monuments in state care have had new interpretive panels. Look at the fact that four of those monuments have new interpretation booklets. Touching on the theme of a Member who spoke earlier, I can say that two of those are in two foreign languages. We have turned a corner with marketing and branding, but we have a lot further to turn. I will take the Member's intervention.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for giving way. Does he agree that the fact that the British Government did not take part in the European heritage label initiative — they were the only member of the European Union not to do so — has cost us money here that we could have claimed or gone for to promote our natural heritage? I agree with what the Minister said about it being a matter of resource, but that is a resource that we have lost out on. We were given no consideration by the English Government at all as to whether we wanted to join in.

Mr Attwood: Whatever about the failures of the London Government and whatever about their failures regarding European branding, it did not stop Northern Ireland

being the lead part of the European Union when it came to openings on European heritage open days. Northern Ireland, compared with any other part of these islands and — I stand to be corrected on this — any other part of Europe, showed the way forward by opening up heritage buildings and other monuments for visits on European heritage day.

5.00 pm

Northern Ireland is not punching its weight when it comes to accessing European funding. That is a huge issue, and I have made that point repeatedly. Whatever the responsibility and failures of London, we have a responsibility to draw down significantly more moneys from Horizon 2020 when it arises, FP7 over the next two years and all the other environmental streams of funding that are open to Northern Ireland. We are missing enormous opportunities in that regard.

I have two further points to make. The first concerns Mr Hamilton's fourth theme. He said that the NIEA is not the right vehicle to take forward these works, and I have some understanding of that argument. However, if we are going to borrow from the experience in other jurisdictions, let us acknowledge what that experience is. In England, they have an independent environment agency, an independent heritage organisation for buildings and an independent NDPB to deal with natural heritage issues. If we are going to have a conversation going forward — I very much think that we should — let us have the conversation about whether we believe that, when it comes to protecting our natural and built environmental heritage, the best model to protect it is with independent agencies doing that work and that promotion. That is the lesson from England. Although a mixed message is coming from England and Wales, nonetheless let us look at the independent model as well as upgrading the in-house models that Mr Hamilton may have been speaking about. I will give way to the Member.

Mr Hamilton: That is a point for another day; your time is fast running out. The argument that I made was that the fourfold increase in output and employment in Scotland has been overseen by an agency of the Scottish Government and not an independent environmental protection agency. There is an independent environmental protection agency, but Historic Scotland is directly accountable to Ministers in the Scottish Government.

Mr Attwood: That is why the Scottish experience might offer an insight as well as the English and the English and Welsh experiences. In the Department, I have demonstrated that I do not accept that the structures of the NIEA are fit for purpose. That is why, a couple of months ago, we gathered the marine function of the NIEA together for the first time to create coherence in marine management going forward. There is a need for further work like that — maybe more radical than that — in the workings of the NIEA on the heritage side.

I do not wait for all these recommendations to emerge on the far side of conversations with other Ministers. Whether in respect of the bid for Heritage Lottery funding for the Dunluce 17th-century —

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

Mr Attwood: Yes. Whether in respect of funding for the Dunluce 17th-century village, the crannog, increasing historical grants, getting money for decay and dereliction,

the Runkerry decision, money to lighting in Derry, all the summits and so on, I believe that there are good ways of showing good authority in real time, here and now, as well as the strategic issues that have been touched on and very much welcomed by me in the debate.

Mr Frew: I appreciate that I am making the winding-up speech to the debate. I certainly recommend to the House the motion moved so ably by my colleague Simon Hamilton.

This issue should be and is very important to the House. It is very important to me and my colleague David McIlveen in North Antrim, where we can see and appreciate the historical environment before our very eyes. He mentioned a couple of places that are very important to us for tourism. Of course, we have the flagship Causeway coastal route and other flagship projects throughout Northern Ireland. However, I would like to concentrate on the small gems.

A lot of Members have raised issues and areas in their constituency, and rightly so. They should be proud of them. I sometimes feel that we, particularly our youth, do not appreciate or are even aware of our surroundings, our history and how steeped we are in history. We are missing a trick by not teaching that to our children. Of course it is important to teach world history about the Roman empire, Greek history and everything else. All of that is important in education, but what about the importance of teaching children the history of their street, of the people who lived in their village, of the buildings that were in their area that have not been preserved and those that have? Also, the environment itself should be considered very important in education. That would go some way to raising awareness of these areas. Earlier in the debate, somebody mentioned raths. How many raths are dotted about this country? Learning who made them and what they were there for could be of great benefit to our young people. It is very important that our young people learn to preserve them and keep them for future generations. Education will be key in doing that.

The whole population needs to be educated. We need to be made aware, and signposting these places will go some way to realising that potential. A lot of people mentioned signposting and signage as an issue. That is important because sometimes our own population, even in their own villages, are not aware of the great potential that could be created around these sites. Even if it is just to walk with visitors from the rest of the UK, down south or America — to walk through these areas and let them see and sample them at first hand is really all that we are asking. We are not asking for large visitor numbers in those areas, because they just do not have the capacity of attractions such as the Giant's Causeway or Titanic Belfast. We should get just a sample of tourists to these areas so that they can be made to meet their potential. I have a couple in my constituency: Slemish mountain is one, and Arthur Cottage another. Slemish mountain is used all year round, but there is a mad rush on St Patrick's Day. We have a small car park with a small visitors' centre and a small lane the whole way up to Slemish. You get so many complaints on St Patrick's Day that the lane is too small, buses and coaches cannot get up and visitors cannot get turned when they get to the top. That is all true, but how far do we go? Do we build a motorway to Slemish? We have to make sure that we get the right balance for the built heritage, the environment and meeting the potential of those sites.

Arthur Cottage is another site that is away down a nice wee lane, right across the fields, acres away from the main road. Again, it is very important that we maintain the integrity of these historical sites.

I will address one issue that has been raised before I sum up on the others, and that is the planning application for the Runkerry golf resort. Would anyone in their right mind suggest that Royal Portrush has gone some way to destroying the great coastal area and beach formation that is the north coast? Would anybody argue that Royal Portrush Golf Club has destroyed anything in that area? It has not; it has led to great potential there. So, too, would the Runkerry golf resort —

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he not agree that access is an issue as well? Once that becomes a wider part of a golf resort, access will be private and we will deny many the opportunity to get to what are some of the most valued areas in Northern Ireland.

Mr Frew: All access will be from the built-up Bushmills side. The golf resort will only edge towards the Giant's Causeway and the massive white building that is the Causeway Hotel, which sits on the side of a cliff. I do not think that anyone can put a serious and substantive argument against that planning application.

My colleague Simon Hamilton proposed the motion and talked about the economic benefit to Northern Ireland. He said that that should not be seen as a polar opposite to the environment. The report records that and measures the benefit of the historic environment. He mentioned the money generated and jobs created in other areas, and he compared and equated us to the Republic of Ireland and to Scotland and asked how we close the gap with our neighbouring countries and sister states in the UK. He brought up the issue of signage, which a lot of people did, with regard to making people aware and taking them off the highways and byways and down into the nitty-gritty of our environment. He also brought up a very important issue, which has raised a significant debate here as to the current role of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and how it is not really fit for purpose for promoting and enhancing the tourist potential of the historic sites.

Mr Boylan talked about the report and went through all of the recommendations of the study. He also referred to the signage in the Lake District and how we have to make sure that that, in itself, is balanced. He went through each recommendation one by one.

I admire Mr Kinahan, who seems to be the Joe Mahon of the UUP group — 'Lesser Spotted Ulster'. He certainly knows his stuff with regard to the historic environment. He is right that it is not just about buildings. It is about forests, the landscape and the people. I think he was the only one who really touched on that, and it was a valid and important point that he raised. He also mentioned protecting the built environment, making sure that we get the balance right as regards funding and opening it up so that everyone can get it. He talked about a web of tourism, which is a very good line.

Mrs Kelly talked about 'Ulster Unearthed', the new programme on TV, which will raise awareness, I have no doubt. I commend the TV for doing that. She also made a very good point about the Christian heritage of this country and how we should capitalise on that. We in Ballymena have been agreed for many years that they left Slemish

out of the St Patrick's Trail for so long. They are starting to come around to our way of thinking and are actually including Slemish on some maps now. It was Mrs Kelly who mentioned the ancient raths — so, credit there — and said that more awareness is needed.

Ms Lo commended the Minister for the project and the work in it. I do not think that any of us would disagree with that. There is still more untapped potential there. She went into the detail on Derry's walls and made the very good point that it is not actually the walls themselves that we always have to take care of but what we build around them. That is a very good case study of how planning can go wrong at times.

Mr Robinson talked about the sites in his own area in Limavady and around that area of East Londonderry, and he went through the recommendations one by one. He is mindful that funding is always going to be an issue and there is always going to be that pressure and that tolerance.

Mr Barry McElduff, from west Tyrone —

Mr McMullan: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree with me that, when we talk about the whole thing on tourism, the heritage and all of that, this could be an opportune time to revisit the policy on cultural tourism in councils prior to RPA? We do not seem to be singing off the same hymn sheet in councils when we look at the cultural tourism aspect.

Mr Frew: The Member's colleague made that point with regard to the RPA. I will leave it at that, because I am running out of time. I agree with him that it is something that should be looked at.

It only took Mr McElduff 45 seconds to mention a single-island strategy, so fair play to him. The message got across there in 45 seconds.

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

Mr Frew: I do not understand why I am here and not in west Tyrone, with that list of great things to see and do. I am scratching my head, wondering why I am here.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly welcomes the publication of the report 'A Study of the Economic Value of Northern Ireland's Historic Environment'; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to work with Executive colleagues to examine ways in which the report's recommendations could be implemented.

Adjourned at 5.14 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 22 January 2013

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statements

Schools: Advancing Newbuilds

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. A Cheann Comhairle, ba mhian liom ráiteas a dhéanamh leis an Tionól a nuashonrú faoi mo phleananna infheistíochta caipitiúla don tréimhse amach romhainn.

Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement updating the Assembly on my capital investment plans for the coming period. In my statement to the Assembly in the autumn of 2011 under the heading "Putting Pupils First: Shaping our Future", I set out the challenges associated with the schools estate. Shoiléirigh mé go raibh m'fhócas ar eispéireas oideachais den chéad ghrád a chur ar fáil do dhaltai – eispéireas a chabhródh lenár ndaoine óga a gcuid poitéinsil a bhaint amach. I made it clear that my focus was on providing a first-class educational experience for pupils that would help our young people to fulfil their potential.

In managing our wide and diverse schools estate, one of the major challenges is the need to balance limited capital resources against the large-scale capital investment needed across the estate. Using the strategic work on area planning, I have moved to ensure that capital investment is targeted to ensure the delivery of modern, fit-for-purpose schools that will be sustainable long into the future. In June last year, I set out for the Assembly my Department's capital investment plans, which included an investment of over £133 million in 18 newbuild projects. At the time, I made it clear that I expected those projects to be actively managed and moved forward to construction as soon as possible. I am pleased to advise the Assembly that work on the projects is progressing well. I am confident that the first of them will be on site early in the new financial year. I am also pleased to report that planning for the move of St Gerard's Educational Resource Centre to the former Balmoral High School is being progressed. It is envisaged that the centre will be relocated before the end of the school year.

In making that statement in June, I also made clear my intention to announce a further list of projects to be taken forward in planning and to release more information on the new schools enhancement programme. A Cheann Comhairle, inniu ba mhaith liom coinneáil leis an gcoimhlint sin agus nuashonrú ar phleananna infheistíochta caipitiúla mo Roinne a sholáthar don Teach. Today, I wish to follow through on that commitment and provide the House with an update on my Department's

capital investment plans for the coming period. Last June, I made it clear that the capital budget available meant that we had to do more with the existing estate. In support of this, I announced the establishment of a new schools enhancement programme that would make funding of up to £4 million available for refurbishing or extending existing schools deemed sustainable under area planning. I am pleased to announce today the first call for projects under that programme. Information on the scheme and details of the application process have today been issued to all the relevant managing authorities and schools. Details of the programme have also been placed on the Department's website. It is anticipated that the first projects selected under the programme will be announced before the end of the school year. Initially, up to £20 million will be made available for the programme in each of the two coming financial years. The schools enhancement programme will prioritise projects aimed at facilitating amalgamations, improving existing facilities and facilitating structural changes needed across the estate.

I recently highlighted that significant funds had been ring-fenced to tackle the backlog in maintenance across the estate and that £40 million had been invested in the current financial year. This focus on maintenance will continue over the coming financial year and, taken together with the investment in minor works, the new schools enhancement programme and the investment in newbuilds, should go a long way to addressing the long-outstanding accommodation issues across the estate.

I can report that the Department has taken receipt of the outline business case for work on the Lisanelly shared education campus and is progressing with the examination of it as a priority. I am committed to delivering on that Programme for Government flagship project as soon as practicable. Lisanelly remains the only viable project for Omagh and the surrounding area in the wake of the public consultation process on post-primary area planning. Déanfaidh mé soiléiriú sa bhreis faoi Lios an Eallaigh nuair a labhraim leis an Teach faoi phleanáil ceantair sna seachtainí romhainn. I will expand on the Lisanelly project in the coming weeks when I address the House on area planning.

Unfortunately, as Members will be aware, Arvalee special school in Omagh, which is to be taken forward as part of the campus project, was burned down on 31 August last year. A temporary solution has been secured to accommodate pupils. However, a newbuild is urgently required. In light of this, I have approved the appointment of a team to develop a business case to look at a newbuild

solution for Arvalee on the Lisanelly site as an initial phase of the project.

A Cheann Comhairle, anois ba mhaith liom díriú ar liosta na dtionscadal atá á gcur chun cinn i dtéarmaí pleanála. I now turn to the list of projects to be advanced in planning. The significant time needed to develop a capital investment project from its initial concept through to actual build means that a portfolio of projects must be advanced to the point at which they could effectively utilise funds that may be available in the future. In making this announcement, it is my intention that the projects will be taken through to construction. However, I wish to make it clear that the authorisation to proceed with construction will be based on the level of capital funding available at the time and all necessary approvals being obtained.

Inniu, tá mé ag fógairt 22 thionscadal le cur chun cinn i dtéarmaí pleanála. Today, I announce a further 22 projects to be advanced in planning, representing a potential investment of some £220 million. These projects have been drawn from priority projects identified by the various managing authorities, and the process used in selecting the projects for this announcement is available on the Department's website. All the projects have been considered in the context of the area planning work being undertaken and form part of the long-term provision in their respective area.

The capital works that I am announcing today are aimed at effecting the agreed rationalisation of the schools estate or addressing serious or substandard accommodation inadequacies, overcrowding or undue reliance on temporary accommodation. Of the 22 projects, 14 are required to deal with previous or planned amalgamations or rationalisations in the estate. This is consistent with the drive towards more viable and sustainable schools and the principle of area planning.

I do not believe that, in a modern, forward-looking society, we should accept a situation in which children receive their entire primary school education in temporary accommodation, the majority of which is clearly outdated. Although we are not in a position to resolve all such situations at this time, six of the projects to be taken forward will provide permanent build solutions for integrated and Irish-medium schools currently located almost exclusively in temporary accommodation.

I know that Members are anxious to hear the list of projects selected, and I will move to that. The eight post-primary projects to be brought forward in planning are these: Holy Trinity College in Cookstown; Strabane Academy; St Patrick's Academy in Dungannon; a newbuild project to encompass the existing schools of St Mary's High School, St Paul's Junior High School and St Michael's Grammar School in Lurgan; Parkhall Integrated College in Antrim; Down High School; and, finally, two proposals to meet the needs of the controlled and voluntary post-primary sectors in Fermanagh. The first of those projects is the provision of a new school to replace Devenish College and to facilitate the amalgamation or closure of Lisnaskea High School. The second is to make provision for a new school to facilitate the amalgamation of Enniskillen Collegiate Grammar School and Portora Royal School.

The 14 primary school projects to be taken forward are these: a new primary school to service Islandmagee and the surrounding area to include Mullaghduh and

Kilcoan primary schools; a new primary school for the amalgamated schools of St Joseph and St James's in Poyntzpass; Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh in Strabane; Gaelscoil Uí Néill in Coalisland; St Bronagh's in Rostrevor; a project encompassing St Mary's Primary School, Cargan, and Glenravel Primary School; Omagh Integrated Primary School; Braidside Integrated Primary School; Portadown Integrated Primary School; a proposal to provide a newbuild solution to service the needs of three schools — Craigbrack, Mullabuoy and Listress primary schools — on the outskirts of Derry; Corran Integrated Primary School in Larne; Elmgrove Primary School in east Belfast; Glenwood Primary School and Edenderry Nursery School in the Shankill area; and, finally, Edendork Primary School in Dungannon.

I reaffirm that my Department's strategy for capital investment for the coming years will be shaped by the outworkings of area planning, and it forms part of the ongoing programme focused on improving outcomes for our young people. It is a continuation of the pragmatic approach that I have taken to ensure the strategic and effective utilisation of capital investment in the schools estate throughout the remainder of the current Budget period. It will also ensure that we have effective capital investment plans in place moving forward.

My announcement today is not only good news for the schools to be advanced in planning but, through the schools enhancement programme, it provides an opportunity for schools to enhance and extend the lifespan of the existing estate and to support proposals emerging from area planning. On the basis of the multiplier figures used by the construction industry — £2.84 for every £1 invested and 28 and a half jobs created for every £1 million invested — this announcement provides a potential investment of up to £625 million in the local economy and secures more than 6,200 jobs in the construction industry. That level of investment will be a much-needed boost to the construction industry here over the coming years.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I welcome the fact that we have come to the House today to look at the announcement that has been made on investment in the refurbishment of our schools and planning for the future. That continues to be an area where we need to deliver. As the House is aware, the Committee has taken an active interest, particularly in the Lisanelly site and Arvalee special school. I am sure that Members will note that a business case is to be advanced for the latter, and mention of that in the statement is to be welcomed.

On eight occasions, the Minister's statement referred to area planning, as well as to decisions on refurbishment and extensions to schools based on decisions relating to the area planning process. The Committee and, I think, every school in Northern Ireland wants to know when the outcomes of the area plan consultation will be published. In asking for this clarification, I reiterate the Committee's view that the results of the post-primary consultation should be published before the primary school consultation on area planning commences, because that has raised serious concerns.

10.45 am

The Minister referred to 18 projects that he announced in June. He indicated then that these projects could be under

construction by the end of this financial year or the start of the next year. In today's statement, the Minister updated the House by saying that only one of those projects has met that expectation. I ask the Minister to look seriously at the processes used after announcements are made. Clearly, they are not working. Can he advise on the appropriate timescale for the approval of the business cases and commencement of construction for the newbuild projects that he announced today that are to be advanced to the planning stage?

I will conclude as a Member of the House. I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of Ballymoney High School and say how disappointed the school will be, as I am, that, yet again and despite meeting all the criteria and expectations of the board and the Department, it is not even mentioned 10 years later. That raises serious concerns about the references in the document to area planning.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Chair of the Committee for his question, which covers a wide range of subjects. I will try my best to cover them all.

I hope to be in a position to publish the area planning consultation results within a number of weeks. There were 47,000 responses, which is fantastic. It shows that there was significant interest in the matter and that the public and the sectors actively responded to it. Therefore, let us give their consultation responses due regard and respect and analyse them. We will then be in a position to set out the next steps in area planning in a number of weeks.

I have always said that area planning will be an evolutionary process rather than the Big Bang, all happening at once. We will be able to sign off definitively on parts of each board's area plans and say, "That is the way forward". Indeed, this statement and my statement in June are based on the information that we already have from the area planning process. This is part of the rolling-out of area plans. The announcements that I made today are strategic investments in the schools estate and in the education of an area.

I was asked when we will publish for consultation the primary school area plans. I also hope to be in a position to do that in a number of weeks. We want to learn from the post-primary consultation exercise. I had discussions with the chief executives of the boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) last week on what lessons we should learn and have learnt from the post-primary process. We will then be in a position to publish the results on the post-primary area plans before the primary school ones. I will confirm that to the Committee in due course and explain the way in which that process will work.

On my June announcement on newbuilds, the Chair and the Committee are aware that taking forward newbuild programmes is quite an onerous task. I had hoped to have proposals on the ground as quickly as possible, and I still think that we are meeting that target. I have said that we have to have projects in place either in this financial year or early in the next. If there is slippage of a number of months, although that may be disappointing to a degree, the key point is that we are getting the projects on the ground, that construction will start and that they will be built. The St Gerard's Educational Resource Centre project is moving forward and will be in place before the end of the

school term. All those things are moving forward, and I am content that we are acting as quickly as possible.

Any building project, regardless of size — we are dealing with hundreds of millions of pounds' worth of projects — can run into delays and other problems, some of which, from experience, I believe can be avoided; others cannot be avoided. Should the entire process of government be fine-tuned? I believe so, because the number of hoops that we have to jump through to get a project on the ground is unnecessary. I even raised that with the head of the Civil Service at a meeting to discuss strategies for the way forward. We are where we are, and we have to continue using those processes. I would like to see them refined.

The projects that I announced today will move forward to varying degrees. I have announced that they are moving forward in the planning process. I have been very careful about what I have said today. This is a good news story, but I do not want to raise expectations among those schools that construction will start in the immediate future. It will not. The schools have to continue through the planning process. I suspect that a number of the projects will be able to start in the current budgetary period, and that is why we are planning for them. If there is slippage in any of the other projects, we will be able to move those in. If further finance or capital becomes available, we have a list of schools ready to move forward. That is why we are there.

I understand the disappointment not only of Ballymoney High School but of others. I have no doubt that, as the questions continue, I will hear that a number of schools are disappointed not to have been included in today's announcement. I will make more definitive statements around a number of schools as part of my capital announcement. I suspect that this will be my last capital announcement in the medium term, although I hope that it is not the last capital announcement of this Assembly term.

We continue to progress schools through the system, and I want to be in a position to announce further school builds before the end of this Assembly term. However, I also emphasise that schools should look at the enhancement package. I am not suggesting that that is the answer to Ballymoney High, but I say in broad terms that an investment of up to £4 million in a post-primary school or any school will make a significant difference to the fabric of that school.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement. The inclusion of Down High School in the list of projects will be greeted with great approval and gratitude across County Down. I also welcome the significant funds for the school enhancement programme. Bearing that in mind, will the Minister expand on the significance of the programme not just for our schools estate but for our wider economy?

Mr O'Dowd: My primary objective is to ensure that we have a functional schools estate. However, the consequences of that are good news for the construction industry. In part of my statement, I used the calculator that the construction industry uses: for every £1 invested, £2.84 is stimulated in the industry. It is a significant investment, with the potential of up to £625 million being invested in the local economy and the potential for around 6,000 jobs as we move forward. So, the Department is playing

its part in assisting the construction industry through this bleak period. This year, we are also investing £40 million in maintenance in our schools. That includes programmes that will ensure that the fabric of our schools estate is improved and assist the construction industry. I continue to seek finances for a number of areas of investment in the schools estate for the benefit of the schools estate, but I am delighted that it also assists the construction industry.

Mr Kinahan: I welcome the statement and the spend on rebuilds and maintenance, especially with Parkhall Integrated College. I just hope that no new hoops are brought forward.

When it comes to the enhancement programme, we seem to be creating divisions between types of schools as regards area planning. Will the Minister prioritise, so that sharing is more evident or encouraged when he looks at rebuilds in the future?

Mr O'Dowd: The details of the school enhancement programme have been published on the Department's website today. Managing authorities have those details. I encourage schools to take a close look at those, particularly schools that may have been disappointed today that they were not part of the announcement, and consider what advantages there would be for them in moving forward through that project of up to £4 million investment in the schools estate. It is a very worthwhile programme.

With regard to greater sharing in the schools estate, I have emphasised time and again that we require further sharing in our schools estate. I announced the Lisanelly programme of work today as being the only viable option to move forward in Omagh. Although there have been delays, understandably, in the Omagh area in relation to considerations around Lisanelly, I am of the view that we now need to move forward with the Lisanelly project and that it is now decision time around that element. I will certainly facilitate shared education when the programmes are brought forward to me. I am looking through the area plans at the moment to consider how shared education has been facilitated in those, and that will also be emphasised in the primary school area plans.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his statement, which I welcome both for educational and economic reasons. I welcome the £40 million investment in maintenance and the school enhancement project, particularly the new schools in my constituency — St Bronagh's in Rostrevor and Down High School. They were badly needed and are much welcomed.

You mentioned slippage etc. As the Chair said, it is important to progress things from plan to cutting the first sod. My concerns for my constituency are Knockevin Special School and the newbuild at St Louis' Grammar School in Kilkeel, which would help to secure —

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

Mr Rogers: — the plans for all post-primary education. I am really asking the Minister to clarify something that he said to the Chair about the last capital announcement in the medium term. Did you say that there would be some announcement before the end of this Assembly term?

Mr O'Dowd: I will clarify what I meant about the last capital announcement in the medium term: these are the only

projects — and my June announcement — that I can move forward with the confidence, firstly, that we have, with regard to the June announcement, the finances to build those schools and, secondly, that, if we move forward the projects that I have announced today, we are in a position to deal with them either through slippage or additional funds coming forward to the Executive or planned towards the next CSR.

It is January 2013. No one knows either the investment we will be able to secure from the Executive or what other, if any, announcements will come from the British Government on their budgetary or economic policies. On a number of occasions, we have seen that we have actually benefited from announcements in Britain where we have got the counterbalance in terms of our block grant for capital. Therefore, particularly in this announcement, I want to be in the position that, if money becomes available, there is a list of schools ready to move forward. I am not ruling out another announcement on capital, but, at this stage, my plans do not include one. If money becomes available, I assure you that I will bring projects forward.

As regards St Louis' Grammar School and the other schools that you mentioned, I am not ruling anything out. The fact that a school is not on today's list does not mean that it is ruled out for the future. There is continuing work to be done on a significant number of schools and on area plans before we can bring further schools forward. So I encourage schools that seek further capital builds — they may be proposing amalgamation or whatever way they propose to move forward — to continue that work. The announcement marks out a phase in the capital builds programme. I would like to be in a position to make a further announcement later in this Assembly term, but we are where we are today.

Mr Lunn: I welcome the Minister's statement, and particularly the fact that he has clearly recognised the most needy cases, which is reflected in the fact that there are four integrated primary schools and two Irish-medium primary schools on the list, all of which operate out of decrepit Portakabins.

I want to ask him about Lisanelly. He will be aware of the desire of Drumragh Integrated College in Omagh to be involved in the Lisanelly project. Can he tell us anything or, perhaps, give any encouragement that the school's opinion will be taken into account as Lisanelly is taken forward?

Mr O'Dowd: I assure the Member that the school's opinion will be taken into account as Lisanelly is moved forward. The configuration of the schools estate on Lisanelly has not been defined, for instance, in terms of the number of schools required or whether there will be a sixth-form college on the site. All those issues are of interest to all schools in Omagh and to Drumragh. I assure the Member that their views will be taken into account. Will the final plan include every wish of each individual school? No, it will not. That is just the reality of the situation. However, I can certainly assure the Member that opinions will be and are being taken into account. I will also say this: it is decision time on Lisanelly. It is a Programme for Government commitment that I intend to fulfil. So, while we have, quite rightly, gone through a prolonged period of consultation and discussion with individual schools and sectors, it is now decision time. Either you are going onto the Lisanelly site, or you are not.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his statement. I also thank him for his recent visit to schools in Holywood, where he saw at first hand the need for three new buildings. Can he update us on progress on the Holywood schools project?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his question. I did, quite recently, visit Holywood with the Member. I think that I agreed to another meeting with him to discuss the matter further. The Holywood project is fluid in the sense that there has been a rethink around how that project might move forward from the board. Those issues are being discussed with the schools and elected representatives. I want to keep abreast of those discussions. Until they come to a conclusion, however, I cannot make a definitive announcement on the way forward. My advice to the Member and the schools involved is to keep those discussions going. I will meet them in due course. As I have said to other Members in the Chamber, the fact that a school or schools are not included in today's announcement does not mean that they will not move forward in the future.

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

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also thank the Minister for his statement. I have listened carefully to some of his answers. He will forgive me if this is a bit repetitive, but does he intend to announce further capital build programmes? I think in particular of my constituency of West Belfast. I know that there has been some discussion around the area plans.

11.00 am

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for her question. As I said, I would like to be in a position to make further announcements about capital investment before the end of this Assembly term. We will have to evaluate what happens in the June announcement and how well these proposals move forward. We will then have to do our sums to see what capital we have.

As I said to Mr Rogers, as we head towards the end of January 2013, no one here knows what the financial position will be as we move into the last two years of this CSR. The British Government may make further announcements about changes to budgetary processes there, and we will hopefully benefit from that if further capital is available. The Executive are continually examining their budget remits to see whether there is slippage in any Department and which Departments can use that money in the short term. Today's announcement puts the Department of Education in a very healthy position for any of those potential outcomes, which will enable us to move forward. If more money becomes available, that will be used up by these projects, and if there is excess money, I can assure you that I will make further capital announcements.

Lord Morrow: The Minister lamented the fact that he has too many hoops to jump through and that there is too much bureaucracy to deal with. What steps is he taking to tackle all that? Surely that is one of the functions that falls to the Minister: ensuring that red tape and bureaucracy are minimised. I suspect that he would have the full support of the House if he arrived at a solution for that.

To what extent were the projects and the programme that he announced here today influenced by the fact that there

is so much temporary accommodation out there, with teachers having to teach in cabins and wooden huts? Will this, in fact, deal with that sort of scenario? If not, how many of those situations will still exist after this programme is carried through?

Mr O'Dowd: I will deal with those questions in reverse order. We are dealing with six projects today that are largely in temporary accommodation. That by no means resolves the issue completely. I do not have in front of me the information on the exact number of schools in temporary accommodation, but I will get my officials to forward that to you.

As for bureaucracy and the hoops we have to jump through, you are quite right: as the Minister of Education — this is, indeed, the case for any Minister — there is a responsibility on me to try to lessen bureaucracy in the Department. We are taking measures to deal with that. For instance, we are examining a regularised plan and design concept for primary schools, so that we do not have to design each individual primary school. We will have a regular design for primary schools. I am not talking about a 1960s red-brick model. I am talking about a modern, fit-for-purpose, inviting design that will meet the needs of primary schools, with only minor adjustments needed.

We will follow that up with designs for post-primary schools, but that is a more complicated process. A number of the processes that we have to go through happen across government. For example, the length of time that it takes to deal with an economic appraisal is, in my view, ridiculous. That is not because civil servants are not dealing with them, but because of the processes that they have to go through. Business cases also have to be gone through. Anybody here who has been involved in planning matters will know that it can be quite difficult to get through a planning process. I have raised those matters with the Executive and the head of the Civil Service, and they are being taken into account as we move forward. So, we are improving on how we manage government with less bureaucracy, but we certainly have not got there yet.

Mr Deputy Speaker: A lot of Members have their name down for a question, so I remind you to keep your question short. I am sure that the Minister — I see him nodding — will keep that in mind as well when he answers.

Mr Elliott: I appreciate and welcome the Minister's statement. I never thought that I would see some of those proposals for Fermanagh on paper. I will welcome it even more when young children are moving in, and I will remind them that it was Minister O'Dowd who made the announcement.

How far will the £40 million for newbuilds go towards those projects? Is there any timescale for the ones in Fermanagh?

Mr O'Dowd: There are a lot of figures floating about here today, so I can understand Members misinterpreting what I say. That £40 million is for school maintenance, which is a different programme again. It is for a school maintenance programme, and there is a rolling programme of maintenance going through.

We have a significant backlog of maintenance across the schools estate, although I increased funding dramatically over the past year. I intend to review my budgets again for this and the last financial year to see whether we

can make any further funding available for school maintenance. During the monitoring rounds, the Executive also made funding available for future school maintenance programmes.

The projects that I announced today have potential costs in the region of £220 million. We have yet to secure some of that funding, although, as I said, as building programmes move forward there may be some slippages. We have to look at what expenditure has the potential to be spent in this CSR. I suspect that some of the projects that I announced today will move forward to building stages. However, some are at the very early stages and it may take two to three years before construction begins. The important thing is that we are moving the projects forward and they are in a position to use money when it becomes available.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. It is a good news story for the education sector in the Strabane area. I am sure that the staff, principals and boards of governors of Strabane Academy and Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh, in Strabane, are jumping with joy this morning when they hear this news. It is, indeed, a great boost to the economy in Strabane, as well, in terms of jobs. Will the funding for the school maintenance and school enhancement programme continue to grow, as that may be the only source of funding that some schools that are not on the list can access for their schools?

Mr O'Dowd: In the last financial year, £40 million was available for the school maintenance programme. We are projecting in the region of £37 million in the next financial year. I am looking at budgets to see whether we can make further money available for maintenance. Without anticipating what the Executive may do in respect of the monitoring rounds, I will continue to bid through the monitoring rounds for school maintenance money. So, there has been a significant investment in school maintenance over the last number of years, and we are beginning to tackle some of the problems in the schools estate. However, I am not suggesting that we are there yet.

I have set aside £20 million per annum for the school enhancement programme towards the end of this financial CSR period. I hope that we will be able to use that completely, and I suspect that we will. I think that it will be a popular programme among schools and will see significant improvement to the schools estate as well. So, there are opportunities for schools to access a number of funding programmes to improve the fabric of their schools.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Nuair a bhí an tAire ag caint, thagair sé don phleanáil cheantair. Tá an próiseas sin socraithe i ndeisceart Ard Mhacha. Ar an ábhar sin, an aontaíonn an tAire liom go bhfuil an t-am ann le hinfheistiú a dhéanamh in Ardscoil Naomh Iosaf i gCrois Mhic Linnáin?

The Minister referred in his statement to area planning. That process is very much settled for south Armagh, with excellent co-operation between the high schools there. Will the Minister agree that this is an opportune time to consider investment in St Joseph's High School, Crossmaglen? Will he accept, if he has not already done so, an invitation to visit that school?

Mr O'Dowd: The standard answer to all Members who have raised individual schools is this: today's

announcement does not rule out a school going forward in the future. If capital becomes available, I will make further announcements.

Indeed, I will be making an announcement around area planning. In certain parts of the North, area planning is largely settled. They have made inroads over the last number of years and planning has been going on. I would like to be a position when making an announcement around area planning to point towards a number of areas that have fulfilled their area planning obligations.

I think that I have on file an invite to St Joseph's. If I have not, I am more than happy to go to St Joseph's and take a look around the school, as I have with other areas, examine the school's estate and have a discussion with the staff and pupils about their views on the way forward for education, which I, as Minister, always find very helpful.

Mr Girvan: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. I welcome the investment of £220 million in capital projects. I particularly welcome the announcement about Parkhall Integrated College. We had many meetings about that matter, for which I thank the Minister. I want an assurance about the time frame in which it will be taken forward. I appreciate the fact that not all of today's announcements are at the same stage; some are further along the road than others. Parkhall Integrated College has approval and so on and is ready to go, so will you give me a time frame? Considering the plight of our local construction industry, when contracts are given, will local firms be able to take advantage of them?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his question. I was impressed with the cross-party delegation that I met with representatives from Parkhall several months ago in the Building. Despite our reputation of sometimes not being able to work together as political parties, that was a fine example of local political parties working together. The group made an impressive presentation with school representatives, and it had cross-community support. After further examination, the merits of the school spoke for themselves. Parkhall is well advanced in the planning process and has only a number of phases to go through before signing off. However, we have to match that against the money when it is available. I cannot give a definitive time, but the project is more advanced than others in the planning stages.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his announcement. It comes after blue Monday and is certainly a good Tuesday, particularly for Holy Trinity College in Cookstown. It provides a new school for Cookstown and gives the town a clear identity as the hub of mid-Ulster. That is important as we try to provide schools for the future. Can any European funding be drawn down, particularly for the advancement of research and development and opportunities to fund it?

Mr O'Dowd: My Department is not using any European funding for the projects. It has, however, been involved in discussions with other Departments and was included in the last visit to Brussels by Executive officials. We are beginning to involve ourselves more closely with the European project and potential funding streams. I will happily accept money from anywhere; if you have any influence in those circles, I will be more than happy to accept that from you.

In terms of Cookstown, Holy Trinity College was one of the core schools that were identified by CCMS, which sees the school as being an integral part of area planning. As with all the other schools, I am delighted to be in a position to make that announcement.

Mr Clarke: I join my colleague in thanking the Minister for the positive statement. It is difficult for me to ask a question, given that my colleague asked everything about Parkhall. The Minister recognised that there was cross-party support. Recognition must also be given to the school principal because he played an important role in bringing forward that delegation. There is a concern because the school has been on a list before, but it fell off. Will you give us an assurance that Parkhall is on the list to stay until it is built?

Mr O'Dowd: I have been cautious about making capital announcements because I realise that, in the past, we announced lengthy lists of schools that would be built some day. Schools, quite rightly, expected them to be built, but they never came to fruition and frustration grew. My June announcement stated that if there is money to build those schools, they will definitely go ahead. Parkhall has been identified as a core school in the area, and it will go ahead. It is at an advanced stage of planning. I now have to bring it to the next planning stage and match that up against funds. I can say definitively that Parkhall is going ahead in the future.

When I acknowledged the cross-party delegation that came to the Building, I was also acknowledging the role of the principal, who, along with representatives from that area, presented a firm argument about the future needs of Parkhall. I acknowledge his work in that regard.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. I particularly welcome two projects in east Antrim: Mullaghduh and Kilcoan primary schools, and particularly Corran Integrated Primary School in Larne, both of which many of my colleagues from east Antrim, I am sure, and I have lobbied very hard on. Minister, can you assure the House today that those two projects will not be marched to the top of the hill only to be disappointed once again and that they will proceed? Finally, Minister, will you agree to meet me to discuss both projects in detail?

11.15 am

Mr O'Dowd: Members are aware that they can write to me and ask for meetings. I am more than happy to receive such requests. I answer numerous letters. I do not need to come into the Chamber for you to invite me to a meeting. I am more than happy to meet you about both these projects and discuss what stages of planning and moving forward they are at.

As I said in response to the Member who spoke previously, I have been cautious in making capital announcements. I could stand here and announce that every school on the list will proceed. That would be great —, “Minister announces all” — but I do not want to do that. I want to make announcements about schools that, as we go through the planning process, I am confident, or reasonably confident, will be sustainable. Those listed today have been identified to me by the various managing authorities as sustainable schools that will fit into the area planning process, be financially sound and continue

to have stable or increased enrolments. Therefore, they should move forward as new schools into the future.

Mr Byrne: I also welcome the Minister's very positive statement, particularly for the schools in Omagh and Strabane that he mentioned. What progress, or otherwise, has there been on replacing Carrickmore's Dean Maguire school, and what can he say about the tug of war over ascertaining its new site?

Mr O'Dowd: I do not have the full details of those projects in front of me. If the Member wishes to write to me, I will elaborate on that as much as I can. Today's announcements are the result of engagement involving my officials, the education boards and the CCMS, and of my officials taking responsibility for the building programmes that the Department of Education is directly responsible for. So the list that I have announced is the result of that consultation. As I have said to all other Members, because a school is not on today's list does not mean that it has been scrubbed. Each school will have to stand on its own merits after today's announcement, and there are various reasons why a particular school is not in this announcement.

Mr Allister: The plight of Ballymoney High School has already been raised, but the Minister did not answer the question. So I ask again: why is it that, after 10 years of languishing in need, Ballymoney has been ignored again?

Mr O'Dowd: I was pretty sure that I did answer the question. Ballymoney has not been ignored, nor has any other school that is not on the list. At this stage, I am announcing proposals after discussions with the boards, CCMS and other managing authorities on school programmes. If the Member believes that Ballymoney has been ignored, he must take up that matter with the North Eastern Education and Library Board. I do not think that we should send out the message from the Chamber today that because a school is not on the list, its future has been decided — it has not.

I will make further announcements about core schools and area planning in the coming weeks. I hope to be in a position, at that stage, to refer to a number of projects that are at the stage at which they can be designated as future core schools, a number of which will require newbuild programmes. So let us not write off a school's future on the basis of questions asked after a statement. A programme of work on area planning is continuing. I would like to be in a position to make further capital announcements in the future. As I have said to many Members, this is January 2013, and we do not know what the financial position will look like over the next couple of years. I hope to be in a position to make further announcements as a result of the work of the Executive and, perhaps, further announcements from the British Exchequer.

Mr I McCrea: The previous Member to ask a question and my colleague referred to Ballymoney High School, and the Minister may be aware that Rainey Endowed was part of the joint project with Ballymoney that was to have gone ahead. Unfortunately, the Department changed the rules for that. Will the Minister assure the House that Rainey Endowed, parts of which are falling apart, will have a newbuild in the not-too-distant future? Will he give the school principal and its board of governors some assurance that it is on his agenda, and will he agree to meet them?

Mr O'Dowd: I am going to bring my diary secretary to the next Assembly meeting. I will agree to meet you; I have no difficulty meeting you and the school to discuss those matters. I cannot stand up here and give a guarantee to any school that is not on the list. That should not be taken as a negative. I am announcing plans for these schools today as part of moving forward. I am continuing to work with my departmental officials and the various managing authorities out there to see how we can continue to move other projects forward. Let us continue the engagement on each of those particular schools to see what we can do going into the future.

Mrs Overend: The plight of Rainey has just been raised. I welcome the statement and the potential investment for the construction industry, which is very much needed at this time. However, I am most disappointed, as the students and staff will be, that Rainey Endowed is not on the list of capital projects. Does the Minister feel that holding them to ransom in this way is the best way to enforce area plans?

Mr O'Dowd: The Member should consider whether using that language is the best way to lobby a Minister. I am not holding anybody to ransom. I am moving area planning and the capital build programme forward in an open, transparent manner. You, and anyone else, can examine how I brought the statement forward through my Department's website. The information on how they were brought forward is there.

The information that I have in front of me about Rainey Endowed is that the draft area plan from the board proposes that:

"Rainey Endowed and Sperrin Integrated College will work towards becoming a bi-lateral shared 11-19 school with enrolment increased to 1600 initially working on a split site arrangement but with a requirement for a new build as soon as possible."

So, the proposal has not been completely worked through. No one is arguing that that should not be further examined and discussed. I am happy to meet the school to discuss it further. A newbuild for Rainey has not been ruled out, nor has it for any of the other schools discussed here. The process is at the stage it is at. I have announced the schools that I am confident we can move forward with. As I said, I could stand here and announce that 100 schools are going to be built. That would not mean that they would be built. Let us do this in a staged approach to ensure that the announcements actually mean something and that programmes of work are actually rolling out.

Mrs Dobson: I also thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the projects that are to be taken forward. However, last week in Committee, Minister, I raised with you the situation of Richmount Primary School, which is in Portadown in our constituency. Will you give an assurance that you will work to ensure that the unmet preschool need will be taken forward?

Mr O'Dowd: The issue at Richmount Primary School is nothing to do with capital builds.

North/South Ministerial Council: Inland Waterways

Ms Ni Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. With your permission, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998 regarding the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) inland waterways meeting, which was held in Armagh on 12 December last year.

The Executive were represented by me, as the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and by junior Minister Jonathan Bell from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). The Irish Government were represented by Jimmy Deenihan TD, Minister for Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht Affairs, and by Dinny McGinley TD, Minister of State with responsibility for Gaeltacht affairs. The statement has been agreed with junior Minister Bell, and I am making it on behalf of us both.

Ministers endorsed the recommendation that sponsor Departments should consider options around the setting up of a board for Waterways Ireland and present proposals for consideration at a future NSMC inland waterways meeting. The aim is to present the paper at the next NSMC meeting in the summer this year.

The Council received a progress report from Mr John Martin, chief executive of Waterways Ireland, on its work, including the following significant achievements: the sponsorship programme to promote the awareness of the waterways across all navigations, with 94 events sponsored up until the end of October 2012, with an estimated attendance of almost 1.1 million people and an estimated value to the economy of over €85 million; maintenance of the waterways, with 99% of waterways remaining open from April to October; at 31 October 2012, a total of 591 metres of additional moorings had been provided, of which 50 metres are at Spencer Dock on the Royal Canal in Dublin and 541 metres at Lough Key forest park on the Shannon navigation; four new publications, which are 'A Taste of the Waterways', 'Guide to the Barrow, 'Good Boating Guide' and 'What's On 2012'; the continued involvement and engagement with the INTERREG IVc Waterways Forward project; and the Waterways Ireland education programme, which includes the development of education packs for schools. That was launched in November by Minister Deenihan and Minister Quinn at the Waterways Ireland visitor centre in Dublin, and at the NSMC meeting on 12 December by Minister Deenihan and me at the joint secretariat offices in Armagh.

The senior environment officer at Waterways Ireland gave a presentation on the negative impacts of invasive species on the waterways. The presentation highlighted the types of invasive species, which can be aquatic plants, riparian plants, fish and invertebrates. The effect of each type of species on the waterway network was covered. Measures for tackling problems associated with invasive species were also discussed.

The Council noted progress on the development of Waterways Ireland's 2012 business plan and budget. The Ministers discussed the main priorities for Waterways Ireland in 2013 and noted progress on the 2013 business plan and budget. The priorities for this year include ensuring that the navigations are open and all existing facilities operational during the main boating season from

April to October and actively promoting the waterways to extend and expand their recreational use in all forms.

The Council received a progress report on the restoration work for the Clones to Upper Lough Erne section of the Ulster canal. Ministers noted that the inaugural meeting of the inter-agency group on the Ulster canal was held on 20 September. The group will examine funding options for the project, which is continuing to proceed through the planning process in both jurisdictions. Waterways Ireland has responded to all requests for clarification and all objections to date, and a decision is awaited from Monaghan County Council and the Department of the Environment's Planning Service.

The Council consented to two property disposals at the River Shannon at Harvey's Quay to Limerick City Council to facilitate the provision of a boardwalk along the river's edge adjacent to the quay wall, and along the Grand Canal towpath at Edenderry, County Offaly, to facilitate the development of a circular walkway by Offaly County Council.

Ministers thanked John Martin, who is due to retire in March this year, for his contribution to Waterways Ireland and noted the process for appointing a new CEO. The Council agreed to meet again in Waterways Ireland sectoral format in summer 2013.

Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): I understand that proposals will be considered at the next NSMC meeting for setting up a board for Waterways Ireland. Can the Minister advise of the timescale for the establishment of that board and when appointments will be advertised and made?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I cannot give the Member any advice on the timescale. At the moment, the progress report that we have states that options are being considered for the next NSMC meeting in June. Other than that, we have no indication of what those options include, including a timeline or, indeed, appointments to the board.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an ráitis a thug sí dúinn ar maidin. I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she outline what capital works have been undertaken in recent years, particularly in the North?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I know that, at the minute, there is a budget set aside for capital works. In 2012, Waterways Ireland's target was to complete 700 metres of new and upgraded moorings at the waterways: 50 metres at Spencer Dock; 541 metres at Lough Key forest park on the Shannon; 90 metres at Derryadd on Lough Erne; and 40 metres at the water sports jetty near Killyhevlín on Lough Erne.

11.30 am

Waterways Ireland has a plan to spend approximately £300,000 in capital in its 2012-13 budget, which includes a proposal to provide 160 metres of additional moorings at Crom on Lough Erne and a new works depot on the lower Bann.

Mr McGimpsey: The outgoing chief executive of Waterways Ireland, John Martin, was appointed when I was Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. His appointment was clearly a very good one and I wish him well in his retirement. He served for 10 or 12 years in that post, which, at the beginning, I can assure Members, was very

exacting, because it brought the waterways in the two jurisdictions together. I endorse the Minister's expression of gratitude to John Martin.

I note that the sponsorship programme to promote awareness of the waterways across all navigations included 94 events that were attended by 1.1 million people and created value to the economy of over €85 million. That is very welcome. How much of that refers to Northern Ireland?

Ms Ní Chuilín: First, I appreciate the Member's remarks about Mr John Martin and I am sure that he will appreciate them as well. John Martin, who is an engineer of note and a character of note, has given great service, particularly to Waterways Ireland.

I will write to the Member with details of the exact number of events that took place in the North — we are talking about places on the lower Bann and at Coleraine — and the exact amount of money that has been spent on those events at those sites.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis. An aontaíonn an tAire liom-sa go bhfuil obair iontach — agus obair dheonach — ar siúl ag Craobh an Iúir agus Phort an Dúnáin de Uiscebhealaí Éireann chun canáil an Iúir agus Phort an Dúnáin a athchóiriú? An nglacfadh an tAire le cuireadh teacht agus féachaint ar an obair sin agus bualadh leis an chraobh áirithe sin den eagraíocht?

Does the Minister agree that excellent work is being undertaken on the Newry canal by the Newry and Portadown branch of the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland?

Since this is a day on which many invitations have been issued, will she accept an invitation to view that work and meet representatives of the Newry and Portadown branch?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as ucht a cheiste. I thank the Member for his question. I agree that the work on the Newry canal, the partnership and the links with other partnerships in the city, is commendable. The Member will, perhaps, be disappointed to learn that I have already received an invitation from some party colleagues. However, it is better that we, collectively, meet the full partnership. All elected representatives from the area should be there too. This is something that people in the constituency should be proud of. The plans that we have to progress in that area are important because investment in it is much needed.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her statement. I congratulate Waterways Ireland for all the good work that it has done. The Minister mentioned the education programme, which includes the development of education packs for schools, which she launched in Armagh. Will she expand a bit on what is in those packs and how they will be rolled out?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The education packs are for primary-school children aged 8 to 11. They are targeted at primary schools that are situated along the waterways and the rivers. The packs highlight the natural environment, the natural resources that are to be found in neighbourhoods and communities and the environment in general. It looks at using waterways and rivers as a health indicator — for example, towpaths and walks. However, it is also about boating and, indeed, water safety. I welcome it: it is a

good initiative. It is certainly something that both Ministers will be looking forward to receiving progress reports on, because it is something that we could roll out, not just to primary schools but to post-primary schools, and do so on the basis that the needs for older children can have a place in the waterways as well.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for her statement. While I note the success of the maintenance of the waterways, has there been any discussion on the responsibility of waste management and environmental issues, including disposal issues, which have been drawn to my attention by some users? There may be some confusion between the local authorities, the private sector and the agency.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his point. I probably need to talk to him afterwards about clarification. The only time waste disposal was discussed was in relation to the invasive species. Indeed, Waterways Ireland is responsible for making sure that weeds — particularly Nuttall's pondweed, which was fairly problematic in 2010 and 2011 — are disposed of. While there is not a formal service level agreement with local government and local partners, there is a formal setting where they meet and try to share responsibility for environmental issues around the waterways. I am happy to talk to the Member about anything specific that he has in mind.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. Can she tell us the current position with the business plans and budgets for 2012?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The business plans and the budgets have come up. Trevor Lunn is not here, but it is something that comes up quite a lot, particularly around the NSMC meetings. The current position is this: all the Ministers met the Chairs and Deputy Chairs of agencies, particularly Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster Scots Agency. We also met the CEO to make sure that the budgets, the business plans and the efficiency savings that were indicated went ahead. So, Waterways Ireland has reported to us that it has met its efficiency savings in its budget and business plans for 2012, to which we provided £3.5 million. So, things seem to be on target for 2012 and moving in the right direction for 2014 as far as Waterways Ireland is concerned.

Mr Campbell: I concur with the congratulatory comments to Mr John Martin on his retirement and wish him all the best.

The Minister alluded to the setting up of a board for Waterways Ireland. She will be aware that there is a concern about cross-border bodies per se in both Northern Ireland and the Republic about the under-representation of the Protestant community in employment. Will that be a priority for the new board?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have not seen any terms of reference for any new board. At the minute, we are just looking at proposals for what the configuration of a board would look like. I have not been made aware of any concerns regarding the religious make-up of workers or members of the board. If the Member wishes to write to me with anything specific, I will be happy to try to respond.

I appreciate the comments that the Member made about Mr John Martin, and I am sure that he will be happy to receive those comments in the spirit that they were given.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas ar maidin. I thank the Minister for her statement. In relation to the education programme and the impacts on schoolchildren, is it anticipated that this will have an impact on children in areas of deprivation?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes it will, particularly because a lot of villages and towns around the waterways have been isolated. They are rural and have not received much investment. Thinking of the waterways in terms of maintenance, environment, fishing or even sport or leisure activities, we are trying to make sure that the programmes are delivered to schools, that there is something in them for everyone and that the children and young people can see a future on the waterways. It is really important to take those initiatives and, indeed, any investment to people who were the furthest removed from investment before.

Mr Rogers: Thanks to the Minister for her statement. The restoration of the Ulster canal will create opportunities for water-based and waterside activities. The recreational aspects of inland waterways have a strong attraction for all our tourists. What discussions has the Minister had with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in order to harness and develop that tourism potential?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board and, indeed, Tourism Ireland are now involved with waterways and the interagency group, particularly in relation to the Ulster canal. They are not only looking at additional funding opportunities for the completion of the Ulster canal but are working quite closely on the tourism product of our waterways, and will continue to do so. I accept the Member's point: it is imperative that there is a joined-up and interdepartmental approach, particularly in trying to provide a more robust and fuller tourism product.

Mr Allister: The joint communiqué from the meeting says:

"The Council noted progress on the development of Waterways Ireland 2012 Business Plan and Budget."

The joint communiqué from the July meeting said exactly the same. The joint communiqué from the February meeting said exactly the same. Back in October 2011, we were told that, at that meeting, the Council:

"reviewed progress in finalising the Business Plan and Budget 2012."

Now that we are through and finished with 2012, is it the case that Waterways Ireland's budget for 2012 has never been finalised? What do you do at these meetings? Is it just a day out for the Minister?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I think the Member is being ridiculous. *[Interruption.]* No, I think you are being ridiculous, but, in fairness to you, you are fairly consistent.

At the minute, the budget is with both Finance Departments for approval and everything is proceeding as normal. It is in the context that the operational responsibility for Waterways Ireland will go through all the different Departments and different processes, and everything is on board. It is with the Finance Departments for final approval, and it will progress as expected and anticipated.

Mr Allister: And when was the 2012 —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The rules of the House are very clear: the Member asks the question, the Minister responds, and there should be no further communication.

Mr Swann: Minister, you noted that there were discussions about tackling problems associated with invasive species. Was there any discussion about anything that can be used across other Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) waters? I am thinking specifically about the River Bush and the concerns that are there, with locals saying that a non-indigenous weed species has been growing for quite some time around the River Bush research station.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member may be aware that Waterways Ireland received capital funds for weed-harvesting equipment, which has gone round all the DCAL waterways. To my knowledge, the problem with the River Bush is being treated and dealt with. It has not been flagged up to me as an area, or a waterway for that matter, that has been so problematic that it needs to be prioritised. The River Bush was not discussed at the meeting, but obviously this is a constituency question, and the Member is entitled to an answer. The River Bush is part of an ongoing maintenance programme to make sure that any invasive species do not get out of control.

North/South Ministerial Council: Languages

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. With your permission, and in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998, I wish to make a statement regarding the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) language body meeting, which was held in Armagh on 12 December 2012.

The Executive were represented by me as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and by junior Minister Jonathan Bell from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Irish Government were represented by Jimmy Deenihan TD, Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, and Dinny McGinley TD, Minister of State with special responsibility for Gaeltacht affairs.

The meeting dealt with issues relating to the language body and its two constituent agencies, Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch — the Ulster-Scots Agency — and Foras na Gaeilge — the Irish language agency.

I will now present a summary of the issues discussed by the Council on 12 December 2012.

Recognising that there is a need for change in the sector, Ministers discussed the Foras na Gaeilge review of core funding, which will be the focus of the next language meeting in 2013.

11.45 am

The Council received progress reports from the chairpersons and the chief executive officers of the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge. The Ulster-Scots Agency reported the following achievements: advancement of the Ulster-Scots flagship programme for primary schools, including agreement with schools on participation in and organisation of an inaugural teachers' conference; delivery of 16 seminars to raise awareness of agency-funded programmes for festival funding, summer schools and music/dance tuition; establishment of the Ulster-Scots Language Forum with representation from language groups, the ministerial advisory group on Ulster Scots, the University of Ulster and the BBC; and completion of the strategic review of the community workers scheme.

Foras na Gaeilge reported the following achievements: funding for the provision of specialised courses for the public service, with over 1,200 participants attending night classes and over 2,200 participating in online learning; promotion of the language among young people through funding of almost €500,000 for 66 summer camps and 77 youth events; further development of the terminology database, with the addition of 1,460 new terms and the revision of 120 existing terms; and the promotion of the use of Irish in a business context in the small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector, with match funding support provided to 125 businesses.

Ministers also noted the ongoing collaboration between the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge on governance issues and the promotion of the work of the Language Body, including revision of the equality scheme, participation in joint showcase events and sponsorship of a book in Irish about Robbie Burns.

The Council noted that Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency have applied efficiency savings to the 2012

budgets in accordance with the guidance issued by the Finance Departments and that the 2012 business plans and budgets will be brought to a future NSMC meeting for approval as soon as possible. Ministers noted that the 2008 and 2009 consolidated Language Body reports and accounts were laid in the Assembly and in the Houses of the Oireachtas on 11 July 2012 and on 7 December 2012 respectively. The Council also directed Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency to include as a key priority in their 2013 business plans the publication of the Language Body accounts for 2010, 2011 and 2012.

The Council noted that draft 2013 business plans for Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency have been prepared, with the focus on delivery of key priorities for each agency. Sponsor Departments will work together to finalise the 2013 business plans and budgets and, following approval by the sponsor Ministers and Finance Ministers, will bring them forward for approval at a future NSMC meeting.

Ministers noted a presentation by the CEO of the Ulster-Scots Agency, outlining the work being undertaken by the agency and other stakeholders to progress the Hairtlan initiative. This entails the establishment of a Hairtlan advisory panel and the development of a funding stream to support the project. The Council also noted the timetable for launching the scheme in 2013 in order to enable programme delivery to begin in 2014.

Ministers noted the provisions of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission (Amendment) Bill 2012 with regard to the publication and periodic review of the official standard for Irish. This is to be used in translating all primary and secondary legislation in the Oireachtas and as the guide for writing in the Irish language. Foras na Gaeilge will also take appropriate action as required to adhere to the official standard for Irish in carrying out its functions with regard to terminology and publications.

The Council agreed to consider a suitable date for the next Language Body meeting.

Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): I note the Minister's comment on the promotion of the use of Irish in a business context, particularly in the SME sector. Given that English is the global language of business, what benefit does she see that having for a sector that is already experiencing difficult economic pressures? Could the match funding that is being made available for that project not be used more wisely?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not think that small and medium-sized enterprises would appreciate the Member's comments. They have been asking for this for some time and support the project wholeheartedly. It comes down to where people feel that the Irish language belongs. It is regrettable that the Chair of the Committee has such disdain for the Irish language.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an dara ráiteas a thug sí dúinn ar maidin. Core funding is due to end on 30 June 2013. Has a decision been made for future arrangements to be made and to be in place by that date?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The review of core funding was not discussed in any great detail at the last NSMC meeting. The Executive, as part of the Programme for Government,

had Irish language and Ulster-Scots strategies, which ended on 27 November. It is important that the outcomes of those strategies are reflected in any new core funding arrangements. The Member will be aware that there will be changes in the Irish language sector. However, it is imperative that the outcomes of those consultations are visible in any new funding arrangements.

Mr McGimpsey: As someone who has spent most of his life in small and medium-sized businesses, I was intrigued to hear about the promotion of the use of Irish in a business context and the match funding. I am interested to know how much money we are talking about. I was a businessman in a former life. If I were on a building site or in a building firm and wanted to access Irish, what are the criteria? Would it be a matter of me hiring a bricklayer who can speak Gaelic, and you paying half the money, or is there something more pertinent as far as a business is concerned? As someone who has been in business all his life, I find this hard to —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Could we have a question, please?

Mr McGimpsey: — understand in a business context.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will get the Member the exact figures. There has been a demand for promotional and marketing material for small and medium-sized businesses. I am surprised that the Member has not received such requests, because the demand has built up since 2002 or 2003. The issue has been raised in the Irish language sector across all regions the length of the island. Foras na Gaeilge has responded to that. It is not just about meeting demand. It is about using Foras na Gaeilge core funding to try to promote better business opportunities for those who wish to do it through the medium of the Irish language.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Chuala mé ansin tagairt ag an Aire don tsamhail nua maoinithe ina ráiteas. An dtig liom a dheimhniú arís inniu léi go seasfaidh sí an fód do na heagraíochtaí bun-mhaoinithe mar a gheall sí a dhéanfadh sí cheana féin sa Tionól?

I notice the reference in the Minister's statement to the funding of voluntary Irish language organisations. Will the Minister once again attest to the fact that she will defend those organisations, as she said she would in the House previously?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as ucht a cheiste. I have always said that I will defend the Irish language, as I will defend Ulster Scots. What I will not defend is a review or reorganisation of the sector that does not meet needs. I know that the Member is also coming from that position. This is not just about maintaining the status quo for the sake of it. It is about making sure that there is core funding for the Irish language to meet the needs of not only children and their parents but the business sector — as we heard in previous questions — the environment and any aspect of life through the medium of Irish language.

It is imperative that those needs are defended. However, I will not — any Minister worth their salt would not — defend something that, on occasion, is indefensible. There have been extensive reviews, and I have done extensive consultations. I want to look at the existing, new and emerging needs of the sector, and that is what I will

defend. I will defend the needs of the Irish language sector not only for the sake of it but because it is the right thing to do.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her statement. I have to admit that I have not really followed the progress of the Ulster-Scots Agency's work very much. Therefore, what is the Hairtlan initiative? She mentioned a funding stream to support the initiative. Is that funding from the budget of the agency?

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is, and the Hairtlan project is about geographical areas and hubs for the Ulster-Scots language, culture and heritage. It is really important because it looks at the oral history and development of the language, but primarily at the development of culture and heritage. Currently, there are no set criteria for a candidate area, but the Ulster-Scots Agency will work with communities who want to identify themselves as part of a Hairtlan area. The Member may be aware that north Down, east Antrim and east Donegal have previously designated themselves as Hairtlan areas, but the desire is to try to roll that out as widely as possible depending on where the demand and need are.

Mr Hilditch: I welcome the Minister's statement and the advancement of the Ulster-Scots flagship programme. At this stage, is there any timescale for its implementation? Are there anticipated numbers of schools and pupils likely to be involved in each academic year and any potential costs?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I went to the inaugural meeting, which involved about 16 schools. I thought that that was very impressive. I also felt that, as it was the first meeting, many other schools would come on board. I have no idea about the cost yet, but it will certainly be within the budget of the Ulster-Scots Agency. I am glad that there has been an opportunity to reflect on where the needs are and that the agency has taken those needs into consideration and tried to respond. The Member was one of the people who asked why money for Ulster Scots was being handed back, which is the last thing that we want to do. We want to make sure that the money is spent on identified need. The project has great potential, and I look forward to it being rolled out.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. What is being done to speed up the process to publish the outstanding annual reports and accounts?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I mentioned in my statement, both Ministers made it their responsibility, even after the meetings were over, to talk not only to the CEOs but to the chairpersons of the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge. The delays are historical and go back to 2001, and, although the accounts and reports are laid consequentially, that is not to say that there is a huge backlog. Both Departments, the Finance Departments and the Audit Office have looked at simplifying, but not diluting, the process. Indeed, we have spoken to the Audit Office and the Comptroller and Auditor General in the Finance Departments, North and South.

The process was used for the first time to complete the 2008 accounts, and those were laid in the respective Houses on 12 July. The 2009 accounts were laid on 7 December. However, I want to be totally clear: we are still unhappy with the progress so far. We want all the 2012 accounts to be laid before the end of this year. I hope that the gap — it is not a chasm, but it is huge because of the

delays originally created in 2001 and beyond — will be bridged and that people will not be frustrated by having to ask the same questions after each statement on each sectoral meeting. I am as frustrated with that as they are.

Mr Swann: Minister, in your statement, you say:

"Foras na Gaeilge will also take appropriate action, as required, to adhere to the Official Standard for Irish in carrying out its functions with regard to terminology and publications."

Who is responsible for the official standard of Irish, and why is Foras na Gaeilge not using it in its terminology and publications?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member may not be aware that there are different dialects in each province. We need an agreed standard for the Irish language, and I will look at that quite keenly. Through Maynooth College, Queen's and the University of Ulster, we are looking at that to make sure that the Irish language has an agreed standard in future.

People's spoken and written Irish is very much down to the province and county that they come from. I am sure that the Member will support Foras na Gaeilge in bringing that forward in the future.

12.00 noon

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire ar maidin. The Minister referred to the consultations. Can she specify when we can expect the outcome and what the next steps will be beyond that?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will appreciate that there were a substantial number of responses to both consultations. That is very positive. Our officials are still going through each of those responses, some of which are very lengthy. For example, one response came to 50-plus pages on the education section alone, so the Member will appreciate that it is a time-consuming process. However, I hope to have the responses to those consultations completed by the end of March, and I will bring to the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee and Executive colleagues ways of moving forward with both strategies.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a cuid freagraí go nuige. Molaim-se go hard na hiarrataí éifeachtacha atá ar bun ag macasamhail Foras na Gaeilge. Ach más féidir liom ceist a chur ar an Aire: cad é atá ar bun ag an dá Roinn stáit le polasaithe faoi leith dá gcuid féin a chur i bhfeidhm, agus an bhfuil clár oibre faoi leith ag an dá Roinn leis na teangacha a chur chun cinn?

I thank the Minister for her statement. The work of Foras na Gaeilge and, indeed, Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch is to be commended for its efficiency and delivery. I speak as a former member of the board of Foras na Gaeilge. Will the Minister outline what, specifically, the two respective government Departments are doing? Do they have a particular programme of work for delivery, and, if so, can she outline some of that delivery to us?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question, and I appreciate his support for both bodies. Both agencies have taken on a lot of joint work, which was not the case previously. That is to be welcomed, and it has increased. For example, they are producing a revised equality

scheme for both agencies, which is not completed. That is helpful. They also participate in joint events, such as the national ploughing championships, and they are participating in Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann. As I outlined in the statement, they have produced a book in Irish on Robbie Burns.

So, there is a programme of work to ensure that the business plans and the agreed programmes of work on the way forward are on target. They are on target, and this is additional work. Both agencies' emerging needs throughout the year will be presented. I am content with the work that both agencies are doing not only singly but together. It sends out a very positive message across the sectors.

Mr Allister: In this week of Robbie Burns night, I am sure that my constituents will be well impressed that, among all the squander, we now have a book written in Irish about Robbie Burns. They might be more interested to know why it is that the accounts, which go to the heart of the financial probity of this cross-border body, are so much in arrears and why, years on, we still await those accounts. Why does the Minister come to the House and say that she is disturbed about it? She is the Minister, but she does not seem to do anything about it. Why is that?

Ms Ní Chuilín: That is not the case. I will ignore the Member's remarks on Robbie Burns. I just do not think that it befits the poet or, indeed, the work that has been put into developing this book, which the Ulster-Scots Agency, Foras na Gaeilge and the respective communities are quite proud of.

The annual reports and accounts for the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge have to be consolidated from the annual report and accounts of the North/South body. As the Member will be aware, that is defined in the North/South Co-operation (Implementation Bodies) (Northern Ireland) Order 1999. They have to be laid in front of the respective Parliaments. I outlined, in response to a previous question, the process that we brought forward to simplify and speed up the consolidation of accounts. We made it a priority to meet the chairs of both agencies to outline to them how imperative that work is. I have no ministerial or statutory obligation other than to make sure that I do everything that I can to have accounts produced. I am satisfied that Mr Deenihan and I have done that.

Mr I McCrea: I certainly welcome the establishment of the Ulster-Scots language forum. Will the Minister detail how those who will sit on that body will be selected and what its remit will be?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Ulster-Scots Agency is leading on that, which is totally appropriate. It is looking at the ministerial advisory group on Ulster Scots and at other partnerships and groups that have been there for a long time and have a lot of experience to offer. We will mark the progress of that work, but I am content that the agency itself is best placed to take that forward. In response to a question from one of your colleagues on the schools initiative and the Hairtlan project, I said that many people have been working in that area for a long time. It would be foolhardy to ignore not only their views but their experience and opinions. The agency knows that, and it will use those people to take the programme forward. I support it in that.

Public Expenditure: 2012-13 January Monitoring and 2013-14 and 2014-15 Technical Exercise

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I want to update the Assembly on the outcome of January monitoring and the Budget technical exercise that was undertaken after the Executive's agreement to realign budgets for 2013-14 and 2014-15.

I will start off by talking about January monitoring, before saying a few words about the Budget technical exercise. Before I go into the detail of the monitoring round, it is worth pointing out that the focus continues to be on the non-ring-fenced resource items, which hereafter I will simply refer to as resource expenditure or resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL). The Executive still monitor the ring-fenced resource and administration expenditure positions, and they are included in the tables attached to the statement.

The key strategic financial management issue for the Executive for the remainder of this financial year is to ensure that HM Treasury budget exchange scheme limits are not breached at the end of the year. Members will recall that those amount to 0.6% of resource DEL and 1.5% of capital DEL. That, of course, excludes the Department of Justice, which is subject to separate end-year flexibility (EYF) arrangements. The actual amounts will be finalised and agreed with HM Treasury in the coming weeks, but they are likely to be around £50 million of resource DEL and £14 million of capital DEL. Importantly, any end-of-year underspends in excess of those amounts will be lost to Northern Ireland. That is something that I have impressed on other Ministers.

The starting point of this monitoring round was the October monitoring outcome, which concluded with an overcommitment of £14.6 million of non-ring-fenced resource expenditure and £10.3 million of capital investment. A number of adjustments were made at the centre that impacted on the overall financial position in this monitoring round. I would like to highlight some of those items.

As part of October monitoring, the Executive agreed to allocate £5 million resource DEL and £5 million capital DEL to the jobs and economy initiative in this financial year. That was held at the centre for allocation in this monitoring round. Departments have now confirmed that only £3.1 million of resource DEL and £0.3 million of capital DEL can be spent in this financial year. That makes available £2 million of resource DEL and £4.8 million of capital DEL in this round for allocation.

Members may also recall that, after the October monitoring round, the Executive held in balance £2 million of resource DEL to fund spend under the social investment fund, childcare strategy and Delivering Social Change projects in this financial year. The total expenditure on those funds is now expected to be £1.8 million, which frees up the remaining £0.2 million for allocation in this round.

As I have already mentioned, the Budget exchange scheme allows the Executive to carry forward and draw down end-year underspends up to the limit agreed with Her Majesty's Treasury. The scheme requires the devolved Administrations to adjust drawdown to the final outturn position. This only recently became available and showed

that there were additional underspends in 2011-12 at block level of £1.9 million resource DEL and £1 million capital DEL. There were also additional capital DEL Barnett consequentials for 2012-13 amounting to £1.5 million announced in the Chancellor's autumn statement. Those additional amounts were also made available for allocation.

The latest regional rate forecast indicated that an additional £3.8 million of resource funding could be made available in the January monitoring round. That was due to a number of factors, most notably the realisation of higher income levels and lower levels of irrecoverable losses than initially estimated.

As part of the October monitoring round, the Executive also agreed that £1.5 million would be made available to DCAL for sports in 2012-13. DCAL has now confirmed that the funding split required in 2012-13 amounts to £0.6 million resource DEL and £0.9 million capital DEL, and that represents a pressure at the centre to be covered in this monitoring round.

Funding was also released to the centre in respect of the coastal communities fund, reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing and the centrally managed EU budget and salaries for individuals working in statutory bodies. All of those amounted to £2.5 million resource DEL and £0.2 million capital DEL.

All the above centre items impacted on the starting position in this monitoring round. Taking those into account, along with the October monitoring overcommitment, resulted in a reduction in the starting overcommitment to £4.7 million of resource expenditure and £3.8 million in respect of capital investment. That provides — it is a long, contorted route, and I hope that Members have followed the figures — the starting position for the January monitoring round before any departmental reduced requirements, reclassifications and internal allocations were taken into account.

I will now turn to the reduced requirements, which is the money that Departments said that they were not going to use. Departments declared reduced requirements in this monitoring round of £30.2 million resource expenditure and £12.1 million capital investment. The full details of those reduced requirements are included in the tables attached to the statement. I remain concerned at the high level of reduced commitments surrendered in this round, particularly since it is difficult to spend large amounts of resources in the final few months of the financial year. I would like to highlight some of the most significant easements and update Members on both the schools end-year flexibility scheme and the A5 road scheme legal case.

The Department for Social Development surrendered £17.8 million of resource expenditure, which accounted for nearly two thirds of all the resource DEL reduced requirements in this round. The easements contributing to this amount came largely from the Housing Executive and the Social Security Agency. Although some of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive reduced requirements were due to additional asset sales and efficiencies, which are good, a considerable amount was due to the deferral of a planned staff early release scheme. The bulk of the Social Security Agency easements related to reduced IT costs, historical VAT payments and welfare reform

costs that were not brought forward as quickly, due to the progress of the welfare reform measure.

12.15 pm

In relation to the schools EYF scheme, which allows schools to either draw down or increase their reserves, Members may recall that the Department of Education was allocated £5 million in June monitoring to cover the estimated 2012-13 net schools drawdown. The final schools EYF declaration, however, confirmed that the final estimated net drawdown will be zero in this financial year. That means that the £5 million will be returned as a reduced requirement in this round. Whilst it is disappointing that those resources will be returned at this late stage of the financial year, it is, I suppose, an improvement on last year's position, when £10.5 million was surrendered at this stage. The schools EYF stock to be carried forward into 2013-14 will now remain at £46.7 million.

I turn to the ongoing A5 road scheme legal case. I understand that the full hearing is scheduled for mid-February 2013. If it is resolved quickly, there is still a possibility of spending about £20 million on the A5 scheme in this financial year. However, it is clear that there is already a £30 million easement. Recently, I secured from the Chief Secretary up to £50 million of RRI borrowing flexibility to manage the issue. The £30 million easement in DRD was, therefore, handled as a technical adjustment to the DRD budget, with a corresponding reduction in RRI borrowing in this financial year. That provides the Executive with an additional £30 million RRI borrowing power in 2014-15. My officials will continue to liaise with their DRD colleagues on the issue. Should it be necessary to make a further adjustment to the DRD capital budget, it can be applied before the end of the year, with a corresponding reduction in RRI borrowing. I will update the Assembly on that issue at the provisional out-turn stage.

I turn to internal reallocations. It is good practice that Departments seek to manage any emerging pressures internally before bringing forward bids for additional allocations. Whilst the public expenditure control framework allows Departments scope to undertake many such movements on a unilateral basis, movements across spending areas in excess of the de minimis threshold are subject to Executive approval. In some instances, Departments have also sought permission to move allocations across spending areas to facilitate the transfer of responsibility for a particular function from one business area to another. The internal reallocations agreed by the Executive in this monitoring round are included in the tables for information.

The Executive also agreed a number of reclassifications between the resource and capital categories in this round. There were also reclassifications between ring-fenced and non-ring-fenced resource DEL categories. Again, those reclassifications are shown in the tables.

All those issues impacted on the amount of resources available to the Executive in this monitoring round. Taking into account the starting position, the reduced requirements and the reclassifications resulted in £20.6 million of resource expenditure and £13.9 million capital investment resources being available to the Executive. Against those resources, Departments' bids amounted to £96.7 million of resource expenditure and £27.6 million

of capital expenditure. Again, the bids are detailed in the tables.

The level of allocations that was agreed by the Executive was informed by a judgement on the final level of overcommitment that should ideally be carried forward to the end of the year and the quality of the bids submitted. Historically, there has always been some underspend at year end in both resource expenditure and capital investment. The key risk for the Executive is that the level of underspend may exceed the limits in the Budget exchange scheme, which would, of course, mean that those resources would be lost to Northern Ireland. On the other hand, there is also a risk of breaching HM Treasury control totals if the Executive decide to commit too much in the January monitoring round. So, a balance clearly has to be struck. Recent experience suggests that the risk of exceeding the Budget exchange scheme limit is greatest for resource DEL, with recent capital DEL end-year underspends being well below the Budget exchange scheme limit. That informed the Executive's decisions in this round.

Before I go on to highlight some of the main allocations, I would like to mention two separate funding transfers made in the monitoring round. The first funding transfer relates to the £11.8 million of funding allocated to us as part of the UK Government's Get Britain Building initiative. This is good news for the construction industry and homebuyers. That funding was ring-fenced, as it scores as a financial transaction, and therefore had to be used for the purpose it was allocated for: loan and equity investment only. My officials have been working with their DSD colleagues on a business model that meets HM Treasury eligibility criteria, and the Executive have now agreed to proceed with two local schemes.

The first scheme involves housing associations purchasing vacant or repossessed properties to fix up and then sell on the market at a discount. The second scheme is a new shared equity scheme, which is a variation on the existing co-ownership scheme. The new shared equity scheme requires first-time buyers to purchase a starter share of between 60% and 75% and put down a 3% to 5% deposit. Participants will initially pay a very low rent on the remaining share, with the interest increasing to encourage buyout of the remaining share after five years. Those schemes should provide a much-needed boost for our local housing market and construction sector. The new shared equity scheme should also assist first-time buyers in getting on to the property ladder in what continues to be a very challenging environment.

The second funding transfer relates to the sale of the former St Patrick's military base in Ballymena. Under the Hillsborough agreement, proceeds from the sale of former military sites should be transferred to the Department of Justice. Accordingly, the sale proceeds of £2.2 million were transferred to the Department of Justice from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister as part of this monitoring round.

The Executive agreed allocations totalling £21.8 million for resource expenditure and £20.7 million for capital investment. Those allocations are detailed in the tables, but I will highlight only a few of the main ones.

The Executive agreed to allocate £10 million of resource expenditure to the Department of Justice for the prison

officer exit scheme. That allocation will help to drive forward ongoing Prison Service reform. Members should also note that that allocation will be more than matched by DOJ surrendering at least £10 million of capital funding in the 2014-15 financial year. That should help the Executive to address the overcommitment in that year.

Some £10 million was also allocated to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. That allocation allows the Department to address additional demand on emergency departments and other acute hospital services resulting from winter and unscheduled care pressures. It also provides additional resources for family and childcare services, general dental services and further work on infection control in our hospitals. That should be welcomed by the Assembly.

The Executive also agreed to allocate £17.7 million of capital investment funding to the Department for Regional Development. That will allow the Department to purchase 42 new buses at a total cost of £6.7 million. When I have good news for the Green Party, it does not even turn up. It would have been really happy about that. Furthermore, it provides an additional £10 million towards road structural maintenance and £1 million for the replacement of 600 street lighting columns. That brings expenditure on structural maintenance in this year to £100 million.

The outcome of the January monitoring round was that the Executive are now carrying forward an overcommitment of £8 million in respect of resource expenditure. In terms of capital expenditure, the Executive agreed to carry forward a zero overcommitment. Since the amount of capital allocations exceeded the amount of resources available, it was necessary to switch £6.8 million from resource to capital to ensure that the overcommitment was zero at the end of the monitoring round.

Members should note that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and indeed the entire block face an unavoidable pressure of £18 million in respect of EU funding not being made available for the Titanic project. The Executive are still considering the complex circumstances surrounding that bid, and a decision on whether to agree the allocation has, therefore, not yet been taken. The Executive may yet still agree that allocation, which would increase the resource expenditure overcommitment to £26 million. However, that is still acceptable in the context of the level of underspends likely to emerge at the end of the financial year.

Before I conclude the statement, I would like to say a few words about the Budget technical exercise relating to the 2013-14 and 2014-15 financial years. The Budget technical exercise allowed Departments to reclassify expenditure and move resources across spending areas, with movements in excess of the de minimis threshold subject to Executive approval. There were also some ring-fenced resource reduced requirements surrendered by Departments as part of that exercise. All those movements are shown in the tables accompanying the statement.

Allocations to the Departments for the next two years under the jobs and economy initiative were also made as part of the Budget technical exercise. In total, £32.5 million resource expenditure and £9.1 million capital investment was allocated in 2013-14, with £27.4 million resource expenditure and £6.9 million capital investment in 2014-15. There was also an allocation of £1.5 million made

available to DCAL for sports in 2013-14 and 2014-15. The Budget technical exercise and the jobs and economy initiative allocations impacted on the departmental budget position for 2013-14 and 2014-15. Revised final departmental budget tables have, therefore, been attached for information.

There are a few further issues that the Executive will have to consider next year, and I would like to highlight them. Members will be aware that the Executive agreed, as part of the 2013-14 and 2014-15 Budget realignment, to reduce the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) budget by £0.2 million in each of the next two financial years. The reduction was based on the actual spending performance of the NIAO during 2011-12 and should not, in my view, in any way impact on its operational capacity. However, the Chairman of the Committee recently wrote to me expressing concern over the impact of that budget reduction, although he also indicated that the Audit Committee agrees that some reduction in the Northern Ireland Audit Office budget may be warranted. In light of that, the Executive agreed to monitor the situation and will come back to it when it comes to the June monitoring round in 2013-14. I think that that will make the Chairman a happy man this morning.

In concluding, I would like to highlight the significant allocations made as part of this monitoring round. They will benefit many people in Northern Ireland. They include money for front line services in health, the purchase of new buses and improvements to our roads infrastructure. The ring-fenced financial transactions transferred to DSD as part of this round will also deliver a much-needed boost for the local housing market and construction sector. New housing schemes should also assist first-time buyers in getting into the property market in what continues to be a challenging environment.

The Executive are carrying forward a considerable overcommitment on the resource DEL side. That should ensure that our block-level underspend at the provisional out-turn stage will not exceed the Budget exchange scheme limit and hence prevent any resources being lost to Northern Ireland. For all those reasons, I commend the monitoring round to the Assembly. I trust that it will receive a warm welcome from Members, whose constituents will be affected by the allocations that have been made and announced today.

12.30 pm

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. I am not a happy man about the reduced requirements. In total, £42.3 million resource and capital was surrendered. One third of that came from the Department for Social Development, and £4.7 million came from the Minister's Department, which has a much smaller budget than others. Will the Minister give those Departments a slap on the wrists?

On a more serious point, does it appear, Minister, that you will remain within the Budget exchange scheme limit as we come towards year end? What is your assessment of the risk of non-ring-fenced moneys being returned and possibly lost to the Executive?

Mr Wilson: I am glad that the Chairman has raised the issue of the late reduced requirements that have been declared by Departments. Although we have found worthwhile projects on which to spend the money, the sooner we are aware of reduced requirements, the better we can plan expenditure and make sure that it fits with the Programme for Government and the kind of priorities that the Assembly has set. I emphasise to my Department and to other Ministers the need to look at these things earlier. On some occasions, it cannot be anticipated. Nearly two thirds of the reduced requirements have come from one Department: DSD. The money for the redundancy scheme in the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and some of the IT stuff that was required for welfare reform could not be spent because of delays, and there is nothing that you can do about that. However, it is important that we look ahead and try to make sure that Departments declare the money. Of course I will slap wrists, publicly or privately, when necessary.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Fourteen Members are down to speak, so I plead with you to be brief. I am sure that the Minister has taken note of that as well.

Mr Girvan: I will be brief. I thank the Minister for his statement. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety cannot normally bid in monitoring rounds, so why has £10 million been given to it at this stage?

Mr Wilson: There was an agreement that the Health Department would have flexibility with its budget and so would not normally be able to bid in monitoring rounds. However, when we are faced with the situation that the Chairman described, in which there are a lot of reduced requirements at the end of the year, it is better, quite frankly, to spend the money than give it back to Westminster. When there are particular issues in a Department that could improve the quality of life for people in Northern Ireland, those bids should be considered. It was against that — considering people who are waiting for emergency surgery, dealing with unforeseen winter demands on the health service or addressing the matter of infections, which is a big issue in hospitals — that it was deemed that the £10 million was well worth spending. I would prefer that the money go into the health service in Northern Ireland than back to the Treasury in London.

Mr Cree: I sympathise with the Minister. It is an almost impossible task to balance a budget that is moving all the time. When I looked at the statement this morning, I thought, "Whatever happened to the review of the financial process?". Things would be an awful lot easier if we had a clear system that required people to budget and abide by the budget that they decided on.

My question is on the significant underspend by DSD of £17.8 million. I am particularly interested in the Social Security Agency part of it. The Minister said that it relates to IT costs being reduced; historic VAT payments; and, indeed, welfare reform costs, which I would have thought are a little early. I know that a lot of money is not being provided —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry, may we have a question, please?

Mr Cree: Yes, it is in there — not being provided on grants and welfare benefits. Will the Minister elaborate on the nature of these underspends?

Mr Wilson: I will not enter a debate on budget arrangements. I, too, wish that we had them in place, although I am not so sure that they would deliver some of the things that the Member talked about.

About £2.5 million of the DSD underspend resulted from there not being time to apply spending for the reduction in Housing Executive staff. The rest was due to welfare reform not going at the pace that had been expected. Of course, there have been delays at Westminster in bringing in universal benefit etc. Therefore, some of the anticipated expenditure on IT systems and delivery has not been necessary. That is partly due to the delay nationally in implementing some of the welfare reform issues, so there was no need to spend the money as soon as this because the systems do not yet have to be in place. Therefore, the right thing to do was to return that money. It would have been much better to know that the money would not be required this year. However, given that some of these decisions arise at a national level, the Minister can respond only as that information percolates down.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I refer the Minister to the £18 million DETI bid to write down the EU debtor. Is that associated with the major project application to the EC in June 2009? I note that the total project cost was £97 million and the associated ERDF drawdown being sought was £18.02 million. There was a difference in legal opinion. The EC's legal advisers believed that the application was ineligible, whereas the UK's lawyers believed that it was eligible. Has that been settled? If not, where do the Executive stand on this £18 million?

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for the question. I want to emphasise a number of points. First, this is not the result of an overspend on the project. The project came in on time and on budget. It is a question of how it will be financed. Initially, there was to have been £18 million of EU money. There is a dispute, and the clear legal opinion that DETI received, including that of the people who wrote the rules for Europe, was that the procurement route followed was correct and it could go that way. Later, the EU said that the procurement had not been properly done and, therefore, this would not be subject to EU funding. DETI will challenge that. However, as EU money has to be spent within a certain time frame, the prudent thing to do was to say, "There is £18 million of EU money that has still not been claimed. DETI could not claim it because the EU was opposed and took a different view on whether the procurement was correct. So let us make that EU money available to some other Department and then use the Executive money to finance the Titanic signature project". That is what the exercise was about. DETI made a bid that would free up £18 million of EU money that another Department could then bid on. It was a prudent step for this reason: had we waited and left it until a year or even less time from the end of the EU spending period, the danger was that we could not have spent the EU money on time. So, this is simply a transfer. There is a pot of EU money, which DETI originally intended to use. The EU has challenged it, but we believe that we have a robust challenge to make on it. Rather than run the risk of losing it, it was decided that a bid would be made now to use Executive money for the Titanic signature project and that another Department would bid for the EU money, so that we could secure the EU money. That is the reason.

The Executive have not taken a view on it yet. As I said in the statement, if the Executive take a view on it in the near future, all that we would do is simply make an adjustment in our level of overcommitment. I am happy that, even with £26 million overcommitment on resource DEL, we will still live within the exchange scheme limits.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his statement. The Minister will be aware of the real concern throughout Northern Ireland about what is being forced on local councils to pay for the review of public administration, not that they wanted it. Will the Minister give the Assembly an assessment of the bid that DOE made to compensate local councils for the reform of public of administration so that it will not be landed on the ratepayers?

Mr Wilson: There are a number of points to make about DOE's bid. First, I did not believe that it was the amount of money that was actually required. Indeed, it was an excessive bid. I have had discussions with the Environment Minister on that, and my officials have had extensive discussions with his officials. There were a lot of assumptions in the bid. For example, it assumed that every councillor would take the retirement money, which, of course, will not be the case. It was also assumed that every councillor on the new shadow councils would be a brand new councillor, which, of course, would not be the case, and that councils would spend money building up capacity for councillors who may or may not be on the new councils. There are a lot of flaws in the bid itself.

The second point that I will make on the bid is that many of those things — we have narrowed it down for the transition costs — could be financed either when the transfer of functions arises or through the councils' own resources. Do not forget that councils will make substantial savings as a result of RPA. It is my view that those savings should be used to finance the costs, rather than the costs falling on the Assembly and, hence, reducing the amount of money that we have available for public services.

The third thing to say is that there are issues with this. Certain costs will be involved as councils converge. I am sympathetic to how those convergence costs might be addressed. That is a discussion that I have not yet had with the Environment Minister, because he has, of course, been focusing on the transition costs. The Executive's position is that councils themselves should meet all the costs. There is a case for looking at how we can deal with some of the convergence costs, and we will have a discussion on that. However, I emphasise to the Member that there are substantial savings for councils. The amount of resources required for the transition from existing to bigger councils is very minimal. Some of them are capital costs and could be included in capital budgets at a very minimum rate. Therefore, I think it only right that councils should bear those costs, and my message to councils is that they should now be starting to look at how those costs can be financed. Do not look for a bailout by the Executive, especially when the savings are so substantial that any loan that needs to be taken out could easily be serviced by the councils themselves, without going anywhere near the ratepayers. That is the important thing.

12.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members, I really need your co-operation to keep questions and answers short. We want

to finish this session before the break, allow the Business Committee to meet and resume here at 2.00 pm.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he expand on the benefits of allocating resources to DSD to set up the house purchasing initiatives?

Mr Wilson: The benefits are many. First, £11.8 million is available and will lead to new house building, so that will help the construction industry. Secondly, it will help with affordable housing, because people will have the option of purchasing the remaining share of their home. They put up only between 60% and 75% and then buy the rest over a five-year period. Of course, there is an incentive for them to do so, because the rate of interest goes up the more time goes on. So, they get an easy step on to the housing market and then an incentive to become full owners of the property. This has the benefits of increasing house ownership, increasing building, injecting money into the building and construction industry and, of course, helping the DSD to deal with the whole issue of demand for housing by relieving some of the pressure on social housing.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for the allocations made to the Department, particularly in respect of road structural maintenance and street lighting. I also congratulate him on the easement that he has negotiated in respect of the A5. Is there further scope to negotiate further easement on that budget should the legal case take longer than he anticipated? I think he said it should take until mid-February.

Mr Wilson: As I said, we will continually monitor with DRD when the spend on that road is likely to start. The DRD has indicated that it is fairly confident of the legal case, and it thinks it can spend £20 million this year. If it cannot do so or if it needs to spend more, we will simply make an adjustment on the RRI borrowing. Since we have up to £50 million, which is the full amount of money allocated for this year, we have the ability to ease either way — either to make more money or less money available this year. We actually have flexibility: it just means monitoring and keeping in touch with DRD officials on that.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his statement. He will recall that something in the region of £10 million was surrendered to the Department of Justice to facilitate the prison officer redundancy package. Will the Minister indicate what the Executive will get back from that from the Department?

Mr Wilson: I suppose that what we want to do is encourage the prison reform proposals of the DOJ and get them implemented as quickly as possible, especially if they lead to savings on its long-term revenue budget. The Department of Justice said that it believed it had a number of prison officers who would take up the early retirement scheme if the money was available. We have that money available this year. Again, as with the Department of Health, we do not want to run the risk of losing that money to the Treasury. So, the money will be made available to the DOJ to allow for more people to take up early retirement. The good thing is that we will actually get it back next year in the form of a capital payment from DOJ, and that will help ease some of the capital pressures that we will have next year. It is a way of managing money between one year and the next. When you have an underspend one year and you are likely to have a pressure

the next year, you can easily carry the money over while keeping within all of the Treasury rules.

Lord Morrow: I suspect that there is not a Member in the House today who is not perplexed at the fact that there is an under-requirement of £42.3 million. It strikes me that a lot of speculative bidding goes on and that the Minister is the unfortunate individual who has to deliver the bad news. That said, however, will he and his Department have to accommodate any further pressures in relation to the A8? Will he confirm that the A8 and A5 projects are one and the same scheme, or have they been divided?

Mr Wilson: They are two separate road schemes. Two separate contracts have been undertaken by two separate firms, and there are different timings for each scheme. However, they both come under the Department for Regional Development's budget, and the job of delivering those schemes on budget is the responsibility of the Minister for Regional Development. He has not indicated to me or my officials in any way that there is likely to be an overspend on those schemes. We expect Departments to manage these capital projects. I have to say that the record of this Executive in delivering capital projects on time and on budget has been fairly good.

Mr Allister: I must confess that I did not quite follow the Minister's answer to Mr Bradley about the £18 million that was expected for the Titanic Quarter from the EU. Surely what table D indicates is that there is a shortfall of £18 million, which DETI made a bid to have filled in the monitoring round, and that it is not money that is available for distribution, as I took the Minister to say, to other Departments. It is a hole in the budgetary arrangements that will require to be filled. Is that not the case?

On the question of EU matters, it has emerged that, previously, £55 million or £56 million for EU fines for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) came from departmental underspends that were accumulated to meet that purpose. Is any of that going on again in anticipation of EU fines?

Mr Wilson: No, that is not the case. Maybe I did not explain it very well. The cost of the Titanic signature project is as had been anticipated. The funding cocktail, however, now has to be revised because there is a dispute about one of the elements of that funding: the EU element. Is it payable, or is it not payable? DETI believes that it is payable, because it believes that it got strong legal advice before it entered into the contract that the form of the contract was legal. DETI took that advice from the best possible source, which was the people who drew up the EU rules, but it has now been challenged. That means that there is £18 million of EU money that cannot at present be allocated to the Titanic signature project but could be allocated to some other project. So, being prudent, DETI has said that it will make that £18 million available so that some other Department can bid for it, which means, of course, that it will not have to ask the Executive for any money. The money that is required for the funding of the Titanic signature project will simply come from Executive money. There is no hole there. There is still the same amount of money; it is simply that someone else will spend the EU money and DETI will spend whatever that other Department's money would have been on the Titanic signature project. That is putting it in the simplest terms. I do not think that there is any need to worry. My only worry would be that, if we dilly-dally on this and leave off any

decision, as there is a time limit in which the EU money can be spent, we could let things go on and find that we will lose the money because we do not have time to spend it. That is why DETI was right to bring forward a bid at this time, and that is one of the reasons why I was happy to accede to it.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his statement and his comments on the Audit Office. While we are on that subject, will he guarantee that he will respect the Audit Office's independence? Will he work with me and others to get a procedure in place that recognises that independence to resolve issues so that we have the transparency that we require in future?

Mr Wilson: There was never an issue about the independence of the Audit Office. I am responsible for the money that is allocated from the Northern Ireland Budget to each of the spending areas, and one of the things that concerned me and my officials, when we looked at all Departments, was that some had bid for money and had consistent underspends or consistent reduced requirements. To better plan for that, we wanted to allocate the money on a long-term basis. So, we looked at where the underspends were and said, "Right, let's then allocate that money so that we have it as planned expenditure". That was done so that we would not run into the kind of situation that I have been describing here today. So, it was purely a budgetary exercise. As the resources were not being used anyway by the Audit Office and it was not spending the money, there was no question of impinging on its ability to do its work. Including this Assembly, there is no area of public expenditure that should be sacrosanct from the good management of public money. People would expect that. In no way was the exercise an attempt to assault the independence of the Audit Office. Of course, as I said in my statement, if it is proved that there is a need for additional resources, a bid can be made for them in the June monitoring round and we can have discussions about that. However, that would have to be justified, just as any other Department would have to justify a bid for expenditure and would have to go onto the list that determines the bids that have the greatest priority.

Mr Byrne: Like others, I welcome the statement by the Minister. There has been £11.8 million allocated to the building programme from the UK Treasury, and you highlighted two possible schemes: the housing associations purchasing some existing properties and the new co-ownership scheme, which I very much support. What will be the breakdown of the £11.8 million for those two schemes? Is there an explanation of why £7 million has been given up by the Housing Executive?

Mr Wilson: I cannot tell the Member at the moment what the division between the two will be. To a certain extent, it will depend on demand, because the purchase of new homes really depends on how many people come forward. Also, the purchase of existing properties by housing associations will depend on what houses are available and which ones they feel they could purchase, do up and sell on quickly. So, the division will really depend on the opportunities that are available, and that will be for the Social Development Minister to monitor. The important thing is that there is £11.8 million available to him to do that. All of that will have an impact on the construction industry and on the ability of people to get homes, hopefully, at prices that are affordable to them.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement. I thank the Minister and Members for their co-operation. The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately on the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time.

The sitting was suspended at 12.58 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Speaker: Question 1 has been withdrawn.

DARD: Headquarters

2. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline how Ballykelly was chosen from the final shortlist as the preferred site for the relocation of her Department's headquarters. (AQO 3194/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The advancement of the relocation of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) headquarters is a Programme for Government commitment for which a strategic outline case was approved by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). Members will be fully aware that the Department's current headquarters at Dundonald House and Hydebank are no longer fit for purpose.

A number of steps were taken before I reached my final decision on the relocation to Ballykelly. The first stage in the process was the development of a longlist of potential locations. The list was taken from the new regional development strategy and, using the 23 local government districts, my officials scored each against a defined set of objective criteria. These included nine different socio-economic factors that considered such things as unemployment levels, deprivation and earnings levels, as well as practical considerations such as the number of public sector and Civil Service jobs already sited in the area.

As I previously outlined, the top two areas in this analysis were Strabane and Limavady, which are both in the north-west. I made my decision to relocate to Ballykelly based on two further factors: the availability of the Executive-owned site at the former Shackleton Barracks, and the availability of buildings on that site that could potentially be utilised.

Work is progressing on developing the business case, which will consider the viable options for relocating my Department's headquarters to Ballykelly.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister for her reply. It certainly throws up one question about the viability, and maybe she can comment on the viability of some of the buildings on the site.

Minister, there is a real sense that you have moved ahead of your Department and officials, with them now playing catch-up. Can you explain why you took the decision unilaterally on Ballykelly, which was effectively a political one, before asking your officials to write the business case?

Mrs O'Neill: Well, I am the Minister, so it is my job to make decisions. The Member will be very aware that, in the Programme for Government, we had a commitment

to relocate DARD headquarters to a rural area. That was a Programme for Government commitment to which all parties signed up. That was, I suppose, the starting point for me to make a decision.

Using the criteria that I outlined to the Member, including the 23 local government districts under the regional development strategy alongside all the other socio-economic criteria, that is the area that came up as most beneficial.

The officials have been tasked to go away to look to the future and what needs to be done now. We have a very competent programme board in place that is looking at all the issues, particularly the fact that there are buildings on the site that could potentially be used. So, I think it is a perfect site. I think there are obvious advantages, given the fact that the Executive owned it, so that will obviously save money for the public purse. There is also the fact that there are buildings on the site that could potentially be used. Some of them are, obviously, more modern than others, but we will certainly be looking towards any that are able to be used.

I have not run ahead of the Department. It is my job to make decisions, and it also my job to make sure that everything is looked at and explored. Based on the Programme for Government commitment, I took the decision for Ballykelly.

Mr Frew: Given the rationale that the Minister outlined for picking Ballykelly as a site, and given the fact that there are sites throughout the Province of a similar nature to Ballykelly as regards old military sites, where there are still buildings on most of these old sites that could maybe be fit for purpose, and given that some of those sites are based in what are classed as regional hubs, namely Ballymena, for one, and St Patrick's Barracks —

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

Mr Frew: Would the Minister not have been better looking at all the sites before making a final decision?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said in my answer to the previous supplementary, the criteria that I used are clear; they are clear for everyone to see. The Member, I think, is making it a local issue and is making a point for his own constituency, which many Members will do and have done. I could make the same case for areas in Mid Ulster.

The fact is that we used the criteria, which are very clearly set out and are very objective. People can look at them at any stage. The 23 local government districts under the regional development strategy have been identified, and that is a long running piece of work. There are also the socio-economic criteria that were applied. The top two locations were in the north-west, and this site, as I said, has the obvious advantage of being owned by the Executive, so it was easy for us to get on-site as quickly as possible. But the major benefit has to be the fact that we are saving money for the public purse.

Mr Allister: If I understand this correctly — the Minister can correct me if I am wrong — the decision was taken on foot of a ministerial direction, because it was not compatible with Civil Service advice to appraise all options. Ballykelly was not chosen on its competing merits, for the shortlisting did not consider specific sites but council areas. It was only after Ballykelly was chosen

that she moved to a business case to try to sustain that decision. Is that the absurd way in which the decision was made?

Mrs O'Neill: There is nothing absurd about it. A direction is necessary in a case in which you want to avoid delay and reduce uncertainty. Standard procedure is to appraise all options fully, even those that do not meet the Executive's identified policy to move the headquarters to a rural location by 2015, as set out in the Programme for Government. That would be complex, cumbersome and, in the final analysis, wasteful of resources. The decision was taken on the basis of the very objective criteria that I outlined, which are open and accessible for anyone to explore further. I encourage the Member to do that.

The regional development strategy identified 23 locations, and then further objective criteria were applied. Whether you like it or not, the reality is that the north-west was the area that was identified. The top two areas were identified as a result of all the objective criteria being applied. As a result, the Ballykelly site, because of the obvious advantages that I have outlined, including it being an Executive-owned site, was a natural option to take.

Sixmilewater

3. **Ms Brown** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the work that Rivers Agency has carried out or will carry out to improve the Sixmilewater watercourse. (AQO 3195/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The significant flood of Sixmilewater in August 2008 caused damage to property at Muckamore, as well as at Meadowside and Riverside in Antrim. Properties were also affected along the rivers that flow into Sixmilewater at Parkgate and Doagh. I am very pleased to advise the House that, following that significant event, Rivers Agency has undertaken considerable works to reduce the risk of flooding to people and property, as well as identifying further work that could be undertaken, subject to competing priorities for available funding.

Rivers Agency has removed material washed down by the flood that could have obstructed flows and increased the risk of further flooding. The agency has also continued to perform planned routine inspections and conduct necessary maintenance work to ensure the free flow of the watercourse. In addition, the agency undertook work at Meadowside in Antrim and Muckamore to ensure that the existing flood defences continue to perform effectively. Rivers Agency is also completing the construction of a flood alleviation scheme at Parkgate. At Riverside in Antrim, the agency has been working with Roads Service to improve the storm drainage system during times of high river flows.

Rivers Agency has also identified cost-effective flood alleviation works at Riverside and along the Doagh river that could be undertaken, subject to competing priorities for available funding.

Ms Brown: I thank the Minister for her answer. As she outlined, in 2010, Riverside Mews in Antrim was identified by Rivers Agency for flood alleviation works, but that is not included in its current capital works programme. Will the Minister provide an update on when we can expect those improvement works to take place?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said in my original answer, works at Parkgate will be completed during the 2013-14 financial year. The timing for the works at Riverside in Antrim — I think that that is the location you referred to — and along the Doagh river are subject to competing priorities for available funding. That work is not programmed in the current Budget period, but I assure the Member that, as and when any funding becomes available, Rivers Agency will continually reassess all areas that need flood alleviation measures. The location that she referred to will be treated in exactly the same manner as other areas.

Mr Kinahan: As many will know, Sixmilewater is very close to my heart, because I live on it. Given that 83% of the surface-water bodies in the local management area have been classified as "less than good", what plans do Rivers Agency and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) have to ensure that we improve the water quality?

Mrs O'Neill: I can perhaps give the Member more detail in writing, but I assure him that Rivers Agency regularly works with NIEA at official level on a range of issues, including water quality. I am happy to provide the Member with detail of any specific negotiations on the water quality of Sixmilewater in writing.

Ash Dieback

4. **Mr McDevitt** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action Forest Service is taking to cope with ash dieback disease. (AQO 3196/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The chief executive of the Forest Service leads the departmental response to ash dieback disease. Officials whose normal functions include plant health continue in those roles, drawing on the expertise of specialists in policy, science, surveillance, agrienvironment schemes and forestry. They are supported by officials from other Departments and local government.

I would like to record my thanks for the co-operation of the former Minister for forestry, Shane McEntee, and the excellent working relationship that I had with him. I am sure that Members will join me in expressing sympathy to the McEntee family on Shane's death just before Christmas. Shane and I worked very closely to ensure that the island of Ireland was as well protected against the disease as possible. We jointly brought in legislation to prevent further introductions of disease to young plants and ash wood. We shared our experiences of how best to find and eradicate the disease.

As also happens in the South, my Department carries out surveillance of recent ash planting on public and private woodland, in roadside and urban landscape schemes, on farms, and in nurseries and garden centres. The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) provides laboratory testing facilities for North and South when symptoms suggest that the disease might be present. As of 10.00 am today, 800 sites have been surveyed. The disease has been confirmed at 24 recently planted sites and two nursery sites. Those include young woodland, garden centres and landscape planting in public places. Forest Service assistance has been offered to private site owners to ensure that the disease is dealt with as swiftly as possible.

We are now planning how best to carry out surveillance work through the summer. As we have no evidence to date

that the disease has spread to the wider environment, our policy remains one of detection and eradication. I will continue to work on the issue with my counterparts in the South and in Britain.

Mr McDevitt: I echo the Minister's condolences to the McEntee family. Mr McEntee will be a sad loss to Irish politics. He was an honest and fine parliamentarian.

Does the Minister acknowledge that quite a number of the sites are on Forest Service land and that that has caused disruption not only to the work of Forest Service but to users of forest parks, not least runners and mountain bikers, whose activities the Minister has done so much to promote in recent months? Can she give us an idea of the amount of money that has been spent on tackling the disease to date?

Mrs O'Neill: As the Member is aware, the disease is relatively new. The strain of the disease was identified only in 2011. A lot of work is being done on surveillance, research and eradication. That has to be the focus at this moment in time. We really need to concentrate on identifying the areas that have been affected. We need to make sure that we have done the research. Given that it is a new disease, we need to make sure that our science is up to date right across the island. We have very much deployed a fortress Ireland approach, which is one that has served us well in other instances, particularly during the foot-and-mouth outbreak.

We are very much committed to this work at the minute. We are engaging regularly with stakeholders to make sure that we get the message out about what people should be looking for. We are asking them to report detections and, if in doubt, to please seek advice from the Department. We met the Mountain Bike Alliance last week. It is very positive about talking to all of its stakeholders and getting the message out there, and it will continue to do that in the time ahead. I can assure the Member that the focus, at this moment in time, is on surveillance, research and eradication.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister consider enlisting the help of the general public in reporting suspected cases of ash dieback?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes; absolutely. This time of year might not be the right time, as trees are not in leaf. So, I am focusing very much on engaging with professionals in the forestry sector, the horticulture and landscape industries and in central and local government to provide the training that is needed in disease recognition and in circulating the relevant information. As the causal link between symptoms and the disease are difficult to confirm at this time of year — even for the professionals — I plan to delay greater involvement of the public until the summer. By that time, we will have completed our immediate surveys linked to trade and started on the wider surveillance of sites of known infection.

In the meantime, the Department has a helpline for the public that takes calls about trees of concern. Our website has links to photographs of the disease symptoms, and we have put up posters in forest parks about basic biosecurity. Since the beginning of the disease outbreak, the Department has received just over 20 telephone calls and e-mails from the public. In the time ahead, particularly as we enter spring and summer, we will work very closely with the public to make sure that we have put enough

information out there to enable them to come forward and identify to the Department things that they regard as suspicious as and when they see them.

Mr Irwin: Given the seriousness of ash dieback and the damage that it has caused across Europe — I think that 90% of ash trees in Denmark were devastated and lost because of ash dieback — would it not have been wise for the Department and the Minister to have banned the import of ash much earlier?

2.15 pm

Mrs O'Neill: The first positive diagnosis that the organism causing ash dieback was a new disease was not made until 2011, when scientists looked at the disease and concluded that *Chalara fraxinea*, or ash dieback as it is commonly known, is a new virulent species. The disease that was previously prevalent across Ireland, Britain and continental Europe had been in place since the 1800s. So you cannot ask whether we were able to take action before now because the disease has been around for hundreds of years. The disease that we are dealing with is a new strain of *Chalara fraxinea* that was identified only in 2011. That is why the science is still not developed and why we are still working very hard, from the science end, to develop avenues to treat or eradicate the disease.

Circuses: Wild Animals

5. **Mr Agnew** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she plans to introduce secondary legislation to ban the use of wild animals in circuses. (AQO 3197/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I have not yet developed a position on a ban on the use of wild animals in travelling circuses in the North. It is important to note that no circuses are based in the North of Ireland. A number of circuses are registered in the South, some of which, as the Member will be aware, regularly travel here. My Department has an agreed protocol with counterparts in the South that provides for an inspection of animals from those registered circuses before they move back to the South. At this time, we have no evidence to suggest that the welfare of those animals is compromised.

My immediate priority on animal welfare is the roll-out of subordinate legislation under the Welfare of Animals Act 2011, including the regulation of dogs in breeding establishments, which will come before Members next month, and the development of regulations on the welfare of animals in pet shops, animal boarding establishments and riding establishments. I also intend to bring forward legislation to regulate the welfare of livestock at markets here.

I can advise the Member that I have been approached by Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) ministerial colleagues, who propose to introduce a Bill banning the use of wild animals in circuses in England. It is important to realise that that Bill is being taken forward on ethical as opposed to welfare grounds. That is because the available scientific evidence does not support the view that the welfare of animals in circuses is being compromised.

Before making any decision on a ban on using wild animals in travelling circuses here, I want to take the time to assess the available evidence and to give the issue

detailed consideration. I met representatives from Animal Defenders International and the Born Free Foundation yesterday to discuss those issues. Our meeting was frank and constructive, and the organisations have undertaken to provide me with evidence, which I agreed to examine.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for her answer. I think that a ban, rather than welfare protection, is needed because even a circus with the best intentions towards the welfare of animals could not meet the needs of many of those wild animals. An elephant, for example, travels 25 kilometres a day in the wild on average, and elephants in circuses have a much lower life expectancy. The Minister pointed out that we do not have circuses in Northern Ireland, but they frequently come from the South, and the burden on the Department, were it to introduce such —

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

Mr Agnew: The burden on the Department, were it to introduce such a ban, would be minimal, but the alleviation of suffering would be huge. I ask the Minister to follow DEFRA and make an ethical decision.

Mrs O'Neill: I assure the Member that I do not have a closed mind on the issue. For me to bring forward legislation, I need an evidence base, which I am endeavouring to acquire. The two organisations that I met yesterday have been tasked with coming back to me with that kind of information, and I will make sure that I explore that in detail. It is important to point out that, given that we do not have any registered circuses in the North, we need an all-island approach to the issue because there is no point in having legislation in one jurisdiction and not in the other. I intend to raise that issue at my next North/South Ministerial Council meeting with Minister Coveney to see what his plans are. I note from a Dáil question that he has the same position as me: he has not ruled it out. There is scope to explore the issue further, but I assure the Member that I am happy to receive any evidence and information that he has because that is what I need to move forward.

Mr Newton: On the basis of all the evidence available, does the Minister agree that the decision of Belfast City Council to ban wild animal circuses from council property was a wise decision, and would she, at this interim stage, encourage other councils to take similar decisions?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware that, right across this island, a number of councils have banned circuses from using their property, and that is a decision for the elected members of those councils. A lot of the groups involved in lobbying on the issue feel very strongly about it, and they will continue to lobby elected representatives. I will look at all of the evidence and then make a decision based on that. In the Welfare of Animals Act 2011, we have in place some of the most progressive legislation on animal welfare. For the moment, I will concentrate my efforts on introducing the secondary legislation to that strong legislation, which puts us in a good position on animal welfare standards. As I said, I am open to listening to the evidence on circuses.

Mr Cree: Will the Minister confirm whether she has met her Executive colleagues on this issue since cruelty to animals was discussed in the House last September?

Mrs O'Neill: Banning wild animals from circuses is not a cross-departmental issue, so it has not been discussed at

the Executive. If, in the future, however, I were minded to introduce legislation, I would bring it to the Executive for further discussion.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for her answers so far, which I find very measured. Will the Minister agree with me that we have come a long road from the days of the Bulgarian dancing bears that were trained on hot coals? Will she ensure that when circuses are in Northern Ireland entertaining largely young people, her Department will ensure that claims of cruelty to animals can be verified, if it happens at all?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for that. I assure the Member that we have protocols in place with our counterparts in the South on the inspection of animals and that those will continue in the absence of any possible legislation in the future. As I said, we have very progressive animal welfare legislation, and we can stand over it. As we bring forward the secondary legislation, it will be strengthened even further. We are in a positive position, and we will explore this issue further as we move on down the line and receive more evidence.

Common Agricultural Policy: DARD/NIEA Engagement

6. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on her Department's engagement with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency in developing a position on the common agricultural policy reform proposals. (AQO 3198/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Since the CAP reform proposals were published in October 2011, officials from my Department have met representatives from the Environment Agency a number of times to share views on the evolution of the reform development process. The agency has also accepted DARD's invitation to sit on a number of internal DARD working groups that have been set up to take forward the development of measures for the 2014-2020 rural development programme. My Department has recently established a stakeholder consultation group for that programme. The group provides a forum for stakeholders to advise and comment on programme development. NIEA is represented on the group, and DARD has been liaising with it on the preparation of a prioritised action framework. This is an EU requirement to ensure that the funding needs of the Natura 2000 network are properly reflected in the future priorities of all funds. DARD will continue to liaise with the Environment Agency through the development programme and until the prioritised action framework is finalised.

Discussions have taken place with NIEA on the options for the monitoring and evaluation of environmental schemes and measures in the proposed programme. It is a statutory requirement that a strategic environmental assessment is carried out on the proposed rural development programme. DARD has consulted NIEA on the development of the terms of reference for the procurement of the strategic environmental assessment evaluators. It is also the intention that NIEA will be invited to join the steering group that will be established to oversee the work of the evaluators.

Ms Lo: Thanks to the Minister for her comprehensive response. It is now very important that the environmental aspect be put into the CAP and that the EU hear about

our concerns. Has the Minister communicated with her counterparts in Westminster?

Mrs O'Neill: I assure the Member that, throughout the CAP reform process, we have continued to engage with DEFRA on all of the issues. We engaged with Caroline Spelman, the previous Minister, and we now engage with the new Minister. We will continue to do that. It is very important that we make sure that our voice is heard in Europe. We deploy an all-Ireland, or team Ireland, approach when I go to Europe. As far as raising the issues that we have highlighted are concerned, our 15 MEPs are on the same page. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Minister to finish.

Mrs O'Neill: Our 15 Irish MEPs will continue to — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs O'Neill: — voice our concerns in Europe and make sure that our points are heard. I am confident that, in the time ahead, we will be listened to and that we will secure all necessary engagements with the Commission and the Parliament. No doubt it is a difficult period, and, when homing in on all the details, we see that it is difficult to make sure that our interests are well reflected.

Mrs Dobson: Is the Minister aware of the views that are widely held in the rural communities that there should be a much greater level of funding in axis 2 of the next rural development programme?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware that, at the moment, the battle is to make sure that we can get any sort of financial framework agreed in Europe. To date, that has not happened. We are hopeful that there may be some agreement on 7 and 8 February that will allow us to at least be secure in the funding that we will achieve. After that, we will decide on the split of the funding.

I do not think that it is fair to say that anyone has lost out. Over £180 million in agrienvironment schemes alone has been paid out of the rural development programme right into farmers' hands. So, I think that it would be unfair to suggest that farmers have not had a fair share of the rural development programme.

For me, the key aspect of the rural development programme and the axis 2 funds is to make sure that we get money distributed to not only farmers but the wider rural community. People who live and work in the rural community are also entitled to be supported so that they can continue to do those things. We must continue to tackle isolation and poverty and all those issues in the rural community. I think that the axis 2 programme was an excellent way for us to do that.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for her response so far. Will she outline how random compliance inspections for the CAP and single farm payments are carried out?

Mrs O'Neill: There are a number of types of inspection. This is not really relevant to the question, but I am happy to give the Member the detail, because a process is applied to selecting people for inspection. That process is based sometimes on concerns arising from, for example, previous overdeclarations. There is a very clear and accountable process, the details of which I am very happy to provide for the Member in writing.

Dog Breeding: Welfare Standards

7. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how she intends to address the issue of dog breeding establishments with poor animal welfare standards, in particular puppy farms. (AQO 3199/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I intend to bring forward new dog breeding establishment regulations under the Welfare of Animals Act next month for debate and approval by the Assembly. Those draft regulations already secured the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee's support at its meeting on 11 December, and the Executive have agreed to the making of those regulations, subject to the Assembly's approval.

The new regulations will provide commercial dog breeders with clear standards that must be met and maintained to ensure the welfare of all breeding bitches, stud dogs and pups in the establishment. They will provide strong powers to improve welfare conditions in substandard breeding establishments.

I appreciate that regulation alone will not stop so-called puppy farming. That will take a concerted effort by members of the public, future dog owners, good breeders and enforcement agencies working together to identify breeders, licensed or unlicensed, who put financial gain before the welfare needs of dogs and their pups. However, the regulations will clearly set out the welfare standards with which commercial breeders must comply. More importantly, the regulations provide the powers to allow action to be taken where a breeder does not meet those standards. Council inspectors will also have clear standards to apply and strong enforcement powers to allow action to be taken, as well as to prosecute anyone who is illegally breeding dogs.

In addition, the new enforcement powers and tough penalties will act as a deterrent to those taking part in illegal dog-breeding activities, sending out a clear message that such activities will not be tolerated.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will the regulations restrict the size of breeding establishments? Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs O'Neill: Commercial dog breeding, irrespective of whether it is large- or small-scale, is a legitimate business, and the regulations will not place any legal limitation on the size of any breeding establishments or on the number of breeding bitches that can be held there. However, I think that it is important to remember that puppy farming is about not the size of the establishment but the conditions in which the dogs and pups are kept.

The regulations aim to provide commercial breeders with clear standards that must be met and maintained to ensure the welfare of all breeding bitches, stud dogs and pups in the establishment. The regulations will also provide enforcement officers with clear standards and strong powers to enforce them. They are not intended to cover individuals who breed the odd litter of pups from a pet, show dog, working gun dog or sheepdog. They are also not intended to cover organisations such as hunt clubs, which, although they breed dogs for hunting, do not sell pups. The Welfare of Animals Act provides general powers that can be used to address any welfare issues that may arise with hobby breeders or in hunt kennels.

2.30 pm

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

Northern Ireland Screen

1. **Ms Brown** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of Northern Ireland screen commission's promotion of Northern Ireland as a major production location over the last 12 months. (AQO 3208/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): NI Screen has implemented key multichannel campaigns to showcase the benefits of the North as a centre for independent film, television and new media production, selling our location, funds and facilities to the global screen industry. These campaigns also communicate the North's successes and promote our unique product and talent on a world stage.

Marketing plays an important strategic role in NI Screen and is a fundamental part of its business, helping to facilitate the organisation's mission of boosting our economy, celebrating our culture and enhancing our children's education.

NI Screen's notable achievements include attracting to the North of Ireland the production of HBO's 'Games of Thrones', the largest television drama in Europe, and part funding Terry and Orlagh George's short film, 'The Shore', which, as the Member is aware, won an Oscar in the live action short film category last year.

Ms Brown: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she outline what plans her Department has to build on the recent success by assisting local councils that may wish to open up their facilities and services to assist in creation and production?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have not had any discussions with local government on this in particular, but I have had discussions with some members from local government around the creative industries and the role that councils have to play. I am happy to take forward any partnership with local government to NI Screen and vice versa. Any experience that we have that would enhance the potential for independent film and television production has to be processed and encouraged, and I am happy to play any part in that.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra. What community work does NI Screen carry out that could practically support deprived and socially excluded communities?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. NI Screen carries out quite a good range of work, particularly with disadvantaged and deprived communities. It is responsible for some of the three creative learning centres, the Nerve Centre in Derry, Crossnacreevy in Castlereagh, and the AmmA Centre in Armagh are examples. These centres provide training for young people and youth leaders, and assistance and support for teachers and people working in schools in the new and creative digital

technologies. Above all, it is proud of the work that it has done, particularly around marginalised and hard-to-reach groups. I am pleased with the work that NI Screen has done and continues to do with communities from deprived areas.

Mr Copeland: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. Given her comments, particularly around 'Game of Thrones' and other potential similar ventures, can she indicate how many new jobs she believes can be created and in what sectors those jobs would fall as a result of these welcome activities?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. It is really important to note that the creative industries and television and film production are a really good economic driver. From 2007 to 2010, £166 million was created, and around £24 million of that went on jobs. When I visited NI Screen's 'Games of Thrones' set, people there had worked in shirt factories and had been made redundant and were now part of wardrobe and design. Students coming out of art college are now part of the stage and creative design, and students and apprentices are going through creative industries and television and film production. These new industries and opportunities need to be nurtured and encouraged. Certainly, NI Screen is doing quite well with regard to providing employment not only to people who lost their jobs but to new people coming along.

Ms Lo: Will the Minister detail any efforts that she has made to make it easier for local artists to access production equipment for films, TV or music?

Ms Ní Chuilín: With regard to local artists, I assume that the Member is talking about film and television production. However, I have also met musicians. The Member might be aware that my Department and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) are responsible for bringing forward a new music strategy. At the end of the day, it is really important not only to try to develop the skills and talent that we have here but to ensure that artists have opportunities and can compete with other people.

I have met NI Screen and others who are involved in the sector, including universities, to discuss how we can help. It is important that the industry does not seem to be one for people who are already there but is attractive to those who are coming in. That is really important. We have not set aside a separate fund for equipment. We are looking at the business of strategies, which are funded, to try to enhance opportunities for people now. It is something that I know, through different budget bids, we will look at in the future. We are, however, still in the process of having those discussions across the sector. When they conclude, hopefully, at the end of this year, we will be in a better position to know exactly what the real needs are with regard not only to training but to equipment.

World Police and Fire Games

2. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether there will be sufficient suitable accommodation for the athletes and visitors at the World Police and Fire Games 2013. (AQO 3209/11-15)

11. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how she is working with Executive colleagues to

ensure that there is sufficient accommodation for visitors and competitors during the World Police and Fire Games 2013. (AQO 3218/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 2 and 11 together.

Accommodation has been and remains a key area of work for 2013 World Police and Fire Games Limited. In recognition of that, the company has developed an accommodation strategy, which is based on an analysis of the accommodation required for athletes and visitors during the games. The strategy indicates that there will be sufficient accommodation for all athletes and visitors. The company is working with the full support of the Tourist Board, the Hotels Federation and the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau in order to achieve the accommodation targets for the games and also to ensure that all accommodation offered to visitors is of a suitable standard. In a further effort to maximise accommodation provision for the games, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I attended an accommodation breakfast meeting on 20 January, which was set up to highlight to hoteliers and other accommodation providers the opportunities that the games present. Currently, 2,560 rooms are booked through the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau, representing over £2 million. The company will continue to focus on that as a priority. A system is in place to ensure that weekly levels of accommodation uptake can be monitored.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her very detailed and informative reply. The games are a big opportunity for local businesses and local people generally. Would the Minister give any specific advice to those who wish to provide additional accommodation to both visitors and athletes?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. He is right: it is a brilliant opportunity. It is, probably, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to have games of this size in Belfast and also taking place in 15 venues outside the city. At the breakfast meeting, I met people from small B&Bs and guesthouses who have fed into the World Police and Fire Games company. The advice that I would give is to feed into the company or, even, contact the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) or DETI. We would be happy to forward people on. We want to hear from as many people as possible who feel that they can offer something towards accommodation for the games. Every opportunity should be made available to them to make that process as easy as possible.

Mrs Overend: We need assurances from the Minister that there will be adequate accommodation for the World Police and Fire Games considering the high demand for beds and accommodation that there was in August last year. It is anticipated that there will be 23,000 visitors to the World Police and Fire Games. Can the Minister provide some details of how the plans that she has put or is putting in place will meet the accommodation needs of those anticipated visitors?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau, the Tourist Board, Belfast City Council, DETI, people from small businesses, such as guesthouses, and hoteliers attended the breakfast meeting last Friday. If all 25,000 visitors come to Belfast this August, there is an estimated shortfall of beds of between 5,000 and 7,000. There is

where the idea of pop-up hotels, campus hotels and student accommodation comes in. The assurance given is that the accommodation must be of a certain standard. That is why work is starting now with the Tourist Board and the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau to make sure that all requirements are in place as soon as possible and that people who provide that accommodation know what they are as early as possible so that they can make appropriate arrangements and so that they, too, can have some economic benefits from the games.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. Can the Minister confirm the process for registration for accommodation providers? More importantly, are any additional fees required of them?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Not that I am aware of, but if the Member has any particular question, or any particular example of something that has been asked from athletes that is additional, I would be keen to hear that. I am not aware of it. I have met athletes from five different countries who are going to be competing here in August, and they were very happy with not only the registration process but, indeed, the accommodation and all the other processes between the services. So if there is anything in particular that the Member wishes to bring to my attention, I would be very happy to hear that.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. How best might the benefits of the games be maximised right across the North?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. As I said to another Member, there are 15 places outside Belfast that are going to be used to host events. So it is important that, even though Belfast won the bid to host the games, other places outside Belfast will have an opportunity to have some economic benefits. That is one end of it.

The other benefit will be to the community and young people and engagement. That was evident last year at the Olympics and Paralympics, where a lot of communities and sporting organisations, most of which are based on volunteers, got involved in some small way. I imagine that that will also happen throughout the World Police and Fire Games.

The other economic benefits are — we have made it very clear — that the World Police and Fire Games will also have, woven into the company, social benefits, social contracts and social clauses, which will make sure that local businesses, in particular, are given some opportunity to benefit from all the economic benefits that are going to come, which will be in the region of £21.4 million. It is important that local people see an opportunity for themselves in that.

Minority Sports

4. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, given the funding package announced for boxing, what action her Department has taken to support other minority sports following the success of the 2012 Olympic Games. (AQO 3211/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thought that I saw question 3 here earlier; I am mixed up.

Mr Speaker: Sorry; question 3 has been withdrawn.

Ms Ní Chuilín: OK. Thank you.

Neither my Department nor Sport NI recognises the term "minority sports" or, for that matter, its application to boxing. Furthermore, in anticipation of the successful Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2012, DCAL took and continues to take action to support all sport in the North through the implementation of the 10-year strategy for sports, Sport Matters.

Sport Matters embraces all recognised sports in the North and aims to support them in their efforts to improve participation rates, athletes' performance and places for sport in the lead up to and following the Olympic Games until 2019. To that end, our Sport Matters action plan has been developed and published. It sets out a range of actions that key delivery partners are committed to taking across all sports in order to ensure that all the targets in Sport Matters are achieved.

Mr Dickson: Does the Minister agree that payments as small as £80,000 to minority sports fail to deliver quality sports and that Northern Ireland will never discover a new Andy Murray in the world of tennis if £80,000 is all that is paid to a sport such as tennis?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am still very reluctant to use the term "minority sports", and so are the people involved in sports. I think that the Member's information on what tennis has received from Sport NI is wrong, as well. I am happy to furnish him with the proper statistics, as another Member has asked a similar question, and those figures are a bit more accurate than what the Member has been led to believe the investment is.

Mr Storey: Reference has been made to the Olympics and the legacy of London 2012. Will the Minister join me in congratulating Mr Joel Cassells from Coleraine, who at the weekend, in the Youth Olympics in Sydney, won bronze for Team GB in the men's fours and the men's eight. He is continuing the success of the Coleraine rowing club and bringing great honour to Northern Ireland. He is a credit not only to his family but to Northern Ireland and the rowing fraternity.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I agree with the Member: he is a credit to us all. During my visit to Bann Rowing Club in Coleraine last year, I was very impressed with not just the three Olympians but the amount of young people they work with on the river. I also know that the schools, after-school clubs and young people have been heavily involved since the three Olympians won their medals. This is an example of a young person who has dedicated probably every spare minute that he has had to becoming the athlete we are all very proud of.

2.45 pm

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The funding for boxing has been widely welcomed across my constituency of North Antrim, in particular by clubs such as All Saints in Ballymena, which has produced very fine boxers, including the one who is getting the freedom of Ballymena in the coming weeks. What expressions of interest have there been in the scheme, and will the Minister update the Assembly on how is it progressing?

Ms Ní Chuilín: This should really be Question Time for all constituency issues. Anyway, I appreciate the Member raising a positive point around boxing. The expressions

of interest have been vast, and the update is that we have been working very closely with Belfast City Council, which is bringing forward its own boxing strategy. That local government strategy is really about investment in staff to try to make sure that boxing flourishes.

The Member asked about our performance and programmes. As he knows, we have invested over £3 million in boxing and are still working with clubs and areas, because the first stage of those expressions of interest is to look at equipment and then facilities and premises. Therefore, I am aware of All Saints, and I assume that Liam Neeson is receiving the freedom of the town for his acting prowess rather than his boxing.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a cuid freagraí. Road bowling is popular in my constituency. Will the Minister join me in supporting the association in seeking recognition from Sport NI for road bowling as a sport?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I am very aware of road bowling. I met someone from Cork, so Cork and Armagh are the two counties that are prominent.

Other sports that had not received recognition came to the Department, and we made arrangements with Sport NI. Getting recognition, as the Member for North Antrim will know with weightlifters, is a long process, and we need to make sure that arrangements for management committees and governance procedures are in place and that there is transparency.

However, I am quite happy to support road bowling and hope that other counties take it up, because it is a sport that is very much linked to our cultural heritage. I remember the programme that was on TG4 some months ago. It is a sport that goes across all religions and backgrounds, so we need to do what we can to make sure that it does not remain within two counties. We need to make it more widespread.

Mr McGimpsey: Will the Minister explain how the funding package for boxing that she referred to can go forward fairly at this time, given the Assembly's commitment to equality and fair treatment, bearing in mind the well-documented abuse of Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club? Moreover, does she agree that the governing body of amateur boxing urgently needs to look at its own governance systems and get its house in order?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not agree that the Irish Amateur Boxing Association urgently needs to get its house in order. I also do not agree with the accusation that the Member made about well-documented, systematic abuse. Despite offering to meet the Member, and indeed other Members, about that club, none, for some reason, accepted my offer. I am assuming that you are afraid to step into the ring. *[Interruption.]* I take my section 75 duty very seriously. To make sure that section 75 is implemented, the criterion that I outlined to the Member at previous Question Times is that clubs need to be affiliated in order to put in for moneys from the boxing strategy, and that remains the case.

Tennis

5. **Mr McDevitt** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how her Department promotes tennis. (AQO 3212/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Responsibility for the promotion of tennis throughout the North of Ireland rests, in the first instance, with the governing body of the sport, Ulster Tennis. That said, Sport NI has provided over £440,000 of Exchequer and lottery funding in the past five financial years to assist Ulster Tennis in developing and promoting the sport. In addition, following recent discussions, Sport NI is finalising an offer of almost £313,000 over the next four years through its performance focus programme to help the governing body to support and develop tennis further. Sport NI has provided Ulster Tennis with a range of advice and guidance on matters including governance, talent development, club development, coach development, and the development of a player pathway and performance systems for the sport.

Mr McDevitt: I welcome the Minister's clarification that it was £440,000 over five years and not £81,000 — by my count — a year, as was suggested earlier. Even the proposed £100,000-odd a year is a very small amount. Surely the Minister will accept that tennis is one of those sports that is perceived to be class-based. There are probably a very low number of people in our more working-class communities who are able to play tennis. Does the Minister agree that that issue needs to be addressed positively?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I agree: we need to try to make sure that sports that were perceived to be elitist or of a certain class are not perceived to be like that anymore. I have visited Lisburn Racquets Club, and I know that there are children and young people from all postcodes who represent all classes and none. I am keen to try to support young people's participation in sport, whatever that sport is. Sport NI and the Department are working with Lisburn Racquets Club, although not exclusively, to develop its facilities to ensure that more children and young people feel that tennis is a sport that they can participate in.

Mr I McCrea: Has the Minister had any discussions with the Education Minister about trying to reintroduce tennis into schools? When I was at school, there were tennis clubs and a lot of issues around tennis. Has she had any discussions about trying to encourage people to get back to playing tennis? If not, will she?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have not had any discussions with the Minister of Education about tennis.

A Member: That was a long time ago.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I would just ignore your colleagues' jibes about how long ago you played tennis. *[Laughter.]* I have spoken to the Department of Education and the Minister of Education about making sure that we do what we can to open up sports facilities and grounds during school and after-school hours. The Department of Education is involved in a sports monitoring implementation group. We are looking at sports provision in schools that the whole community can benefit from, but there has been no particular discussion about tennis.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. What discussions have taken place with Ulster Tennis about future support for the sport?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I said to Conall McDevitt, Sport NI has had discussions with Ulster Tennis, and it is providing

guidance and support. It is looking at the evaluation of the sport's high-performance athlete development, talent and coaching, club development and systems of governance. I firmly believe that those discussions have been very valuable. Ulster Tennis believes that they have been very valuable, and those will continue. It is important that governing bodies have an ongoing engagement with DCAL through Sport NI because, should additional moneys become available through sport, it is important that an up-to-date needs analysis is done so that governing bodies and projects are in a state of readiness and can avail themselves of that money.

Stadium Development Programme

6. **Mr Mitchel McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline how the wider social and economic equality benefits from the stadium development programme are being progressed. (AQO 3213/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Executive are firmly committed to the use of public money for maximum improvements to the lives of people in the areas and communities that suffer the greatest socio-economic inequalities. My Department also has a stand-alone statutory and public policy requirement as a public authority in its own right, and that imposes specific procedural duties attached to section 75. In keeping with that, social clauses that will maximise the sustainable economic, social and environmental outcomes have been firmly embedded throughout the procurement and delivery process for all three sports stadia and will form an important element in the contract-award criteria. In addition to those clauses, we will target sectors and areas of our communities that are assessed as being in the most objective need and will provide a wide range of social returns for areas and communities living in proximity to the new stadia.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for the detail in her answer. Those social clause measures are extremely welcome, but will she give us some specific information about the long-term unemployed?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his ongoing questions on this issue. The Ravenhill contract, which is the first to go ahead, will provide long-term employment for seven people and create four new apprenticeships, with 5% of its workforce being in recognised apprenticeship schemes. It will have two student placements and produce five practical post-contract proposals, which is also important, to develop a range of social returns in the area. The Member will be happy to know that similar measures will be applied to the Casement Park and Windsor Park stadia contracts.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. I will follow up on the Minister's answer to Mr McLaughlin. Does she agree that the redevelopment of the Brandywell stadium in Derry would provide wider economic benefits in an area of severe deprivation?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Fair play to my colleagues from the north-west: they never miss an opportunity during Question Time to mention the Brandywell. The Member is right. Any development of any facility — in this case, sports stadia — has to have maximum social returns for the area. Derry is certainly in the top 10 of the most-deprived areas. Although social clauses are still a work in progress,

they will be strengthened at every opportunity, and I hope that they will be stronger again when the time comes to develop the Brandywell.

Mr G Robinson: Although I welcome the progress made on the Ravenhill development programme, will the Minister give an update on the Windsor Park development programme?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Windsor Park programme is on target and is developing well. The most recent position is that everything is on target, and I met Windsor Park representatives as part of the sponsor programme board that is regularly attended by the IFA, the GAA and rugby representatives. We are discussing with Belfast City Council what it intends to do about developing its own leisure provision so that those developments happen at the same time rather than afterwards, and we maximise the benefits. I am happy to say that I am working well with the IFA and that everything is on target for it. As far as I am aware, they are happy, too.

City of Culture 2013

7. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the venues, accommodation and car parking provision during Derry/Londonderry City of Culture 2013. (AQO 3214/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Derry City Council has been working in partnership with the Culture Company, a range of Departments and statutory and civic agencies to ensure that the venue, accommodation and car-parking requirements during the City of Culture 2013 have been identified and that action is being taken to ensure that they are met.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí. I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she outline the wider social benefits of the City of Culture taking place in Derry for the wider north-west of the island?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question, which follows on from Mark H Durkan's question about the economic impacts and benefits to Derry City in particular and the wider north-west. I made it clear in my letter of offer to Derry City Council, vis-à-vis the Culture Company, that there must be strong equality, sustainability and social and economic benefits for people in the city. It is important that people who live and work around the city have an opportunity to benefit from the Culture Company. Indeed, Derry City Council is looking at sourcing and procurement routes that will maximise opportunities for small and medium-sized businesses. The social benefits for children, young people and the people of the city will be great, and I wish them all the very best for their programmes for the rest of the year.

Mr P Ramsey: Will the Minister, along with me, acknowledge and commend the BBC and the Culture Company for such a magnificent event for the region as the 'Sons and Daughters' concert? Will the Minister also assure the House that absolute collaboration is taking place between Departments to maximise the City of Culture's potential for that region of Northern Ireland?

3.00 pm

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes, I congratulate them. The concert was absolutely brilliant, and I really enjoyed it. There is a real buzz about the city, and it is brilliant. Every time you go back to Derry, you can see that the people have got behind the programme, and rightly so. My Department, Derry City Council, the Culture Company and other Departments, including DETI, DSD and OFMDFM, have supported it. Over £30 million has gone from the Executive to the City of Culture, and rightly so. As I said on the 'Sunday Politics' programme, we are not done yet. Congratulations also go to the BBC. It was a great event and, hopefully, a sign for the rest of the year.

Mr Speaker: That concludes Question Time.

Mr McGimpsey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In question 4, I raised the well-documented sectarian abuse of Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club. The Minister, in her answer, told the House that I had been invited to meet her and that I had turned down that offer. I am not aware of any such invitation ever being issued to me.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me deal with the original point of order. First, it is not a point of order. The Member has what he said on the record, but he should take the issue up directly with the Minister. It should not take time from the business of the House.

Executive Committee Business

Planning Bill: Second Stage

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Planning Bill [NIA 17/11-15] be agreed.

I thank the Business Office for enabling the Second Reading to occur today. Subject to the will of the Chamber, I wish the Environment Committee well in assessing the contents of the Bill, which are, by and large, very familiar to them given the passage of the Planning Act in the previous mandate.

Reform in the North has served us well, as I have said before in the Chamber. The character of our Government and of much of our society is a result of the benign and positive consequences of reform. The North could benefit from a further phase of deep and radical reform. I do not only say those words; I try to judge myself against them in the time that I have as Minister. It is in that context that I see this Planning Bill and many other aspects of planning reform, which I will touch on before I deal with the Bill itself.

My priority as Minister on the planning side has been to take a twin-track approach, on the one hand to achieve real-time change and reform in the character and content of the planning system and, at the same time, to work through deeper and radical change and reform that will sustain good planning in the rundown to RPA and thereafter. I would like to think that there are positive indicators that corners are being turned in real-time change and reform. I will not deny that there are still corners to be turned when it comes to the planning system. Indeed, I have been saying to the senior planning management staff, over the past two weeks in particular, that, if there has been a measure of positive change over the past 18 months, now is the time to push on with further and deeper change, both in the planning system as it works in real time and in longer, deeper and radical change and reform. At all times, the purpose is to ensure that the planning system works in a way that protects our heritage and environment and delivers outcomes from economic opportunity. Yesterday's debate on the economic value of the historic environment demonstrated and, in my view, captured very effectively how our heritage can be protected and positively developed. I believe that that approach should inform the wider planning system generally. I do not think that you can divorce the contents of the Bill from the wider architecture of the planning system. Therefore, I want to touch on some of that architecture and on the wider changes in the planning system before I delve deeper into the Bill.

When I came into this job, there were in and around 60 article 31 applications. Decisions have now been issued for over half those applications. For a further nine, decisions have been made, but notices of opinions have not been issued. Therefore, a substantial body of what were the article 31 applications before the Department has now been managed. Indeed, among those that have come into the system over the past 18 months, there are good examples, including the police college and the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society's (RUAS) move to the Maze, of applications being handled consistently with the

Programme for Government (PFG) aspiration to ensure that 90% of large-scale investment planning decisions are made within six months and applications with job creation potential are given additional weight.

If you looked at the planning system's performance on small, intermediate and major applications — those being managed in the divisional planning offices — you would see that figures from the last quarter confirm that minor applications were processed three weeks faster than in the same period last year: from 15 weeks to 12, exceeding the target of 14. You would also see that intermediate applications were turned around two weeks faster, going from 20 weeks to 18 weeks, again surpassing the 20-week target, and that the number of decisions issued against renewable energy applications doubled, increasing from 88 to 177, with 92% being approved. I am now telling my planning system that, if that is the standard of achievement for renewables, intermediate and minor applications, I want to push on and below the target figures that are being surpassed. Historically, there have been about 1,000 renewables applications in the planning system for wind farms, wind turbines and anaerobic digesters. Given the direction of travel, in that 177 applications have been approved, that is also an area to push on in.

I acknowledge the 22 councils that have now agreed to departmental proposals for streamlining. Under those proposals, 75% of applications that are not deemed to be strategic or article 31 applications will be accessible to the streamlining process. Again, that is an example of empowering local people to make local decisions and of doing so, subject to public and political input, in a streamlined way.

I also acknowledge — this was touched on by the Culture Minister in one of her last comments — that greater use is being made of pre-application discussions for significant and major proposals. Yesterday, I met the IFA about the Windsor Park proposal. It was able to make its application in December because of the pre-application discussions that are being piloted on that proposal and as a result of the requirements that have been laid down on the football authorities for community consultation, advertising the proposals, convening community events and so on and so forth. Subject to the consultees' view, that application may be handled well within the six-month target. I want to acknowledge what the football authorities are doing on that, and I encourage the GAA authorities to deploy the same practice, which they are doing, for the Casement Park proposal.

I have, in various ways, referred to the House proposals in respect of permitted development rights. They are too numerous to mention, but I want to acknowledge my predecessor, who initiated that work, and I hope that I am now accelerating the work, including the consultation on a proposed permitted development right allowing farming accommodation to be increased by up to 500 square metres by including the provision of a renewable anaerobic digester plant, which concluded just last week. I hope to make an announcement in that regard.

At the same time as that ongoing, real-time, active, robust management of the planning system, which, subject to people's view, is producing some results, the Department — this is where I come back to the Bill — has been engaging in a series of summits on critical issues and ongoing strategic issues that, in my view, require further

attention by government, Departments and the wider community, in terms of things such as heritage crime; beach summits; community benefits; enforcement; blight; urban decay and dereliction; and so on. The outworking of all of those summits has informed not just planning policy but wider policy within the Department. That is not to discount further proposals that will come forward on fees, especially fee reduction for third-party charitable organisations and for the renewal of existing planning permissions, as well as a broad range of work in respect of planning policies, with which I will come to the House in the near future, across four or five different areas.

Behind all of that there is an elephant in the room. We are 800 days from the transfer of significant planning function to councils. As Members will be aware in the rundown to RPA, the biggest element of government function that will be transferred is the planning function. Anybody who has been in this job, responsible for the Planning Service and making decisions as planning Minister, will know that, day and daily, your day could be occupied with issues around individual planning applications and development plans. That responsibility — some might see it as a burden, but I see it as an opportunity — will transfer to councils in 800 days. That responsibility — in terms of the many individual applications, in terms of having responsibility for local development plans and in respect of the new community planning function — is a deeply significant and challenging one but one that is full of opportunity.

In the rundown to RPA, we must not only ensure that the transfer happens but that it happens on the right terms, in the right way and with the right funding, handing to the local councils a planning system that, on the far side of RPA, will see local ratepayers — business and domestic — see, in the function of councils, real change and real benefit when it comes to the future shape of the council clusters. That is where the Planning Bill comes in. It accelerates the substantial elements of the Planning Act from the last mandate. Rather than introducing them with RPA, as was proposed, which is now to be in 2015, it is to create the new planning architecture intended by the Planning Act but create it now in the rundown to RPA so that, when RPA happens in the late spring of 2015, councils will inherit a planning system that has already gone through the reform and, consequently, is more fit for purpose. That is what the Bill tries to capture. It takes the elements that will be put into place and puts them into place now in order to ensure that the councils and councillors have a better planning system that is more fit to serve the interests of ratepayers post 2015.

3.15 pm

So, what are the elements captured by this Bill that are to be introduced in advance of RPA? There are six or seven, and I will touch on them only briefly because I am mindful of the weather conditions. There are a number of principles that are given expression through the Bill in various planning proposals. The first is that there will be faster processing of planning applications. The Bill outlines measures that are designed to capture that aspiration, and I will name some of them. First, although the issue may not arise so often, the Bill will grant to independent third parties the capacity to conduct inquiries and hearings into major planning applications, sharing that responsibility with the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) but giving it to independent third-party persons who are appropriately

qualified and capable of conducting those sorts of inquiries.

Secondly and critically, the Bill will create a statutory duty for the first time in Northern Ireland law on statutory consultees — the Bill will create more statutory consultees than there are currently — to respond to consultations within a prescribed timescale. The indication is that that prescribed timescale will be 21 days. That will be taken forward by regulation on the far side of this legislation. However, if it is not straying too far, I want to establish now that I do not intend to wait until the Bill completes its passage to take forward the work on the regulations. If we are going to have new architecture for the planning process in advance of RPA, we need to do that sooner rather than later. Consequently, we will take forward work on the regulations in advance of the passage of the Bill, subject to the views expressed by the Committee for the Environment, because I would not want to step on its toes.

Thirdly, in pursuit of the faster processing of planning applications, we will put into law the capacity of the planning system to say that a particular proposal is non-material when it comes to a change in respect of a proposed building. So, if accommodation has planning permission and the applicant changes what is being proposed, there will be a process whereby that could be deemed to be non-material and, consequently, will not require a full planning application, the processes therein and the fee that that would attract. There are a range of proposals for faster planning applications.

It is important that, consistent with good evidence, proper process and good law, we have fairer and faster appeals. Those elements in the original Act are now being captured by the Bill in order to introduce them in advance of RPA. What are the headlines when it comes to fairer and faster appeals? First, the period in which a person can appeal against a planning decision will be reduced to four months. Secondly, there will be restrictions on an appellant's ability to introduce new material at an appeal. There will be some narrow exceptions to that, but the principle will be established. The Planning Appeals Commission will have the opportunity to award costs on planning appeals in a way that will mark applicants who make an appeal without any real ambition of being successful and avoid those who might use the planning system in ways that do not represent a healthy way to proceed.

Thirdly, we will enhance the environmental aspects of planning. That will be expressed in a number of dimensions. For example, where there is a proposed development in a conservation area, it will be a legal requirement that it should enhance the character and appearance of the area. At the moment, the test for any proposal is that it should do no harm. We want to put the test more positively to ensure that the proposed development in the conservation area should enhance the character and appearance of the area. That is the right principle to adopt. Given the scale and wonder of our heritage, including our built heritage, expressed through our listed buildings and our conservation areas, we should seek to improve, not diminish, the appearance of those buildings and those areas. That is what the Bill will do.

This is captured in clause 2 of the Bill. Clause 2 states explicitly that, in carrying out the Department's general duties in respect of development of land and in respect of the work of the Planning Appeals Commission, the duty on

both will be to fulfil the objective of furthering sustainable development and promoting or improving well-being. Those are very important principles that are captured in the early clauses of the Bill and in the Act that was passed during the last mandate, which restate that, in carrying out their general functions, the Department and the PAC have to do so with the objective of furthering sustainable development and promoting or improving well-being. Those are very important principles. I will speak later about new clauses in the Bill that were not in the original Act, clauses that have attracted some interest. It is very important that, in looking at the totality of the Bill and the conduct of the planning system, people appreciate that, in carrying out the functions, the planning system does so with the objective of furthering sustainable development and promoting or improving well-being and nothing in the Bill takes away from those proposals.

I have just referred to the fact that there are two clauses in the Bill that are additional to what was in the original Act. They are clause 6 and clause 2. When it comes to planning policy and planning applications, the Bill will reflect that which is already in policy statements, namely the objective of promoting economic development, paying particular regard to the desirability of achieving good design — that is, in respect of planning policy. When it comes to the determination of planning applications by the Department and, in future, by the councils, material considerations will include a reference to any economic advantages or disadvantages that are likely to result from the approval or refusal of planning permission.

I want to spend some time in respect of those two clauses, because they are new, they have attracted some interest and they will, no doubt, be interrogated by the Department in going forward. So let me repeat: there are two aspects to the new clauses — one in respect of planning policy and one in respect of planning applications — but both revolve around the same principles. Let me make it very clear what I understand all that to mean. Previously, I attracted some criticism when I, to borrow a phrase, suppressed PPS 24, which was a draft planning policy that I inherited from the previous mandate. The essence of PPS 24 was that, when it came to, for example, deciding planning applications, economic considerations would be given determinative weight. That was the impact and consequence of PPS 24 as drafted. As I indicated, I was not minded to proceed with that draft. I did so for a range of reasons, including my view that the draft was very vulnerable to multiple legal challenges. Given the character of the development community in the North and others, I felt it was very vulnerable and likely to be subject to legal challenge. In any case, on a greater point of principle, it was not the right policy approach. Giving determinative weight to an economic application would stretch the planning system in a way that could create conflict with the wider duties of the planning system, including sustainable development. I want to make it very clear that, whatever else the Bill proposes, it does not state, as PPS 24 suggested, that economic considerations should be given determinative weight. That is not the intention of the Bill.

I spent two hours on Saturday afternoon in Belfast city centre. I have not spent that length of time in the city centre —

Mr Allister: Were you protesting?

Mr Attwood: No, and I was not counterprotesting. I was doing what a lot of other people did on Friday, Saturday and Sunday: reclaiming the streets of the city centre for their true purpose; namely, to shop, have a drink, have a coffee, eat and do some business. Many others did the same. I was struck, when walking the streets of downtown Belfast for a couple of hours in lawful activity, by the scale of vacancies. It is only when you spend time on the streets that you see the scale of it. Without compromising the wider purposes and principles of the planning system, it is timely, appropriate, reasonable, necessary and legal to send a message through the Assembly and the Planning Bill that economic considerations are material when it comes to a planning application or a planning policy. That does not give determinative weight to economic considerations in a planning decision but means that they will be a material factor, along with the other material factors that are part of the planning system. That is what the Bill states; it does not state more than that. Going forward, the law will have to be read in a way that is consistent with the adopted planning policies, case law and the other legal requirements that inform planning decision-makers. Ultimately, it will fall to them to make decisions, be they on applications that are currently in the custody of individual planning officers — soon to be in the custody of councils — or those that are in the custody of the Environment Minister in respect of article 31. In making a decision one way or the other, he, she or they will exercise judgement in consideration of all the material factors: the law, precedent, the evidence and good process.

I felt it appropriate, after conversations with Executive colleagues — one or two in particular — that to put that type of clause in the Bill was timely and reasonable. I want to make it absolutely clear that that does not subvert, derail or in any way diminish other material factors when it comes to planning considerations. I would like to make the point firmly —

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for giving way. He has raised a very interesting subject around economic development. I accept that it will not have any greater weight than any of the other aspects in the Bill, but, as the Minister stated, it will obviously be up to an individual, more likely, or a group to make a subjective decision on what will carry most weight in any decision on a planning application.

However, I assume that the Department will bring out further guidance that will help to determine what weight each aspect of each individual application is given. Can the Minister tell us when we can expect to see that guidance?

3.30 pm

Mr Attwood: I will reply to that in a number of ways. First of all, the Member is absolutely right: it will fall to he, she or they to make the ultimate judgement, bearing in mind, among other things, the material considerations. I was about to say, before I took the intervention, that I would not be arguing for this clause to go into the Bill if I felt that there were a tension between that clause and, for example, that which I have been entrusted to do in making article 31 applications. In my view, the clause is entirely consistent with the function that I have been fulfilling over the last 18 months in, as Mr Elliott just referred to, making

the judgement on the weight to be given to the various material factors when making decisions.

I do not want to anticipate next week's debate but when it came to Rose Energy, for example, in my view, the material factor of the impact on the environment had greater weight than some other material factors. Conversely, in the case of Runkerry — I do not wish to anticipate the outcome of the judicial review of that decision — while I recognised the material features and factors in respect of the environment, in my view, building infrastructure on the north coast and the economic material factor in respect of that planning application had greater weight.

Therefore, I think that I have tried to demonstrate that, when he, she or they come to make a decision, they have to weigh in the balance all these material factors, policies, laws, evidence and precedents and come to the judgement call and ensure that that judgement call is entirely consistent with —

Mr Agnew: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will answer this question and then come back to Mr Agnew.

Secondly, I will make a point that relates to the body of the Bill. When it comes to the material factor of economic impact, the Bill states that an assessment should be made of the economic advantage and/or disadvantage. When it comes to the economic benefit or otherwise of a planning application, a judgement has to be made in the round as to both the economic advantage and disadvantage that might or might not arise. In that regard, I have also made decisions where I have made a call and given advice to the PAC in respect of what I think is the appropriate retail policy for the greater Belfast area, bearing in mind the economic advantages and disadvantages that might attract in one venue or another.

If good process and good judgment prevails, this clause sends out a positive message but does not in any way compromise the wider planning system. Before Mr Agnew comes in, I will confirm that Mr Elliott is absolutely right. Beyond the law, there will be a requirement to have a further policy if not guidance.

I have just come from a meeting with the Royal Town Planning Institute. What was the purpose of that meeting? It was to work with the institute in the rundown to April to have a summit convened by the institute but with an input from the Department to look at the proposal for a single planning policy statement. We have multiple planning policy statements in Northern Ireland, far too many to mention. If you go to Scotland and Wales — Wales started this process — you will find that they have a single planning policy statement. What does that do? It captures, in a smaller number of words and in a more accessible format, a guide to the planning system to ensure that those who have an interest in it — whether a developer, an applicant, a citizen or a community — have a pathway through the planning system, rather than having to look at multiple documents and try to work out which is the most relevant to their interests.

We are working with the Royal Town Planning Institute and on our own to work up a single planning policy statement, which, in my view, has to be in place by the time of a transfer of functions to the local councils to ensure that

the planning system is more intelligible and more of an aid to all those who have an interest in planning generally or specifically. That is where a lot of the further working-out of the law will have its place, but I am mindful that, in the interim, the planning policy statements, the guidance, the High Court decisions and so on will be the architecture around which the law will revolve.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for giving way. In his answer to Mr Elliott, he referred to the Runkerry decision and stated quite clearly that economic factors were a material consideration in it. If economic factors are already a material consideration, what is the need for the new clause in the Bill?

Mr Molloy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I intervene to say, first, that the weather conditions are getting worse outside and, secondly, that it might be beneficial if the Minister finishes his introduction and then allows Members to speak? The Minister has a right of reply at a later stage rather than taking interventions continuously during this part of the debate.

Mr Speaker: That is an important point of order, and it might be wise to allow the Minister to finish and then bring in Members. I will allow the Minister to answer.

Mr Attwood: As I said, I am prepared to take all questions, but I do not want to frustrate or impede the debate in any way. I will be guided, as other Members might be, by your observations. Whether that was a ruling or not, I do not know, but it was certainly an observation.

My answer to Mr Agnew is that you could ask the same question about clause 2(1) because that reiterates the previous legislation and states that, when the Department or the Planning Appeals Commission exercise any function, it must do so with the objective of "furthering sustainable development". I got advice, subject to correction from the Attorney General, that that might not be the best legislative approach and that you do not have to repeat in subsequent legislation that which is in previous legislation. I happen to disagree with that advice. If a good principle needs to be articulated in subsequent law, let us articulate it even if it has been articulated in previous law. The Scottish Government have put into their Marine (Scotland) Act 2010, for example, the duty of sustainable development of the marine. They did not have to do that because it exists in previous legislation. However, I think that they were right to do that. I am trying to do the same in our Marine Bill, which might be one reason why it has not got to the Executive table yet. No harm or violence is done to good principles of law to reiterate them, and I have no doubt that Mr Agnew will welcome the principle of furthering sustainable development or promoting and improving well-being as principles of the Bill. Therefore, he or anybody else do not need to get upset by the reference in clause 2 to "promoting economic development". That is my answer, but I will give way if there is further —

Mr Boylan: It is snowing.

Mr Attwood: I have to get down only to Stranmillis.

The clause will be interrogated by the Committee, which I welcome. However, that is my understanding of the thinking behind it, and I am comfortable with it. It is not an offence to anybody's interest but sends a good, strong, positive message to the world, even those who doubt me, that this place is open for business.

I have just two further comments on the Bill. The Bill contains a requirement for enhanced community development. As I mentioned, we piloted the pre-application discussion and community consultation on the GAA proposal for Casement Park and the IFA proposal for Windsor Park, and those have been done well. I have heard a very positive report about Windsor Park, and I will be a bit more cautious about Casement Park because it is in my constituency. The pilot worked well, both on the positive side and on what some might think is the negative side, and it will be built into the Bill. As part of that, the Department will publish a statement of its policy for involving the community in the delivery of planning functions. It will do so no later than a year after Royal Assent, although I would like to think that it would happen much earlier. A draft of that policy has already been prepared. It will require subordinate legislation, but it will give life to the principle of involving the community in the delivery of planning functions. Very much like the IFA model, it will deal with how and when consultation should take place, and so on. When the IFA submitted its planning application for Windsor Park in December 2012, it also submitted a report on how it had conducted community consultation, with whom it had spoken and where, where it had published its plans, what the conclusion of that conversation was and how its proposal had been adapted and amended to reflect community input. That is a very powerful way of empowering the community and the citizen in taking forward planning functions in the North.

I will touch on two final matters — there are only two more. I have always said that the flip side of good planning is robust enforcement. If I were to be self-critical, as I tend to be, I would say that one of the areas in which I have not been able to get as much over the line as was my ambition is that of enforcement. Yes, we have upgraded the staff of the ECU and I urged my permanent secretary to empower the ECU more on environmental crime, but there is a lot more that the Department can do on overall enforcement. In the near future, I will try to take forward the conclusions of an enforcement summit that we held last June.

The Bill will take forward proposals in the Act to raise fines by the courts to a maximum of £100,000 where, for example, a stop notice has not been complied with. It will introduce fixed penalties whereby rather than going through the length and cost of a court prosecution, people will be able to take a reduced fine for a fixed penalty. There are many who risk building and then come to get retrospective approval. I understand that, at certain times and in certain places, people decide to take a chance, and they feel that they are not acting with anything other than good intentions. However, there are many examples of people who think that they have the measure of the planning system, and so they build and then seek retrospective approval. Again, to drive discipline into the planning system, if such individuals apply for retrospective approval, they will pay a multiple fee rather than the single planning fee that might otherwise have been relevant to their application.

In very broad terms, because I am mindful of Members' travel requirements today, that captures some of the shape of the Bill, and I will reply to other matters in my response to the debate.

I try to push officials very hard at times, and that has been the case with the planning system. So I want to

acknowledge that, time after time, I found that the senior management in planning offices were up for the challenges and took some of the criticisms. In my view, they have pushed reform and change in a positive way. That is captured in two ways, and this is how I will conclude. Last year, the planning system in the North received a special award from the Royal Town Planning Institute for the unique contribution made by planners to Northern Ireland. Everyone in the Chamber knows of the unique contribution of the political community — for good or ill, some might say — over very difficult years. Public service is what this is all about, whether we are talking about elected people or civil servants. The planning system, corporately, won the award in recognition of its public service in very difficult times. The system recognises that it can do better, and I think that it has demonstrated that it is doing better.

3.45 pm

In conclusion, I refer to the final question asked of the Culture Minister at Question Time. In December 2012, the planning system in Derry received special recognition at a Europe-wide planning awards ceremony in Brussels. Why? It was because, in very quick time, working with the council and Ilex in Derry, it was able to turn round the planning approval for the Peace Bridge.

Ebrington would not be Ebrington, and Sunday night would not have been Sunday night, had the planning system not turned round that particular application in your own home town, Mr Speaker, as quickly as it did. I think that this reflects the importance of planning with respect to wider community confidence, changing the profile of the city, creating economic development and sending out a very strong message, in these very difficult times, that there is much good in the North and in the planning system.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): I welcome the Second Stage of the Planning Bill; quite a bit later than expected, but welcome nonetheless.

As the Minister outlined, the Bill will make legislative changes to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning system that is available to the Department in advance of the transfer of planning functions to councils.

The Committee welcomes the intention of the Bill: to modernise and strengthen the planning system by providing faster decisions on planning applications; enhanced community involvement; faster and fairer appeals; tougher and simpler enforcement; and a strengthened departmental sustainable development duty.

Members were briefed on the Bill at the Committee meeting on 10 January. Departmental officials informed members that the Bill is intended as an interim measure, most of which will remain in place only until it is possible to fully commence the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, at which point it will be repealed.

Importantly though, the Bill will introduce additional provisions to underpin the role of planning in promoting economic development and good design. These are new policies, which were not part of the extensive consultation conducted prior to the introduction of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Act 2011 which underpins this Bill. The explanatory and financial memorandum indicates that the new provisions will be subject to consultation during the Bill's passage through the Assembly, so it will be up

to the Environment Committee to ascertain the thoughts of the public on them. I assure Members that, although the Committee does not want to see any further delays in the process, it would be remiss of us if we did not carry out thorough scrutiny of those new elements, and I intend to come back to the House to seek an extension to the Committee Stage to allow people enough time to reply to the call for evidence.

On the issue of promoting economic development, I asked officials why that had been added after the withdrawal of planning policy statement (PPS) 24, as I felt that it may put additional pressure on planners. The Department stated that, though economic considerations had always been material in planning, it has been included in the Bill to give clarification to planners by putting it on a statutory footing. As stated previously, the Committee will go into this new provision in more detail once the Bill enters Committee Stage, and I imagine that that particular provision will be the one that generates most comment.

The Committee welcomes the provision for enhanced community involvement with developers having to consult communities before submitting major planning applications. I am sure that all Members have had planning applications where the community has not been consulted and that has led to objections being raised and the planning process being slowed down considerably. Communities need to be involved from the start to identify any concerns that they may have and to resolve those with the developers from the outset. As a result, we should see applications being turned around faster, creating a smoother process for all involved.

Any attempt to ensure a faster processing of applications is to be welcomed, particularly in the current economic climate. All too often, we see applications suffering major delays due to the failure of statutory consultees to respond in a timely fashion. Therefore, I welcome the introduction of a duty for statutory consultees to respond to consultation within a prescribed time frame. We can no longer afford to delay applications because a response has not been received, and this provision will ensure that, if no response is received within the timescale, the application proceeds. That seems very fair to me.

However, I must sound a note of caution. The Committee has been told that there are currently only two statutory consultees identified in legislation with whom the Department must consult before determining an application for planning permission: district councils in whose area the land that is the subject of the development proposal is located; and, in certain circumstances, the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland. For this new provision to deliver shorter planning times, it is essential that that list is extended. However, although many would assume that the Northern Ireland Environment Agency should be added to that list, as the agency is legally considered to be part of the Department of the Environment, it cannot be identified in statute as a separate entity and, legally, the Department cannot statutorily consult itself. That anomaly will, of course, not be resolved when planning functions pass to councils, because the Department will remain the planning authority for a limited number of regionally significant applications after the transfer.

I welcome the measures towards a faster and fairer planning appeals system. The provisions to restrict the

introduction of new material at appeal and to allow the Planning Appeals Commission to award costs where the unreasonable behaviour of one party has left another out of pocket are sensible and should help to ensure that appeals are genuine, rather than their being used as a stalling tactic.

I welcome with caution the time limit for submitting appeals being reduced from six to four months. I fully understand the rationale for its introduction and welcome it accordingly. However, I know that it was tried in England and led to a significant increase in appeals, so that, in fact, they have now reverted to the longer time limit of six months. We will, therefore, need to keep a close eye on the outworkings of that provision.

Enforcement has always been a major issue for the Committee, and any legislation is only as good as the enforcement that follows. The measures to make enforcement simpler and tougher are, therefore, to be welcomed. Raising fines for a series of offences, introducing fixed penalty notices as an alternative to costly and lengthy prosecutions through the courts and introducing multiple fees for retrospective planning applications should help to ensure that planning permission is sought in advance of development and offenders are dealt with quickly and penalised financially.

I know that the previous Committee was very keen to see higher maximum fines introduced into the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 in order to ensure that the penalties for offences gave a clear message that planning offences are taken seriously and not just treated as another cost to be factored into the price of the development.

In conclusion, as soon as the House commends the Bill to the Committee, we will call for written submissions from interested organisations and individuals. Members will be extremely interested to hear their views, particularly on the two new aspects of the Bill. I look forward to a good ongoing working relationship with officials to ensure that my Committee is able to scrutinise the legislation properly. On behalf of the Committee, I support the principles of the Bill.

With your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would now like to add my own comments as MLA for South Belfast.

The Northern Ireland Assembly has set sustainable development as a clear goal of government in its sustainable development strategy. The principle of sustainability is defined in the regional development strategy 'Shaping Our Future' as the ability to:

"meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

The principle is also set out in PPS 4, which:

"seeks to facilitate and accommodate economic growth in ways compatible with ... social and environmental objectives and sustainable development."

When draft PPS 24 went out to consultation, it was overwhelmingly opposed by more than 70% of respondents. It was eventually — due to the good sense of the Minister — withdrawn by the Department. That is why I am at a loss to see how the new additional provision underpins the role of planning in promoting economic

development. It is also extremely concerning that the new policy will not be subjected to extensive public consultation, unlike the comprehensive consultation for the 2011 Act. Whether the absence of such a process may be deemed to be lacking in legal standing, it is certainly not best practice. It may also be criticised as trying to sneak in such a fundamental shift in planning principle through the back door.

The Committee will do its best to consult. However, it will not have the same scope as a full public consultation organised by the Department. I have to say that I am annoyed by the Department's leaving the Committee to carry out that consultation. We have only a team of four staff to carry out that full consultation within a very short period. The Department has an entire unit to manage consultation.

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

If the aim of the Bill is to streamline and speed up applications, I am worried that giving extra weighting to promoting economic development may give rise to more potential for legal challenges and disputes, thereby having the opposite effect and, in fact, being counterproductive to that aim.

Businesses may not see any benefit from planning reform if challenges are going to cause serious delays to planning decisions. I see the reasoning behind the emphasis on the importance of good design. Nobody would argue with that. However, I am uncertain as to why specific provisions for promoting economic development are necessary.

4.00 pm

Clause 6 will amend an article in the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 and a section in the Planning Act 2011 by inserting the provision that material considerations in the determination of planning applications include a reference to considerations relating to any economic advantages or disadvantages that are likely to result from the granting or refusal of planning permission. Basing the decision on a planning application on whether it is economically advantageous or disadvantageous can, no doubt, be a minefield.

It would be fair to assume that, in many cases, the deciding outcome of an application could benefit one party while leaving another in an economically unfavourable position. One example of that could be an application for an out-of-town shopping centre versus opposition to it from town centre retailers. Larger developers who have the means to develop sophisticated economic arguments can profit from such projects. For a resident or a small community, such as those that many MLAs represent, proving economic gains or loss could be costly, and they could lack the necessary expertise to do so.

Another potential dilemma for planners could be a future planning application for hydraulic fracturing in Fermanagh, with the Department weighing up the economic advantages and disadvantages rather than determining the application purely on an environmental impact assessment and material matters. We do not have an independent environment agency, and we have already seen examples of applications, such as the one at Runkerry, being approved by the Minister against the advice of NIEA.

The strongest economies in Europe have robust planning systems. Have we not learnt the lessons from overdevelopment both here in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland, where economic factors were allowed to outweigh other considerations in the appraisal of development. I would be curious to know whether a comparison with other jurisdictions on economic development in planning has been carried out. To the best of my knowledge, stipulating economic development as a policy in planning is not common practice. In fact, I would be very surprised if it were.

Our planning system must have a long-term strategic policy on sustainable development, delivering on its duty to uphold the public interest. We in the Assembly have an obligation to future generations to preserve our natural and built environment. Yes, we need economic growth, but the balance must be struck here to ensure that the Bill does not put on a statutory footing a bias in favour of economic development, with less regard for the impact that such economic gains may have on people, communities and the environment in the longer term. I urge the Minister to reconsider carefully the new provision in the Bill on promoting economic development.

Mr Weir: On behalf of the DUP, I broadly support the Bill and its Second Stage. As a member of the Environment Committee, I will have the opportunity to go through the Bill in some detail, so I will try to keep my remarks brief. I had hoped that the Minister would also keep his remarks brief. To be fair, he spoke for 46.5 minutes, which, by his standards, is extremely brief. I have rarely heard him speak so succinctly.

Mr Elliott: Do not encourage him. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Weir: No.

I want to touch on a few of the Bill's provisions. As was stated, although there are new aspects, it builds on the 2011 Bill. That Bill stretched to over 230 clauses, while this one, although highly significant, stretches to only 28 clauses. I do not know whether that means that it will take a shorter time to scrutinise, but at least it will be more manageable.

Clause 6, which deals with the economic determination of planning applications, will arguably be the most controversial and significant element. We will receive evidence from groups that have concerns about that. I was a little dubious about the Minister dropping the previous PPS, so I have a different concern. It is important that we give proper weight to economic considerations. I have to say, with the greatest respect, that it would be wrong if economic considerations were the only consideration in a planning application. However, we have to give sufficient weight to them because we cannot remain aloof to economic conditions. It is something of an ivory tower approach to say that no thought at all should be given to economic considerations when we are in the midst of a recession and people are unemployed. The Bill refers to:

"considerations relating to any economic advantages or disadvantages likely to result".

Again, to be fair to the Minister and to the Bill, it is not saying that that is the only aspect that will be looked at.

Also, and far be it for me to defend the Minister, out-of-town shopping centres were mentioned. The Bill refers

to economic advantage and disadvantage, and I would have thought that that is a clear case that we should try to weigh up the economic advantage to see whether that is appropriate in those circumstances. When a ministerial determination is made, it is important that officials give advice to the Minister, but I am sure that the Minister accepts that the buck very much stops with him. I have disagreed with a number of ministerial decisions. We will probably debate one of those decisions — on Rose Energy — next week. If any of my colleagues from Lagan Valley were here, I suspect that they would say that they were not overly keen on the decision, or at least the draft proposals, about the impact of John Lewis. I certainly believe that, at times, the Minister will get it wrong. Ultimately, it is for the Minister to make that decision. He cannot simply be a slave to whatever his officials bring forward; rather, he has to have a somewhat independent mind.

My test of clause 6 — I will be interested to hear the criticisms — is whether it is fit for purpose and properly and appropriately promotes economic implications. We have to look at getting that balance right.

I welcome the references in some of the earlier clauses to community involvement and pre-application community consultation. There was a very lively debate on the previous Bill about third-party appeals. My party and I were certainly hostile on that front. We took the view that it would be much better to try to resolve problems at the earliest possible stage. I appreciate that that was not necessarily a popular view in the Chamber. However, given where we are, surely all of us agree that getting a planning application right at the start and, when possible, dealing with the community's concerns by way of community involvement and proper consultation would be beneficial. It is about ensuring that there is a correct balance: there must be genuine and proper consultation but it must not be so overly bureaucratic that it simply creates additional delay in the system.

A number of proposals in the Bill are sensible, particularly those on timescales, some of which were mentioned by the Chair of the Committee. A criticism often levelled at the planning system in Northern Ireland is that it is too slow and cumbersome, although the Minister indicated improvements. A number of aspects of the Bill can lead to more timely, and, hopefully, more correct, decisions. There is, for example, a reduced time limit for appeals and an attempt, in clause 10, to free up the system by allowing a bit more flexibility in who can chair public inquiries. That is a useful proposal.

I take on board what the Chair said about the duty to consult. A concern often raised is that the Planning Service turns things around quickly enough but is hamstrung by waiting for responses from others. It is important to look at the organisations and statutory bodies bound by the duty to consult and make sure that it is fit for purpose. So there is a range of changes. Similarly, as someone who has dealt with concerns from local residents, particularly in North Down, that not enough weight is given to, for example, conservation areas or areas of townscape character, the provisions are to be welcomed.

There is a lot of detail in the Bill, although it contains 28 clauses as opposed to, I think, 234 in the previous Bill. I see some First World War veterans of that Bill dotted around the Chamber. This is an important Bill that has the

potential, if we get it right, to move planning forward in Northern Ireland and improve the situation. I look forward to the detailed scrutiny and, therefore, I support its passing Second Stage.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt ar son an bhille seo. I also support the Bill. There are just a few issues that I would like to bring up. Most importantly, what we need to get right is what we are trying to pass down to local authorities. Anybody who has experience of councils knows that planning legislation is open to interpretation. We want to try to shore up the gaps to create the best possible legislation so that the decision-making process in local authorities will be that wee bit better.

I want to pick up on some points raised about the principles of the Bill. I know that we will undertake clause-by-clause scrutiny in Committee. Minister, the issue of the duty on statutory consultees raised its head. Concerns about that were raised during the passage of the Planning Act, when the likes of NIEA was mentioned. I agree with the 21-day response, but we still have a responsibility to try to reach all those consultees. Sometimes, that sits outside the scope of the Department, and it will sit outside the responsibility of a local authority as well, but we must look at how we address the issue of respondees because, until now, they have held up the process. Maybe you would like to touch on that a wee bit because it is an important point.

I agree with the publicity arrangements under clause 4, but we need to get that process right from the start. It may be that it is not inclusive under this clause but will be under the required subsequent legislation. Although they may not come under the heading of publication, we should look at the likes of site notices and neighbour notification. That would also help the process.

Another issue that raised its head, and it came up during Committee Stage of the Planning Act, was that of mineral sites. I would support clause 14, but it refers to a condition being imposed on those sites. I am somewhat concerned that there may be some existing sites, such as the older sites, on which conditions may not have been imposed. I would like us to look at how we could replenish or rejuvenate some of those previous sites.

4.15 pm

The other issue relates to clause 12; the introduction of new material at appeals. Mr Weir talked about third-party appeals and everything else, and about getting the process right from the start. I want us to talk about how we look at the application process because that is key to providing new information. You said in the clause that there will be exceptional circumstances or circumstances in which it cannot be foreseen to introduce it. However, having a proper application process at the start would clear the lines in respect of how people submit the application.

I have only two other points to make. I want to make a point about the good-design issue. I agree with that but I would like to see an opportunity for new design and for people to incorporate new ideas in the future. There is a design guide for rural planning. I hope that we will provide opportunities for new design in that regard.

The last point that I want to talk about is the economic issue and clause 6. I heard the Chairperson articulate her points about that. I am supportive of that. Clearly, it outlines the advantages and disadvantages. The Chairperson spoke about the issue of out-of-town shopping centres as opposed to in-town ones. Minister, surely we should be looking to the applicant to bring forward his or her arguments on that debate. You give the advantage if there is job creation, but you have to look at the impact that that would have on the local area or community. That would be a disadvantage. If there is going to be an impact, applicants should be given the responsibility to clearly outline the advantages and disadvantages of the economic argument. There is no point in saying that we will allow a business to create jobs if that will displace other jobs and businesses in other areas. I do not know whether the intention of the Bill is to include this in the application process, but perhaps the responsibility being put on the applicant in that regard is something for consideration.

I support the Bill. No doubt we will have a bit of a debate in Committee about the economic argument. I look forward to that. The Bill is not as bad as the 224 clauses or whatever number of clauses there were in the Act. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for bringing forward the Bill. I appreciate Mr Molloy's sentiments about helping some of us with longer journeys to get home earlier, but I am concerned that that would stifle debate to some degree. Obviously, we are at a legislative stage, and it is always useful to have the debate when the issues arise. The Minister has never been backward in taking interventions and articulating his side of the debate, but I understand the rationale.

I start with a quote from Committee:

"Good planning and quick decisions are key to economic growth and new jobs."

It is vital that we develop a planning system that will serve us for many years to come. We have had significant problems in the past. Many of them have been because of inconsistency in the planning process. I have had this discussion with the Minister in the past: certain areas and divisions seem to take a different view on some aspects of planning policy than others. That leaves it very difficult, particularly for us, as elected representatives, when we hear colleagues in another area say, "Well, look, we would not have much problem getting that passed. I don't know what your issue is". We want to have consistency, and good planning will obviously be right at the heart of that.

I support absolutely the faster processing of applications. Earlier, the Minister talked about enforcement, such as fixed penalties. People who build at their own risk without planning approval will pay multiple application fees when they apply for retrospective approval. I do not support people who do that, but sometimes you can understand their rationale. Business people in particular have been frustrated. First, they have lost business and the opportunity for economic development in the past, simply because the planning system and the bureaucracy it entails have been far too slow, time-consuming and totally out of step with any economic progress that business would like. That is why some such people have been almost forced to go ahead. I am not saying that I

support their doing that, but, quite clearly, there is an understanding among some in the wider community about why it happens. If we can make it better and fix it, that should resolve the issue. That is why what the Minister is suggesting is a good idea. However, we must ensure that we have the system properly fixed, so that it will not be a bureaucratic mess for those who want to develop and for economic developments in particular. Making satisfactory progress on that will, I think, resolve quite a number of issues.

I note the suggestion, which nobody has picked up on and the Minister did not refer to, that costs could be awarded against a party by the Planning Appeals Commission. I understand that the rationale for that might be to avoid cluttering up the process. However, I am concerned that that would militate against those who cannot afford to go to appeals or to make their case there. I would like to hear some more detail around that, because that measure might say to the public, "Well, the appeals system is only for the rich". I hope that that is not the position, but, from what I read in the clause, it seems to be. The Minister may put me right when he makes his winding-up speech. I hope that everybody would have a fair opportunity to make their case at appeals. That right is vital for the person who is appealing the planning decision and those who support it.

The Bill contains enhanced environmental aspects. The Minister referred to the conservation areas and said that the test of a development should be that it will enhance the area. We have some difficulties, which I have referred to in the past, around conservation areas and townscape character areas, where you are not allowed to remove a building. Sometimes, that building is allowed to rot. What does that say for an area? Is that enhancing an area where there might be plans to take down and renew that building, even with a similar facade? I think that there have been some very poor decisions in some such instances here. I know of an instance in my constituency, where an applicant was getting funding from the International Fund for Ireland — I think that it was in the region of £150,000 — to build a new structure to put in place some shop or industrial units — I cannot remember which — with some things above it, and it was stopped by Planning Service, simply because he needed to remove the entire old building and replace it. He even agreed to replace the former facade with an almost identical one. Those are the types of planning decisions that do not give people any confidence in the system.

I note the Minister's comments on enhanced community development. We already have the pre-application discussion (PAD) system, which I think has been working extremely well. I know people who have engaged in it and development proposers who have actually taken part in that. They found it very useful, from their point of view. It means that, when they come in with a full application, it is much more relevant and they do not spend time changing it. So, the new community development system will cause maybe some concern among those putting in for development, simply because they will see it as an opportunity for people who object to make their case at an early stage and try to stop the proposal before it even gets to application stage. There will need to be some confidence-building measures among the wider economic world in that respect.

That takes me to my next point, on economic development. I had an exchange with the Minister on this. It is quite an interesting aspect. Obviously, it is a subjective decision from those who have to make the decision. It is very subjective as to what carries most weight. The Minister mentioned the Rose Energy one. I know that he and I may disagree over the significant economic weight that that should have carried. His decision or opinion would be different from mine, but he ultimately makes the decision. So, quite clearly, it is very subjective. That is why I would like to see some guidance on that before the Bill finally goes through, just to establish where the perimeters are for the people making those decisions. Most of us here have served on councils at some stage. I can imagine quite a debate on the council floor around whether a planning application should carry more weight from environmental aspects or economic aspects. I can see some very fiery debates around that. I am not, by any means, saying that I am opposed to it. All I am saying is that we need some clarity and guidance around it.

The economic development clause will certainly be supported widely by the economic world and those in industry. They feel, by and large, that their views have not been taken account of. I know some guidance was brought out some time ago, which was, I think, then legally challenged. Maybe the Minister will keep me right, but I know planners got some guidance in the past, and I do think that that went to a legal challenge.

I also note the issue around a single planning policy statement. It would be very helpful if that could be progressed by the Department and the Minister at an early stage. We have a number of planning policy statements and, sometimes, to me, some of them seem contradictory to each other. I hope that that single planning policy statement can be progressed, sooner rather than later.

I will leave it at that. I am happy to help the Bill progress to the next stage. Obviously, we will have significant debate in Committee and, indeed, even at further stages here in the Chamber.

Mr Eastwood: As someone who has to get over the Glenshane Pass tonight, I will attempt to keep my remarks quite short.

Since the day and hour the Minister came into office, it has been clear to people that he is not only a reforming Minister but a Minister who is prepared to make decisions. He has proven that he is prepared to make decisions in support of the environment and also in support of the economy. He has made very balanced decisions and has been able to show his independence in that regard. I think that that may go some way to proving some of the arguments around the economic clause.

The Bill paves the way for planning powers to transfer to councils in 2015. It is designed to make the Planning Service faster, more decisive and more in tune with the needs of the environment, our communities and the wider economy.

Many improvements have already been made to the Planning Service. There is a PFG commitment to ensure that 90% of large-scale investment planning decisions are made within six months.

When the Minister took up office there were 60 article 31 cases. Now, 31 of those decisions have been made, with a

further nine already announced. Many of the applications had been with the Planning Service for many years prior to the Minister taking up office.

4.30 pm

Only last week, statistics were published showing improvements in planning performance for the second successive quarter. That is largely due to a new focus on active case management, the implementation of a good practice guide and a reduced requirement for documentation accompanying planning applications. Minor applications were progressed three weeks faster than in the same period last year, intermediate applications were progressed two weeks faster, and the number of decisions issued on renewable energy applications has doubled, with 92% of those being approved.

Guidance has also been issued to staff on the need for consistency in decision-making right across the board. That points to some of the questions that Mr Elliott raised. There has also been an increase in the number of streamlined applications. That is a system that was piloted in my constituency in Derry, and it has greatly improved efficiency in the planning application process right across the board. We have also had increased response times from statutory consultees, but clearly things can still improve a lot. That is what the Bill is about. It is designed to build on those achievements and others made to date. It will underpin the role of planning in promoting economic development. It will allow for implementation of reforms contained in the 2011 Planning Act. It is also now intended that those reforms will be enacted and tested before powers transfer to councils.

Although the Planning Bill is intended to enhance economic development alongside sustainable development and to ensure that planning is not an obstacle to investment, it is also designed to allow local communities to become more involved in the planning process at a much earlier stage. Developers will be required to consult the community before submitting major planning applications. That will allow the community to become involved at an earlier stage than happens currently.

There will also be further measures to encourage sustainable development, with new protections for conservation areas and wildlife. The appeals process will be reformed to ensure a faster and more effective system, and there will be a comprehensive consolidation and review of existing planning policy right across the spectrum of policy areas. The Bill will also ensure tougher enforcement procedures for planning offences. There will be a new maximum fine of £100,000 where an enforcement or stop notice has not been complied with.

The Bill will enable the planning system to be faster, more accountable and more focused on economic development, but it will also be tougher on those who flout planning legislation and is designed to enhance further our natural and built environment. I support the Bill.

Lord Morrow: I am just looking at the clock. I hope that we can get out of here before 7.00 pm, because that should ensure that we get home by 10.00 pm, if last night is anything to go by.

I listened with rapt interest to Mr Eastwood. I must say that he has a tremendous grasp of the Bill. I do not think that

the Minister could have done better himself in selling the Bill, so “Well done” to him. The Bill’s aims and objectives are indeed very laudable. They are first class, as a matter of fact, but I suspect that it could be said of most Bills that go through the House that their aims and objectives are very good, and there seems to be a determination written into them, backed by a determined Minister, to make things happen, in this case as far as planning is concerned. As my colleague Mr Weir said, my party supports the aims, objectives and principles of the Bill, which, as I said, are laudable. However, I want to comment on some of the things that are in it.

Clause 2 makes clear what the Bill is trying to do. It states:

“Where the Department or the planning appeals commission exercises any function under Part 2 or this Part, the Department or, as the case may be, the commission must exercise that function with the objective of ... promoting economic development.”

I suspect that not one MLA will object to that. The issue has been mentioned from two perspectives: Tom Elliott came at it from a slightly different angle from that of the Committee Chair, which is good. All of us will say that we should promote economic development in a measured and balanced way, not in an abusive way. As MLAs, we want to ensure that the balance is correct.

Clause 2 mentions “furthering sustainable development”, which is a theme that runs through the Bill. I have no problem with that, because it is a good thing. Clause 3 deals with the meaning of “development”, which is interesting:

“a structural alteration of any description of building specified in a direction given by the Department for the purpose of this Article, where the alteration consists of demolishing part of the building.”

Let us imagine, for example, that a decorative chimney is taken from a building. What does the clause really mean by the phrase “demolishing part of the building”?

We are all conscious that, from time to time, abuses occur. All of us, particularly those who have served on councils over the years, have garnered some experience and knowledge. I know that the Minister is no different in that respect because he served his time as a councillor and cut his teeth there. He would have come across all that in his work as a councillor.

Tom Elliott made an interesting point when he talked about an incident in Enniskillen, I suspect — County Fermanagh, anyway — in which a developer wanted to do something but was held back by the planning authorities, who would not let him replace an existing development with something very similar. That has happened in Dungannon in my constituency, where we could have had a very enterprising and exciting development, but, because of planning rules, we now have a street on which development has been restricted. The economic downturn happened, and opportunities were missed and lost. I hope they are not lost permanently, but, sadly, they may be lost for a long, long time. In the past, the lack of moving on with planning has stymied things. I suspect that the planners will defend themselves by saying that they needed further information and there was no joined-up thinking in the Departments. If there was a wee bit more joined-up thinking between Departments and consultees, we could see things

happening. I am not sure that the Bill will achieve that. I am not sure that it cites it in the same determined way as it cites other things, and I would like to have seen it in the Bill.

Planners and the Department sometimes get blamed for things of which they are not guilty. Then again, we are all in that category. As MLAs, we sometimes get blamed for things of which we are not guilty. Decisions should be made on the basis of the information that is available, and planners should not have to run around the country getting more and more information if what is required is clearly determined and outlined. If the information that is needed is there, they should get on and make decisions. The Minister is a man who is not afraid to take hard questions sometimes, so I hope that he will comment on this. Has he or his Department done any study of the time that it takes to process a planning application here, compared with, for instance, England, Scotland and Wales? How do we fare in comparison? My opinion is that we do not fare very well. The Minister might tell me that I have got that wrong and we are ahead of them. That would be great, but I will let the Minister comment on that.

Mr Eastwood said that he thinks that the Minister takes the tough decisions and is not afraid to call them. Yes, we have noted that with the negative decisions on John Lewis and Rose Energy. There is no doubt that some of us looked for different decisions, but those were the decisions that the Minister took. No doubt, he will stand by them, defend them and say that they were right.

Clause 16 deals with an increase in certain penalties. The explanatory and financial memorandum says:

“This clause also increases the maximum level of fine, on summary conviction, for a range of offences relating to breaches of planning control or consents from £30,000 to £100,000.”

When you read that, you think that a £100,000 fine is, by anybody’s standards, a lot of money, but is it? Is it? If there was a development on a site that cost £100 million, would £100,000 be a deterrent to the developer? I suspect that it would not. I think that that works out at about 0.001 of 1% of the contract price, so I do not see it as a great deterrent. I would like not only that deterrent to be put in the Bill but one with a percentage relating to the contract price. The Minister should give some consideration to that. I believe that, when you get to that stage, you have a deterrent that will stop the breaches.

Clause 18 speaks of the control of demolition in conservation areas. We have seen that happening, too. Clause 19, which ties in with that, relates to tree preservation orders (TPOs) and now also preserves dying trees. It is hard to put the tree back after you take it down, is it not? It was there for 100 years, 150 years or 200 years, and it is gone overnight. I suspect that this clause will not stop that, but I am pleased that it is there. I think that it will act as a deterrent, but I suspect that it will not stop it.

The Minister should take another look at where there is demolition in a conservation area — where it has been raped — and maybe even beef it up a bit. There has to be clearly defined legislation to tackle situations in which a clearly defined conservation area has been raped.

I want to talk about a situation in which the Department is dealing with a planning application. We are supposed

to live in an age of transparency in which everybody is equal, though some of us are not convinced. The Minister should consider the inclusion in the Bill of a timeline for the determination of an application. We have looked at applications in the past that had been sitting for years. I am not in any way saying that that is the fault of the planners, but I am saying that a planning application that was submitted in 2004, 2005 or 2006 and has been sitting there for up to 10 years will be affected by the many things that happened during those 10 years, which means that the application is not as relevant as it was on the day it was submitted. Planners might come back and say that they asked for A, B, C, D and E and never got it. A determination should be made on that planning application on the information that is available. If more information is required, has been requested and is not forthcoming, I would proceed and make a determination. Ten years is far too long for an application to be kicked around, amended and changed. The Minister should set a timeline for the processing of a planning application. If that was in the Bill, it would be even more fit for purpose. I hope that will be given due consideration.

4.45 pm

I hope that we will have an enforcement policy that is fit for purpose and will deal with those who flout the law and go ahead with developments. The Minister made reference to that, and I was pleased to hear it. Those who go for planning permission in retrospect cannot take it for granted that all is well and they will get it. The planners take a sensible line on that. I have spoken to planners, and they have told me that, when employment is involved, they go the extra mile — those are more my words than theirs — to facilitate an applicant. In principle, I do not have a problem with that, and I do not think that the Assembly does. However, I strongly believe that those who deliberately flout planning legislation have to be dealt with.

Those are the matters that I look forward to the Minister dealing with. I look forward to the Bill coming to the Committee. We will get our hands on it and try to shape it. I am sure that the Minister will appreciate all that we are doing, because we are doing it for his good, the Department's good and our constituents' good. It will be good at the end of the day. Mr Eastwood said that he thinks the Bill will deliver at the end of the day, and I hope that he is right. We, as Committee members, will try to ensure that that is the case.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, this is a good opportunity to have a debate. I was not trying to stifle Mr Elliott earlier; I was just trying to follow the normal procedures. I can understand why people thought that we were already into the debate, because the Minister was some time in explaining the Bill, but that is OK. Thankfully, Mr Eastwood is here, because it was important that someone spoke up for the Minister.

We have had reformed Ministers here of all kinds, including church ministers. We had Mr Rooker, who was here for a time and left behind a legacy that has taken some time to overcome. We need to be cautious about reform and what it actually means.

In general, it is beneficial to see on paper some of the ideas in the Bill and the clauses that we will go through. In Committee, I am sure it will take some time to get through that. It is important to caution that this does not become

another Bill that will simply curtail people and put more power in the hands of a future Minister, whoever that might be. The present Minister needs to remember that he will not always be there and that someone else will interpret what he has said.

We have heard various opinions about what this is about. Like all Ministers, the Minister will often have to make the final decision. Remember that that is just the Minister's opinion — it could be right, or it could be wrong. Over the years, one of the inconsistencies in planning was that we heard various people's opinions on what was good planning, what was bad planning, what looked well, what was good design and what was not. I pay tribute to all the planners that I have dealt with at local government level over the years. At the end of the day, they try to accommodate and facilitate. Sometimes architects and designers are as much at fault as planners.

It is also important that we look at what is being proposed and get the responses back on planning. I am a wee bit concerned that we will appoint persons to carry out an inquiry who are not necessarily Planning Appeals Commission staff. How sure can we be that those who are appointed will be independent of the Department and have an open mind and objective opinion that takes into account the needs of the area and the applicant and the different environmental concerns?

There has been a lot of talk today about the economic benefits of sites and developments. I take it in good faith that the Bill will promote that. Clause 2 talks about:

*“(a) furthering sustainable development;
(b) promoting or improving well-being; and
(c) promoting economic development.”*

However, I have to say that that has not been my experience to date. Hopefully, the legislation will change that. This Minister has certainly not changed it. This Minister has not followed that line. I have concerns about whether what is in the Bill will be reflected by any future Minister.

I will give the example of a factory outside Coalisland — the Minister knows it well. It is trying to develop an old sandpit on a brownfield site, which will create jobs. In fact, the factory proposes to double its workforce. It has been trying to get planning permission on that site for the last six years. It has made a very determined effort in the last two years. That development would provide jobs in an area of very high unemployment, an area that is renowned for its engineering experience and exports materials across the world. In fact, 82% of the world's mobile crushing and sand and gravel equipment is made in that area of east Tyrone. Yet, a factory that wants to double its workforce cannot do that because the Minister is holding the application on his desk, despite the fact that the planners have already approved it.

I am concerned about what will happen in reality. Maybe a new Minister or somebody else will make a different decision, but factories cannot wait that length of time. Developers who are signing contracts and trying to get business into an area cannot wait years for planning permission. They have to be able to say that they are going to produce a, b and c and that they will do it next year, in six months or whatever the case may be. To be held up and not even know whether they will get planning permission is soul-destroying. It is also deprives local

people of jobs, and that is what is happening in that area at this time. That factory could double and possibly treble its workforce because it is possible to expand on the site. We need to have a vision of what is possible and how we can improve the well-being of people in the area and the environment of the area. The factory will be developed on what is currently a brownfield site and a site of dereliction. New factories can give people confidence. It is very important that the Minister proves himself with actions as well as in the Bill.

There are proposals for more public consultation on developments, which is very important. However, in considering economic factors, what weight do we give to serial objectors? What weight do we give to the people who simply do not want anything like factories or even schools and play areas in an area because it is too close to them? What consideration do we give to that and what consideration does the Department give to the fact that it grant-aids those objectors through Supporting Communities? What assessment does it make of objections and whether they are valid or are simply from serial objectors?

In that same area, a serial objector, who is also a councillor, has objected to four factories, including one proposed by one of the biggest engineering companies, Terex, which exports all over the world. You are talking about 500 jobs, and we will send those jobs elsewhere. Why do we fund Supporting Communities to very often go against the decision of the planners? The Department is funding the objectors through Supporting Communities, and the planners then make the decision to approve. Where does it end? We are in a new situation, and I see that the Minister of Finance and Personnel does not even have to approve it now. Is it like legal aid? Is some sort of assessment made of whether objections are valid or are simply from objectors? Some people object to any change whatsoever and do not want any noise, for example, in an area. We need to look at what we are funding. It is important that communities that need support get support, but it also needs to be valid. There needs to be an assessment before you simply throw ratepayers' money into fighting something.

Sustainability has been talked about in a strong way, and my belief is that, particularly in the rural community, you cannot have sustainability without economic development. You sometimes have to change the community and the make-up of the area to create that. Often, the best place for factories is in the rural community because they need access and space around them to do things, and it does not work to put them into development lines or into town centres because of the effects in those areas. We have a great opportunity, through our local Assembly, to make decisions that are relevant to the local area. However, if we get into a situation where party politics in local areas can influence Ministers to object and to hold back progress, we bring into question how good our local Assembly is at delivering for the local community. Does it support the local community, or does the local community support it? Is it a small section of the community? We need to look at all aspects of the Bill. Are we talking about a fair planning process or one that can be controlled and managed and have political input?

The Bill will hopefully take us through to the point where local government will have more control over planning.

It is important that, if we hand the power of planning to local government, we give the councillors and the local community the power to do that. The consultation process must be genuine, and the Minister should not, in the future, step in, take a planning application out and hold it up and stall the process. If local government is to have power, we should give it power and not curtail it in any way. We may have to deal with article 31 applications, but I am not talking about those. I am talking about normal planning applications that should be dealt with in the normal way, and it is important that, at local government level, the local community has the opportunity to have an input. We now have an opportunity to draw up area plans that, with community planning, involve the local community in developing the area. In the past, area plans were handed down to us from on high in the Planning Service and were fought over between barristers in the courts, and the local community had very little say on or input into them. If we are to give the local community power to have an influence, we need to look at what weight is given to that and take it into consideration. It should not be the be-all and end-all. There have to be compromises to make sure that we get a proper new planning system that will benefit everyone in the future.

5.00 pm

The proposal that a response to a consultation has to be made within 21 days is very important, because, as the Chair said earlier, the planners may only have to consult with councils and a couple of other bodies and do not have to consult nationally with NIEA. Often, the planners hold up processes in various ways because there is no consultation back from NIEA until the last minute. In a recent planning application that I was involved in, it only arrived the evening before the case was going to court. Therefore, NIEA and other bodies need to respond by a certain time. If they do not respond by a certain time, they must have nothing to say, and the planners should move on. Over the past number of years, it has not been my feeling that that is the way that they have operated. The consultees have held up the process, sometimes indefinitely and without any real cause or justification for that. It is very important that we get a response back in time. It is also important that we get a response back in time from the planners so that it is not stretching for 10 years, as Lord Morrow said. Also, where the Minister intervenes, it is important that there is a response time from the Minister on the decisions that have been made.

Hopefully, the Bill will be improved by the time that it comes out of the Committee and that the various aspects can be dealt with there. It is a very important step forward, and it is important, in this document, we have the three aspects of furthering sustainable development, promoting and improving well-being and promoting economic development for the future.

Mr Kinahan: I am very pleased to see the Bill coming before us today, and I am especially pleased to see movement in planning. It was something that was close to my heart a while ago when I was on the Environment Committee and we scrutinised a Bill with whatever the number of clauses that it had. It intrigues me that we were told then that there were 16 to 18 other pieces of legislation or guidance that were yet to come through, and I am aware of this as maybe only the second or the third. I know that RPA was one of them, so I ask the Minister: where are all

of the other pieces that need to be fitted to the jigsaw for that Planning Bill, which we all put so much time and effort into, to start to work? It is good to see a Bill that is bringing in speed and a quickening in our planning process.

One matter that has just been touched on and concerns me but from the other side is that of the conflict that arises between councils and the Assembly. When I was a council member, I sometimes felt that we were making planning decisions that purely suited the local area and not necessarily the whole of Northern Ireland. Francie raised a good point, but it has to be looked at from both points of view. We must make sure that things are being done for Northern Ireland as a whole and yet somehow keep the balance with what is needed locally for the councillors who are on the ground.

I am concerned, and I know that the public is because it is often raised, about the old backhand or paper-bag rumour that went around that money was meant to be changing hands. I have never heard or seen any example of that, but it concerns me that that is what the public think of planning; that, somewhere in the system, there is a way of corruption playing its hand. I want to hear from the Minister how he feels that we can ensure that that is corrected so that the public do not go away with that. I am aware of a story of an official being laid off due to corruption. We need to make sure that that is absolutely knocked out of the system and that it does not exist. I do not believe that it does exist at the moment.

Most of this Bill is tidying up, and I welcome that. I particularly welcome the appointment of other persons to help through the Planning Appeals Commission, because that was one of the areas where matters were being slowed up. I congratulate the Minister on many of the areas where he has tried to speed things through quicker, knowing that, in some cases, others will not be happy with his decisions. The effort was there to try to get things through, and we did have our say.

One thing that has always bothered me in the planning process is that we somehow always end up designing everything so that we have a battle between two sides, neither of which wants to give way. I long to see a system which encourages people to sit down and discuss their differences and try to find the right way forward, so that it is not a planning process which is constantly having to be fought out in court. Runkerry is an example. It is extremely sad that it has ended up in court. We know that we need the jobs and that we would like to see a good golf resort up there. Those involved in it know that, when you build a golf course, it brings the wildlife back. It can be done in such a way that everyone benefits, and that is what I would like to see coming out of these planning changes —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the Runkerry issue is subject to judicial review and Members would be best not saying too much about it.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you for that clarity.

I also support the raising of the penalties, although I thought that we had put those in place a year ago. I was pleased when we managed to achieve the raising of penalties from £30,000 to £100,000. I note Lord Morrow's comments on that matter, in that, at the time we discussed the percentage idea but were unsure as to whether it was manageable.

We also looked at the problem of dying trees. It was pointed out at the time that, once you are born you are getting closer to your death and, therefore, you are dying and it is the same with trees. We are all dying and, therefore, it is vital that protection protects all dying trees.

I welcome the fixed penalty notices coming through into the system. However, if we go by the small matter of fixed penalty notices on litter, at the moment, different councils interpret them in different ways and, therefore, I look forward to hearing from the Minister how we will get fixed penalty notices on a much grander scale into the system so that every council and every system treats them in the same manner.

The major battle, which many Members have touched on already, is finding a balance between promoting economic development and furthering sustainable development. There, I think, lies the nub of one of the most difficult matters. I look forward, but feel some sympathy for the planning people left to make the decision. I go back to my earlier point: we really want to see people sitting down and trying to find a solution to a matter, rather than fighting it out.

Another area of concern is community involvement. When I asked a year ago what we meant by "community", I was told that it was the people who live there, those who work there and all those who drive in and out and go through it. And it becomes huge; it is everyone. Again, it has been asked how we stop the serial objector from holding up the whole matter. I look forward to seeing in the Bill how we will deal with that, and how we will get proper consultation in the local community that gets them all on board. Maybe that will deal with my other concern about always fighting a battle, instead of finding a nice joint way forward.

I will enjoy watching this from the Education Committee, and I wish all the rest of you in the Environment Committee the best of luck as you go through this Bill clause by clause. I congratulate the Minister on bringing the Bill to the House.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacú leis an Bhille, agus ba mhaith liom diriú ar an chuid sin den Bhille a bhaineann go háirithe le forbairt eacnamaíochta. I welcome the Second Stage of the Planning Bill, and as other Members have said, its aims, objectives and overall principles are honourable.

I want to focus in on a couple of specific areas. I welcome the fact that there is a commitment to the faster processing of planning applications, but maybe concentrate now on the whole area of promoting economic development. Other Members who have spoken have cited specific examples of how, in their direct constituency experience, they have encountered what might be described as bad planning, which disabled economic development, rather than enabling or promoting it. Even where environmental concerns were taken into account, still the correct balance was not achieved.

I have a distinct recollection of my time on Omagh District Council between 2000 and 2010 when a very thorough attempt was made by councillors across all the political parties represented on the council to work together to establish an enterprise park in Fintona in County Tyrone. It is the largest centre of population in the Omagh district and the most socially deprived and socially disadvantaged town where unemployment is at its highest. A local

community group emerged and people began to show leadership locally to tackle the issues of the day, and their priority project was the establishment of an enterprise park.

Omagh District Council was able to gift or transfer to the local community an area of land where the enterprise park might be developed. IFI grant aid was achieved and 12 anchor tenants were ready to go. Planning Service explained at the time that it was a finely balanced decision and one where it might exercise discretion. However, in that instance, there was no approval and it was a refusal. The community was demoralised. Local government, in its wisdom, had backed it strongly. That was one of the worst examples that I ever witnessed of Planning Service using its discretion to effectively disable economic development in an area where jobs were being created. I want any future decision-making on planning legislation to be informed by that experience.

In the same broad area of promoting economic development is the vexed issue of directional signage — what is allowed and what is not allowed. In the recent past, I tried to support local business — a plant hire company near Dromore in County Tyrone, a small bed and breakfast facility in Drumnakilly, a creative arts business in Omagh and, more latterly, a gymnasium inside an industrial estate. Planning Service is taking exception to modest signage pointing people to a gym in an industrial estate, which is way off an A-class road and a B-class road. Those are examples of where Planning Service could be a lot more flexible and a lot more supportive to the survival of small and medium-sized enterprises.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to relate his remarks back to the Bill, please.

Mr McElduff: OK. I am trying to give individual examples of bad planning in the past to inform good planning in the future so that it will influence the Bill as it develops.

Primarily, I am concerned about the words, “promoting economic development”. In an area of social disadvantage, there should be a greater will to establish the principle, for example, of an enterprise park and then get on to the business of discussing design and accommodating Planning Service with design.

At this time, job creation and job retention should be a central consideration when the Department assesses applications. At a time when people are crippled by rates and a rise in fuel and other costs, Planning Service can do more to promote economic development.

Mr Allister: I want to raise a number of issues about the Bill, and I will do that as succinctly as I can. First, I have a concern about the threat to the independence of arbitrators in respect of Article 31 inquiries referred to in clause 10.

5.15 pm

Article 31 inquiries, which deal with significant planning applications, are an important part of the infrastructure of the planning process. They are also an important part from the point of view of public confidence in the planning process. They have evolved, in that when there is a major planning application upon which the Department is, ultimately, to make a decision, the system has been devised under article 31 that farms it out to the Planning Appeals Commission to hold a hearing and make a recommendation, and the Department stands back and

carefully considers the independent advice that the commission gives.

I think that that is right and necessary. There have been some criticisms — I have had occasion to experience them myself — when, despite the recommendation of the Planning Appeals Commission, the Department has done its own thing on an article 31. But if we undermine that introduction of an independent role in article 31 by bypassing the PAC, without explanation as to why we need to do so, and have the Department appoint someone else to hear the application and conduct the article 31 inquiry, we will undermine the process. Remember that the Department is a party to an article 31 inquiry. It is one of the combatants in the article 31 arena — it, the applicant and the objectors. In any such arena, it is bad practice for one of the parties to get to choose the referee, so to speak. Therefore, it is a flawed approach in clause 10 to say without explanation — we have heard none from the Minister as to why it is necessary — that it will circumvent the procedure in article 31 whereby the PAC conducts the inquiry, and choose someone of its choosing to conduct the inquiry. Why? If they produce a report that the Department does not like on an article 31, will that be the last time that that person is asked to chair such an inquiry? It has to be seen to be independent as well as being independent. So I do question that, and I have a suggestion —

Ms Lo: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Ms Lo: I am very seldom in agreement with the Member, but I am certainly very much in agreement with him this time. I also want to say that the PAC actually has the power to appoint anybody else if it wants to — an independent person.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can remarks be made through the Chair, please?

Mr Allister: It would not be a bad habit to develop, to agree with me in respect of certain matters. I appreciate the point that the Member has made. It is the point that I was coming to: that there have already been occasions when the Planning Appeals Commission, because of its workload, has asked someone else to undertake an inquiry.

I was going to make this suggestion to the Minister: rather than clause 10's saying:

“a person appointed by the Department for the purpose”,

why not regularise that by saying “a person appointed by the commission for the purpose”, and thereby retain some semblance of independence, which the present wording surrenders? I put that suggestion to the Minister.

I will now move to what clause 12 brings upon us in respect of matters that may be raised in appeals under article 32. Article 32 appeals, as we all know, are the regular, run-of-the-mill planning appeals. Here we have the introduction of a provision that nothing new may be introduced to the appeal. Clause 12 states that:

“a party to the proceedings is not to raise any matter which was not before the Department at the time the decision appealed against was made unless that party

can demonstrate to the satisfaction of the planning appeals commission -

(a) that the matter could not have been raised before that time; or

(b) that its not being raised before that time was a consequence of exceptional circumstances."

I have to say to the Minister that my experience of planning appeals is that they are a very important outlet, not least for objectors. Departments may come along to hearings with very skilled and experienced planning officers or even legal representatives. Applicants may come with equally skilled representatives to fight out a planning appeal. However, the party, if there, who often comes with the least expertise is the objector. He or she usually turns up for the first time in that sort of forum without legal or other professional representation and tries to do the best that he or she can to fight their corner.

It would be punitive in respect of justice being seen to be done, for objectors in particular, to introduce a provision that states that you cannot bring in anything that has not previously been before the Department. That would be far too rigid and far too hard on objectors. I also question whether it is compatible with article 32(4) of the existing 1991 Order.

I will remind the Minister what that article states:

"Where an appeal is brought under this Article from a decision of the Department, the planning appeals commission, subject to paragraphs (5) and (6), may allow or dismiss the appeal or may reverse or vary any part of the decision whether the appeal relates to that part thereof or not and may deal with the application as if it had been made to it in the first instance."

In my experience, that latter terminology has been used by the commission to justify the receipt of fresh information and to say, "This is an appeal, but we will deal with it as though it were made to us in the first instance."

How does the provision in clause 12 sit, if it sits at all, with article 32(4) of the Planning Order? The Minister needs to look at the compatibility of that and at the new proposition about whether it is compatible with article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights? Is it consistent with a fair hearing of an appeal issue if you have legislation that states that the PAC can deal with an application as though it was made to it in the first instance, but you want to bring in other legislation that states that someone — I take the example of an objector — cannot raise an issue that has not been before the Department heretofore? I question whether that is consistent, and I think that the Minister needs to look at it.

I will move on to deal with some other points very quickly. This is somewhat related to my concerns about the issue of objectors: the power to be introduced by clause 21 to award costs in respect of planning appeals. I can understand that there might be a temptation to say that if someone runs and loses a planning appeal, there should be some consequences. However, I think, again, that that can be very punitive. Certainly if someone, on some frivolous basis, goes down a certain route, that person might be thought to warrant some punishment in costs.

Does the introduction of an open-ended provision that the Planning Appeals Commission may make an order on costs mean that costs regularly follow an event? If you lose an appeal, do you pay everyone's costs? How are costs apportioned when objectors are there to object, the appellant is fighting a case, and the Department is taking a view for or against? In one sense, there are two winners and one loser on the decision.

There are practicalities, and it would be particularly punitive for third-party objectors, who come to planning issues with their hands already tied behind their backs in that they have no right to a third-party appeal. If there is now the additional risk of costs, that is quite punitive.

A situation will develop, which pertains to many good potential judicial review challenges, that they can never be brought because of the fear on the part of applicants that, if they lose, they are saddled with intolerable costs. In such cases, there may be a legal aid safety net, but there is no such safety net in planning appeals. That is a draconian and unnecessary measure, and the Minister should look at it again.

The proposition in clause 2, and in Part II of the 1991 Order setting out the general guidance on planning, that, for development plans, the Department or the commission must exercise their functions:

*" with the objective of -
(a) furthering sustainable development;
(b) promoting or improving well-being; and
(c) promoting economic development."*

I want the Minister to clarify whether that is a single, three-pronged objective. Is the function to be exercised, as it appears grammatically to be drafted, with a single objective rather than objectives? Those seem to be three components of a single objective. Is that what the Minister intends, or does he intend each to be a free-standing consideration? As to what "improving well-being" is supposed to mean, I do not know. I think that it means whatever you want it to mean. Inserting wording into legislation that means whatever you want it to mean is not a good course. However, I seriously ask the Minister whether that is a singular objective whereby all three elements must be satisfied, or is it something different?

Clause 6 amplifies what is meant by material considerations so that it embraces the debate over economic advantage or disadvantage. Further down the road, I suspect that, when development plans evolve that take account of clause 2, they will be quite explicit about promoting economic development. That will be an essential knock-on effect of clause 2. In those circumstances, what does clause 6 add to the debate? What does the following mean:

"considerations relating to any economic advantages or disadvantages likely to result from the granting of or, as the case may be, the refusal of planning permission."?

It does not help the balancing exercise simply to state that account must be taken of one or the other. I suspect that greater assistance, if that is what it is to be called on that front, will come from the percolation through the development plans of the objective of promoting economic development. Although I feel quite positive towards that, I have to remind myself, as should the Minister, that

planning is about planning, so the economic consideration probably should not be that which is paramount. It certainly has its place, but there is a balance to be struck on how that is weighed.

5.30 pm

Clause 4 states:

"A development order may make provision requiring notice to be given of any application for planning permission".

Article 21 uses the phraseology "development order". Is that a development order as defined in article 13 of the 1991 order? If it is, how does that fit with the definition and, in particular, with the repeal of the original article 21, which was the provision whereby planning applications had to be advertised? Is it the special creature of development order that is in article 13 of the Planning Order? Is there, therefore, some effective diminution in advertising requirements? Where do we find what is defined as a "development order", as quoted in the new article 21 pursuant to clause 4? Where do we find that definition if it is not in article 13 of the 1991 order? I am sure that the Minister follows the point that I am rather clumsily trying to make.

On a similar point, clause 5 refers to a pre-application community consultation. It introduces a new article 22A, which states:

"Before submitting an application for planning permission for a development of a class prescribed for the purposes of this Article".

Where is the "class prescribed" for the purposes of this article? Where do I read that definition? Is that in the 1991 order? Is it in this Bill? Is it somewhere else? Perhaps I have simply missed it, but I have not been able to find where the class prescribed for the purposes of the article is so prescribed. Perhaps the Minister could help us with that.

The final point that I want to make relates to the introduction of fixed penalty notices in clause 20. A fixed penalty notice, by its very nature, is a one-off penalty. Under planning legislation, particularly in regard to breaches of enforcement notices, an inherent part of the penalty process is often the imposition of a daily fine: there is a fine for the breach of the notice and an ongoing daily fine until the breach is remedied. How does that sit with the option of a fixed penalty notice? Presumably, if a fixed penalty notice is issued, it abrogates the opportunity for a daily fine for a breach of an enforcement notice. Is that sensible? In other words, how would you deal with a continuing breach of planning by fixed penalty notice? I am sure that the Minister will be able to advise on all of that.

Mr Agnew: Planning is fundamental to whether we prosper as a society; it determines how we develop our homes, towns and cities. A well-managed planning system can bring improvements in health and well-being. A strong planning system will protect our environment and rural areas. An efficient planning system is vital for a strong economy. For those reasons, we must ensure that we get the legislation and planning policy right. In fact, I argue that it is more important to get the legislation right than get it quickly. No one would argue that the planning system in Northern does not need to be reformed, although we may differ on what such reforms should look like.

I have to question why the Bill has come forward, given that we had the Planning (Northern Ireland) Act 2011 as a result of the lengthy Bill that went through the Assembly's processes. What is its purpose? One explanation that we have been given is the length of time that it has taken for RPA — the 2011 Planning Bill was dependent on the conclusion of RPA — and planning, as I have outlined, is too important to keep back improvements. If that is the key purpose of this Bill, I question the decision to put additional clauses into the Bill. As we have seen, particularly around references to economic development, the additions are creating controversy around the Bill, where, had they not been introduced, there might be none. Indeed, if all that the Bill sought to do was to, on a temporary basis, implement certain measures of the 2011 Bill, it might have had accelerated or at least a quick passage through the Assembly. However, as we have heard from its Chairperson, the Environment Committee will seek an extension to the Committee Stage. So, it looks unlikely that we will see the Bill's progress through the Assembly speedily.

The Bill contains what are described as "desirable additions". Minister: desirable to whom? Who sought these additions? Why are they in there and what benefit do they bring, given the cost of how long it will take the Bill to go through?

There are certainly good aspects to the Bill, and I will refer briefly to some proposals in the Bill that I think it is right that we should seek to introduce sooner rather than later.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member for giving way. I agreed with the Chairperson, who said that the Committee would ask for an extension of time to consider the Bill. The reason is to give it the proper process and due recognition of responses to the consultation. It is not really to delay; it is to give everybody an opportunity to participate in that process.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree that the reasoning for asking for the extension is sound. The fact is that the Bill has new additions without public consultation. Should the Bill be seeking to enact only something that had already been through public consultation and the Assembly processes, I think that the Minister would have a strong case for having no public consultation. That is why I again question why these "new additions" have been included in the Bill. I think, as I said, that the speedy introduction of sensible and agreed legislation does harm to that objective.

So, I welcome the enactment of some of the provisions in the 2011 Act, including the faster processing of applications. I do not think that you would hear anyone argue against that. Whether an applicant or an objector, speedy resolution is in everyone's interest, and the Minister has referred to progress that has made on that. Further progress would be welcomed.

On having a faster and fairer appeals system, I share some of Mr Allister's concerns: it may be faster but I am yet to be convinced that it will be fairer, and I will come back to that. I certainly welcome enhanced community involvement; although, again, I am dismayed that we are still without legislation for third-party rights of appeal. However, the enhanced community involvement is a step in the right direction. Simpler and tougher enforcement, again, is to be welcomed. We need to see more enforcement.

The perception is that a blind eye is too often turned by Planning Service to breaches of planning regulations.

I also welcome the increase in staff numbers in the environmental crime unit. I welcome particularly the greater powers to do with retrospective planning applications; a practice that has, to some extent, brought the planning process into disrepute.

Measures to enhance the environment and strengthen the system are to be welcomed. The introduction of the clause on good design seems fairly uncontroversial. It may be uncontroversial in principle, but I suspect that, in practice, it may be very controversial. I would not like to be the person who drafts the guidance notes on how you enforce good design. However, the clause is to be welcomed. It could, as I say, cause some difficulties, but I will wait and see on that one.

Reference has been made by a number of Members to diseased trees that are under a tree preservation order (TPO). The fact that a TPO would still apply to a diseased tree is certainly to be welcomed.

Most of the benefits from bringing forward legislation sooner have been through the consultation process and agreed by the Assembly. They are to be welcomed. Again, however, I would question the reasoning for the introduction of new clauses to the Bill.

I come now to the issue of economic considerations and the clause to promote economic development. The clause has caused concern and suspicion. The Minister himself made reference to PPS 24, which he wisely scrapped, for want of a better word. That was the right decision. An overriding precedence given to economic factors could have caused many problems, even in areas such as health and safety; if economic considerations were to override health and safety, that would be very bad policy. However, because of that attempt, many see the clauses on economic considerations as an attempt to legislate where the policy did not come into force. I appreciate that the overriding nature of PPS 24 has not been included in the Bill. However, even if you accept that, you then have to question the purpose of putting it there. That came up in the Environment Committee, and an official stated that the Bill:

"gives economic development the statutory weight of a material planning consideration ... I suppose that, ultimately, legislation gives it the highest status in policy."

I have concern with the suggestion of "highest status in policy". It suggests a hierarchy. I suspect that the Minister will refute that, but, if that is the case, it contradicts by definition sustainable development. I would be concerned about that potential conflict and contradiction.

Previously, in reference to PPS 24, the Minister stated that:

"Many rightly argued that economic considerations are already a factor in planning decisions and are already dealt with in a balanced way alongside other material considerations".

That suggests, and, to me, confirms, that economic development is already a material consideration. If that is the case, I would again question why it has been put in the Bill. When I put that question to him, the Minister did mention the reference to sustainable development. If

economic considerations are to be given explicit mention, I suggest that what might be more helpful would be for environmental considerations to be given equally explicit mention. If it brings no improvement in practice, I question its necessity in the Bill.

What might be helpful is an explicit definition of what we mean by sustainable development. I would not accuse the Minister of this, but, often, in Departments, sustainability and sustainable development are used as buzzwords, without being founded on an understanding of what sustainable development means. That would be beneficial in really giving weight to sustainable development, which, inherently, includes economic considerations.

5.45 pm

I fear that the inclusion of this clause is, to some extent, a concession to those who wanted to see PPS 24 and, perhaps, an attempt to say to those who are saying that we need to see economic development because the economy is struggling — I fear that it is a knee-jerk reaction to the short-term economic situation. Knee-jerk reactions create bad legislation. Indeed, the lack of consultation on the new clauses — as well as clause 10, which I will come back to because it is a significant amendment — is bad process. I gave reasons for that earlier in my speech.

OFMDFM's 'Practical Guide to Policy Making in Northern Ireland' states:

"Proceeding with no or token consultation may appear to save time in the short term, especially in a context of limited resources, but it can result in problems later."

In fact, we are seeing that already because, whilst we may have saved time in public consultation at the start of the Bill's progress, additional time may be required for its Committee Stage. I second Anna Lo's points about the Committee's capacity to conduct public consultation compared with that of the Department.

Even if we accept that clause 2 does not give any greater weight to economic considerations, the specific reference in clause 6 to the weighing-up of economic advantages and disadvantages could have considerably detrimental unintended consequences. Those have been mentioned, to some extent, by other Members.

What we are trying to do is streamline planning, speed it up and make it more efficient, but by introducing the specific reference to the weighing-up of economic advantages and disadvantages we open up all sorts of problems. It could result in more appeals and judicial reviews and could be counterproductive to many of the other objectives of the Bill.

The Minister will know that when you have three economists in a room you will get six different opinions. I am concerned to see how that might play out in the form of legal challenges. We will inevitably have economists representing those who, whether they are applicants or objectors, have considerable vested interests. How do we make those judgements? How do we stand over them in a court of law?

Indeed, how does the Planning Service — Planning NI, I should say — make those decisions, given that there are, to the best of my knowledge, no economists in planning? They are planners; they are not economists, and whilst

indeed they are experts in their field, I fear that this may put a responsibility on them that is not specific to the arena of planning.

Again, I have to ask: whose economic advantage and disadvantage? By definition, certainly in the case of commercial developments, it will be to the economic advantage of the applicant. Presumably they believe so, or they would not put the application forward. What if a development impacts on house prices in an area? Is that a material economic consideration? It has not been to date, and it is probably right that it has not been.

Again, what about competitor businesses? If an application is to their economic disadvantage, whose profit will be given the greater weight — the existing business or the applicant? Again, I am interested to hear about that in feedback from the Minister. However, I have concerns that it could turn out to be a legal minefield.

I often sit beside Mr Allister, but it is very rarely that we stand side by side. I think that he would agree with that as much as I believe it. I share his concerns about how clause 10 would enable the Department to appoint those who chair and provide recommendations on article 31 applications. I have serious concerns about the perception of the independence of the process. I think, quite rightly, that the independence of the process is compromised if, as Mr Allister pointed out, the Department is a party to a dispute and appoints the person who will referee it.

Having sufficient safeguards in place might alleviate some of my fears, but my reading of clause 10 is that it takes out the numerous safeguards that were in the original Act — the Planning Act 2011. Those safeguards were consulted on and approved by the Assembly. I very much believe that to be a significant change, and, again, there was no public consultation on it. Indeed, in his opening remarks, the Minister made little reference to it. Should the Bill go through the full Assembly processes, I ask the Minister to confirm whether that amendment will remain in place post-RPA, which is when the 2011 Act will come into force. The change is significant, and I am keen to hear whether it is proposed that it be temporary or permanent.

Another question that I have on that proposal is whether it will apply to applications that are currently in the system. If it does, that would raise further suspicions that the Minister and the Department are seeking to put through something that would give them greater power to make decisions on current applications in the way in which the Department wants.

As I said at the start of my speech, I am disappointed that there is still no third-party right of appeal. I stand over my point that, given the Bill's objective, new clauses should not have been introduced. However, if we were to introduce new clauses, introducing one on third-party right of appeal would have been beneficial. I know that the issue was debated in the Assembly and that it received cross-party support. The only exception to that support was the DUP, which tabled a petition of concern. I think that that was a misuse of the petition of concern, and it raises the question of whether the DUP, whose Members are no longer present, is the party of the developers' union. I am all for trade unions — I am a big supporter of them — but we need transparency in the arrangement between developers and political parties. Indeed, if we are to have public confidence in the planning process, it is essential

that we have transparency in political funding, especially when we devolve these powers to councils. As I said, there are certainly concerns about safeguarding against incorrect decisions and councillors not being influenced by other factors.

Before I conclude, I have one further question for the Minister. Where do the Bill and the Planning Act 2011 sit with plan-led development? Is it still the Minister's intention to implement that? BMAP is a perfect example of the time, energy, finance and effort that can be put into developing such plans.

Area plans are a sensible way to take that forward, but the original intention was to give them primacy. Is that still the intention? If so, what is the timeline?

In conclusion, planning is fundamental to how our society functions. It affects our health and well-being, our environment and our economy. Planning legislation and policy is one of the most important aspects for Governments, this Assembly and, soon, for councils. We need a system that is fair, efficient, transparent and accountable. It should be, and rightly is, underpinned by the principles of sustainable development. In my view, that should not be compromised. In that regard, I have some concerns about the Bill. There is much in it to recommend; I will be happy to see it going to the next stage, but I would like it to be revised as it goes through the Assembly.

Mr Attwood: I thank all Members who spoke for their kind and not-so-kind contributions.

To begin, I want to make a wider political point but not a party political one. I sometimes think that we cannot see the wood for the trees. What I mean by that in this instance is, as I said in my opening remarks, that there are 800 days until the transfer of planning to local councils. That will be an enormous responsibility for local councils and, arguably, a burden on them.

On Thursday, I will again go to the Executive looking for funding for the transition costs for the transfer of functions to local councils and their reorganisation between now and 2015. A big element of that funding proposal is to build the capacity of councillors and management to best manage the functions that will be devolved to them in 2015 around planning applications, local development plans and community planning. I confirm for Mr Agnew that plan-led development is the best-led development, and I will come back to that theme later. Community planning will be an enormous responsibility, but it has to be done, and it has to be done right. Therefore, building up the capacity of councillors and management will be an essential element of getting it done and getting it done right. However, I am not going to hand something to local councils that I know is not fully fit for purpose. In 2015, I am not going to say to councils that they have all this planning function, and, by the way, in 2015, but only in 2015, put in place the elements of the Planning Act that have been referred to today.

So although it is absolutely right to interrogate the Bill and to ask the questions that have been asked, we should be mindful that it substantially reflects the law and the democratic will of the Assembly from a previous mandate. I am mindful of that, which does not mean that you do not revisit legislation or decisions. I think that, in my time and tenure in this office, I have demonstrated that I have been prepared to take a different view from that of my

predecessors. However, if we are serious about RPA and getting it right, and if we are going to get it right, we need much of the Bill to be in place in good time to ensure that there is good planning for local councils on the far side of 2015. It will be very important to bring that perspective to the interrogation of the Bill, being mindful that it reflects the thinking and will of the Assembly during the previous mandate and the urgency and primacy of ensuring that, in 2015, the people whom councils serve — business and domestic ratepayers and others — get, through the transfer of functions, a planning system that fully measures up to their needs.

6.00 pm

It may well be that I will not be able to address all the issues raised, partly because some require further consideration and reflection by me. Some issues are technical or legal and will require further advice. There were some questions to which, despite my best efforts to work up an answer, I probably do not have the answer. However, through a further written reply to the debate and through the process of interrogation at Committee Stage, I will ensure that all those questions are answered. I will try to address some of the more challenging comments made, even some of the more unkind ones.

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

I will go through all the contributions of Members who spoke. Anna Lo made a self-evident but fair point. I try to acknowledge points that are fair and, as Ms Lo will hear, I will also acknowledge points from some Members that I think were unfair, including from Ms Lo. This Bill came later than expected. That is due, first and foremost, to the new clauses. It is also because of the toing and froing and conversation between me and officials, and officials and Ministers from other Departments. That is why this came “later than expected”, to borrow Ms Lo’s phrase.

I was determined to ensure that we got the Bill through the Executive and to the Assembly for the reasons that I just gave, namely to hand councils something that is more fit for purpose than what we had before, and which reflected the will of the Assembly in the previous mandate through the Planning (Northern Ireland) Act 2011. I was determined that, in achieving that objective, I did not build into this Bill something that might only create multiple problems down the road. That is why there was a later than expected decision by the Executive to approve the Bill. I was determined that the Bill would not create hostages to fortune, that it would not overreach and that it would not lead to unnecessary legal challenges. People are entitled to make legal challenges, but I will certainly try to mitigate unnecessary ones. That is why the wording of the new clauses has been drafted as it has, in comparison with the previous legislation. The intention was to navigate that path and ensure that what we are doing does not overreach. I will come back to that issue in some detail.

The Bill was drafted so as not to create legal mischief, legal doubt or legal challenge. I cannot anticipate what others might do hereafter, but that is the path that I chose. In coming to the House later than expected, I have tried to ensure that we have legislation that is on the right side of all of that, but achieves the ambition of getting the new architecture in place in advance of 2015.

A point was made about consultation on the new clauses. It is a preferable model to have the type of consultation referred to, but the advice that I was given, which has not been contradicted by any legal authority in and around government, is that, despite introducing new clauses today, the processes hereafter of political and public consideration of those clauses, as well as the overall Bill, satisfy the threshold of public consultation. That is the advice that I have been given. Given the circumstances that I am in, which are that this has come later than expected, and given my ambition to get the new architecture in place in advance of RPA and to have it tested and tried, as Mr Eastwood said, even if only for a year or so, I think that, in the round, that is the best approach to take. That is why the consultation process will be undertaken by the Committee. Ms Lo referred to being annoyed that it is being left to carry out that consultation. However, when you measure all the various factors and try to balance them and achieve the best and desired outcome, I think that, given the circumstances we are in, that is how it will be approached.

On the basis of this debate, it is quite clear that those clauses, as well as the Bill generally, will be scrutinised intensely. In that way, a sufficient and satisfactory level of political and public input will be satisfied. A threshold will be reached to ensure that a proper process — it may not be the process that others would have designed — is fulfilled that sees whether it is the will of the Assembly that this legislation is passed to send out the message that clauses 2 and 6 send out in all their terms. I want to confirm to Mr Allister that clause 2 and its three subsections, themes and principles should be read together as an integrated approach rather than as selective with a hierarchy therein. I will come back to that shortly.

In the circumstances that we face, to fulfil the ambition of the original Act and to do all that in advance of reorganisation, taking into account all the comments that have been made is, I think, both politically and as Minister, the better way to proceed, even if some people do not consider that it is the best way to proceed.

I will differentiate between Anna Lo’s comments as Chairperson and her comments as a South Belfast MLA. I can confirm that, in her comments as Committee Chairperson, she was quite right that having provision for statutory consultees and time frames for response does not mean much if you do not broaden the category of statutory consultees. That will be a consequence of the legislation. Not only will it be laid down in regulation what the time period might be — at the moment, we are working towards 2021 — but the range of statutory consultees will be broadened to ensure that the statutory timeline has genuine meaning and brings into the body of law and the practice of planning the rigour and discipline that might have to —

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for giving way. I would like him to clarify the point about the transfer of functions to local councils. Is he saying this evening that that is no longer guaranteed to happen before 2015 and that, in fact, the transfer of functions may well not now take place? I would like him to clarify that point.

Mr Attwood: I do not know why I need to make any point of clarification. I think that the Hansard report will confirm that there was nothing in what I said that suggested that

anything other than 2015 remains the ambition. That is the intention. The Executive decided in November 2010 — erroneously, in my view — to have 11 councils rather than 15, and I committed to managing that decision. There is no evidence of my doing anything since that time other than managing that decision and sending out the message that the point of no return passed long ago and that this will be achieved. I hope that that intervention was informed by mischief rather than by the very clear statements that I have made in all my contributions at all times in respect of RPA.

In my view, Anna Lo's contribution in her capacity as an MLA was certainly unhelpful and probably crossed that line. Let me explain why. We have had enough in this society of what I refer to as the leadership of worst fears. It is people looking at a situation and concluding from it that the worst fears is their response. We have seen ample evidence of that in the past six or seven weeks, where decisions are taken and people draw conclusions from them that, in my view, are disproportionate. Frankly, there was that sort of thinking in Mrs Lo's comments.

I do not mind criticism of the decisions of any Minister: that is legitimate, democratic and ensures accountability. However, you have to give the full narrative. Mrs Lo drew conclusions about how the new legislation that is proposed in the Bill might work itself through for the application that is yet to come for hydraulic fracturing in Fermanagh. Mrs Lo chose to somehow apply clauses in a Bill, which I tried to explain, to the potential for hydraulic fracturing and say that, because those clauses refer to economic advantage or disadvantage, they would somehow have consequences for the proposal for hydraulic fracturing. People know how charged and sensitive the proposal for hydraulic fracturing is in Fermanagh. Mrs Lo knows that I have said absolutely every time I have been questioned that there will be no rush to fracking in Fermanagh, that all environmental and planning requirements will be upheld and that we will assess all the science — American, European and Irish. People will have noted that there was a call for evidence to a project led by the Irish Government, but involving my Department, on best practice or best science on the issue of potential for hydraulic fracking. Mrs Lo knows how vigilant and careful I have tried to be in that regard, and to try to get some casual headline by saying that it will end up with the potential for fracking in Fermanagh —

Ms Lo: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a second.

In my view, that is worst fears politics. Yes, you can raise questions about what this might mean, but to relate it to something that is not even in the planning system at the moment is not a wise approach.

I make those comments because the other point that Mrs Lo referred to when she spoke about planning decisions I made in the past 18 months was Runkerry. I will not get into the issue of Runkerry because I will respect the authority of the court even if other people do not necessarily appear to do so. Comments were made without giving the wider narrative about decisions that were turned down because environmental standards, in my view, were of greater weight or about decisions taken on rebalancing, as I see it, in-town in favour of out-of-town retail as has happened in Derry, which is consistent

with current planning policy and all the other planning requirements. I will give way to the Member.

Ms Lo: Minister, thank you for giving way. Does the Minister not agree that introducing a policy of promoting economic development will strengthen the hands of all developers in economic development?

Mr Attwood: No, I do not agree with that assertion. Whether you believe that or not, to try to relate the proposals and my comments to what might or might not happen in Fermanagh is trying to exploit fears rather than, as we are obliged to, looking in a measured, proportionate and discerning way at what legislation really means. There have been other examples, I have to say, of Ms Lo misrepresenting and mangling what the Department is trying to do for reasons that she can best explain.

6.15 pm

I cannot understand some of the assertions around these clauses. Ms Lo said that stimulating economic development is not common practice in other jurisdictions. Subject to the Hansard report, that is a quote. Stimulating economic development is not common practice? There is a presumption of development in law. Some people do not like that, but there is a presumption of development in law. The purpose of the planning system is, working from that principle, to then mould planning policy and decisions that take into account all the other factors that properly and reasonably should be taken into account. To send out a message, from any political party in this Chamber, in the circumstances in which we exist at the moment in the North, when we are about to enter a triple-dip recession and we are about to have 20,000 more people on the unemployment register because of the outworking of welfare reform; when we are about to see two more phases of welfare cuts, as has been indicated by the Chancellor in his autumn statement, on the far side of 2015 — and, mind you, it is going to be earlier than 2015 — to send out a message that stimulating economic development is not common practice in other jurisdictions is, in my view, incredible and is not the sort of message that we need to be sending out to so many hard-pressed people at this time.

Ms Lo: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: Yeah, I will.

Ms Lo: Minister, as Mr Allister said, planning is about planning. We cannot allow bad developments to go ahead simply because they are going to have short-term economic gains, but ruin our environment, ruin our neighbourhoods, ruin our communities and ruin our health and well-being.

Mr Attwood: Again, I have to say to the Member that, four times in that intervention, she said that we were ruining, ruining, ruining — our heritage, our health and our communities. I do not know what your observation —

Ms Lo: Bad development.

Mr Attwood: Bad development should not happen. That is why I have been making assessments based upon all the relevant factors: the law, the evidence and planning policy. Where I think something is bad, I have been saying so. I do not get that upset about the criticism, because you need to be clear-headed and clear-sighted. I have overturned, for want of a better word — Mr Poots has now gone, but

he will be returning shortly or, at least, as soon as I have finished my remarks. I have overturned a view essentially in respect of the seats-for-sale restriction at Belfast City Airport because, in my view, that was not a sustainable position. It was not based upon the law, and it was going to get crushed at a judicial review. I have taken a different view from others in respect of Rose Energy. I have taken a different view in the advice that I have given to the PAC in respect of the overall greater Belfast policy.

So, where I think that something is not measured up against the law, policy or evidence and is “bad”, to use your term, I think that any Minister, if they are worth their weight, should be prepared to make those decisions and live with the consequences as long as they have good law, good process and good conscience on their side. This notion of portraying what has been proposed in this legislation as some sort of advance guard for development here, there and everywhere seems to me to be disproportionate.

It reminds me — and now I am going to get into some trouble, if I am not careful, Mr Deputy Speaker —
[Laughter.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Yes, you anticipated correctly, Minister. I think that you have made your point very well, and I am sure that the House will be pleased if you are coming to a conclusion on that.

Mr Attwood: I will take that as endorsement and move on, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I have to say that I am not in the place that some in this Chamber are, where economic advantage, whatever it may be, is going to prevail. I think that there are probably some people who skirt around that argument; I must be honest with you. There are people who go close to that argument, but I am not one of them. That point was captured by Mr Weir before he left. He looked at what was proposed and used very cautious words about, if you like, the economic elements proposed in clauses 2 and 4. He said that proper and sufficient weight should be given to economic considerations, but he never used the line that there should be determinative weight given to them. That is the difference between where I am and where others might like to be. Where others like to be is to give determinative weight to economic considerations. In my view, that is disproportionate to the overall character and integrity of our planning system.

Mr Agnew: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will. There should be proper weight given to economic considerations and proper weight given to all relevant material considerations, as informed by law and policy practice. I give them sufficient weight but not determinative weight. How can people draw a conclusion from clauses 2 and 4, when I suppressed the policy that gave determinative weight to economic considerations? This is the language that Ms Lo used, and I quote her again:

“trying to sneak in such a fundamental shift ... through the back door.”

Do you think that that is the sort of politician that I want to be, sneaking something in — a fundamental shift — through the back door? I will give way.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for giving way. I have expressed respect for him and the scrutiny that he has

given to decisions in the past. He has referred to his own performance as Minister, but, ultimately, he will not be Minister for ever. The question that I ask is this: does he believe that, when another Minister comes in, will the Bill in any way empower that Minister, under either clause 2 or clause 6, to give added weight to economic considerations over and above other aspects of sustainable development?

Mr Attwood: No — that is the answer. It does not. I have had the conversation, taken legal advice and looked at the words that have gone into the Bill, and, given that those words are not of a scale and extravagance that measures up to being determinative, I do not believe that that conclusion can be drawn. I will come back to the point and then reply to Mr Agnew’s latter points.

Mr Weir also made the point about third-party appeals. My intuition and judgement is to go in the direction of third-party appeals. The South seems to have become a bit more neutral or hostile to them. I understand that the Scottish Government, who have been the clear leaders of new planning policy — in spatial planning, integrated planning, the devolution of planning function to local citizens and so forth — seem to be somewhat more uncertain about third-party appeals, but my intuition and judgement is to build them in. I made a call about a year ago — maybe it was not as long ago as that — that, given the scale of what was required for planning, given the issues that I referred to in my opening remarks and given the need to get a single planning policy statement to deal with article 31 applications, reduce the time lines around all categories of planning application, build up a robust enforcement regime, get this legislation before the House and get the architecture in place before the transfer of functions in 2015, if I were to go down the road of third-party appeals, without prejudice to the fact that there would be people who would have opposed it, I would have been overreaching. I am also of the view that the sum of the parts to which I referred had the best opportunity, in this mandate, to get planning and the twin-track or binary system that we will have after 2015 as fully fit for purpose as possible.

I want to bring forward proposals for third-party appeals, but my judgement is that, at this stage, I would be overreaching and would probably end up in a dead end. Therefore, the energies and diligence of the Department should be directed to all the other aspects to which I referred. In the Southern system, there are third-party appeals, but they come at a price, which is that citizens and communities are less involved in the earlier stages of a planning application and have the safety net of a third-party appeal at the far end. Therefore, if my judgement is that people cannot go down the road of third-party appeals at the moment for the reasons that I outlined, even though I want to and have ambitions to do that, the involvement of the citizen and the community is built up in the earlier part of the planning system — pre-application in respect of significant planning applications — and will work itself through to get community planning right as part of the transfer of planning functions in 2015. That is the strategy. People can dispute that and say that that is a strategy of folly or that there is a better way to go. I understand those arguments because intuition and judgement could have led me in that direction. However, I weighed everything in the round, and that is my conclusion.

Cathal Boylan made an interesting point. He started by talking about consultees — he referred to them as respondees — and how that would work. I think that he was highlighting the fact that there is a culture shift at the heart of this, which is crucial to the Bill and to the transfer of functions and falls to the Assembly and to Ministers. If the Bill is to make a difference to how the North develops, it is a culture shift that puts plan-led development and citizen input at the heart of things. A PAD process would have the citizen and the community given their proper position with regard to planning. When the RPA Bill comes before the Assembly, statutory organisations will have a responsibility to engage with communities and councils and have regard to what councils propose for community planning and development plans. That is why, within a year — hopefully, much more quickly than that — the Department will issue advice on the statement of community involvement in development plans and planning control functions. That is the culture shift to which, I think, Mr Boylan, referred.

Mr Boylan and Mr Allister also mentioned appeals and whether new material could or could not be introduced. Some interesting comments were made. Mr Allister was not here during the previous mandate when this proposal was passed. It would be negligent of me simply to say that that is the will of the Assembly and disregard the comments of Mr Allister and others. I owe it to him, as an MLA, and to the authority of the Assembly Floor to reflect on all that.

6.30 pm

Let us look at the proposed new appeal system, which was touched on. The legislation will include the power to appoint other people to conduct article 31 planning appeals. If that happens at all, it will happen when the Planning Appeals Commission says that it does not have the capacity to do something. That is the purpose, and that is how it will be defined in regulations. It will be defined in regulations in consultation with the PAC. This does not usurp the PAC as the proper authority. It is not trying to say that we will appoint a friendly face to get a friendly outcome. Again, that seems to be the interpretation of what is intended. Forgive me if that misrepresents what Mr Allister said. The purpose is to deal with future situations should the economy prosper, sustainable development begin to roll out and issues arise with article 31 applications that have to go to the Planning Appeals Commission for further enquiry. Remember that of all the article 31 applications at the moment, only three are going to the PAC. I am subject to correction. One is for the North/South interconnector, and the PAC is discussing the airport, but that is not an article 31 issue. I cannot remember the third one at the moment. Currently, such matters are rare. However, in the event of a pressure point in the PAC, the purpose will be to appoint somebody, subject to the proper process and rigorous standards, in order not to compromise the principles of transparency, independence and so on, in the way that might have been portrayed in some of Mr Allister's comments.

Under the model that I propose through you, Mr Deputy Speaker, to Mr Allister and others, costs will be awarded only against the appellant or the Department. At the moment, an individual citizen does not have the right to go to the PAC on the far side of a decision with which he or she is not happy. Therefore, a citizen's opportunity and

the financial viability of going to appeal will be protected because costs will not be awarded against them. They will be a participant, but they will be neither the appellant nor the Department. Too right: I want the PAC to be able to award costs against a small number of people in the North who use the planning system, the PAC and the High Court and might even go beyond that on occasion to push the limits of good planning policy beyond what is best for all of us. They are entitled to do that. That is the law, and I will not deny them that opportunity. However, some people overreach when it comes to using the law, the planning appeals process and the courts. That is what I am trying to get at: it is for that sort of unreasonable behaviour that a new disciplinary regime is required to send out a message to those who overreach.

When it comes to new material, the appeal process is legitimate. I do not think that there is a contradiction between the 1991 order and the Bill. I do not think that there is a contradiction, as Mr Allister suggested, between prior legislation and the Bill in saying that an appeal process should look at what was argued previously but guidance to PAC can state that there is information that, in exceptional circumstances, might be revisited. I do not think it unreasonable to say that, if information could have been raised before, it cannot be raised later. Those are good principles to inform the process. Mr Allister has, however, made some points. I will listen to them further and come back to his points later. Do not be concerned.

Mr Elliott made the point — I will make it now as we approach 7.00 pm — that we do not want to hold people back unnecessarily. Last night, as Mr Elliott knows, he was held back until 7.00 pm because of a meeting that we were having about the RPA upstairs. Therefore, I regret it if people are being held back. He made the point about a lack of consistency. I think that he was referring primarily to PPS 21. Over the next period, I have to bring quite a number of planning policy statements to the Executive. I will not detain the Assembly with them at the moment. The purpose of the PPS 21 operational review, as I have explained to Mr Elliott, is that it was a real-time, real-life operational review that, in one way, does not have a conclusion because its purpose was to say to the planning system that there is inconsistency in planning decisions between divisional offices and that, consistent with the substance of PPS 21, flexibility should fall to the applicant. That is the default position — I am being careful now, because I do not want to get myself into legal problems — and the flexibility should fall to the applicant, as long as that is faithful and loyal to the content of PPS 21. I think that it is time to report to the Assembly on where that operational review is and what has changed. Subject to what Members might say, I do not hear the same volume of criticism about inconsistency across PPS 21 applications. I think that there has been some reinterpretation of some operations, consistent with the ambition of the policy.

Turning to Tom Elliott's point about costs being awarded by the PAC and his concern that that is only for the rich, I think that I have answered that. It will not be the "poor", for want of a better word — the individual citizen — who is at the PAC who will be awarded costs.

In respect of conservation and enhancement, the policy will be "Where possible". It will not be an absolute rule. When it comes to developing a conservation zone, we should look towards enhancement rather than anything

less than that. Where that is not possible, the planning system will obviously have the opportunity to say that what has been done may not be enhancement but lives within the spirit of the policy.

I will deal with Lord Morrow's comments. He said that he thought the planning system had seen economic opportunities lost. He rightly pointed out that, as a councillor, I might have seen where that was manifest. I do not dispute that. However, this legislation creates the architecture so that economic opportunities are not lost in 2015. Let me give you the example of Clare County Council, which I always quote. Eighty per cent of the Republic of Ireland's land mass is now covered by development plans. That has been achieved in about 10 years. Serious mistakes and worse clearly arose during that period. The tribunal confirmed that there was irregularity, corruption and criminality. So, when you develop local development plans, you need to be careful that you do so absolutely right and legally. What does the example of Clare County Council tell us? It tells us that because the west coast of Ireland has the best wind, wave and tide in the world, which is advertised and dramatised through renewables, technology, and research and development, it has a self-sufficient electricity supply and is a net exporter of electricity to national grids in Britain and in Europe. That demonstrates why renewables are such an opportunity. What has Clare County Council done in its development plan? It has captured that. On the pages of the Clare County Council development plan, it says, "Come and plant your renewables on the coast of Clare, because we have the best wind, wave and tide in the world". That is an opportunity. If we get the architecture of planning right in the rundown to RPA, then come RPA, when councils are developing their local development plans, which I hope they will push on with — I will come back to that in a second — that is the sort of thing that people need to have the ambition to do — to follow the example of Clare and to say, "This is where our economic opportunity is", in order to ensure that economic opportunities are not lost.

You only have to go to Kilkeel in south Down to see a community that has lost its traditional industry and has seen a decline in traditional fishing. What has it done? It has recreated its fishing industry through added-value produce and diversification, using the fishing fleet to assist in the growth of renewables in that part of the world, following, not least, the recent decision to award a licence for offshore wind farms. So, that is where the opportunities exist and — to answer Mr Elliott's question — that is what the Bill will achieve.

I will not address all the points made but will touch on some of the matters that were raised. Mr Molloy's speech was a curious one, and I am being kind when I say it was a curious one. Mr Molloy first of all cautioned us against reform. I always knew that Sinn Féin were just a bunch of conservatives, and, on the record in this Chamber, they cautioned us on reform. That is a quote, and Hansard will confirm that. I am of the same view as Robert Kennedy, who said that he demanded the right to dissent because there was much to dissent from. In our society, that remains the case, but to be cautioned on reform is disturbing.

There was also a theme that, I am sure, Mr Molloy did not intend because he has a long record of being involved in

community activism. I remember going down to Coalisland when I was Social Development Minister — you can confirm that. It was a great night. In fact, it was a night a bit like this — there was snow on the ground, isn't that right? — in December 2010. We had a great night down there with an Irish language organisation and other activities. So, I am sure that he did not mean this, but he came across as being anti-community and anti-citizen. Why, he asked, were we funding organisations, such as Supporting Communities? I think that what he probably meant was Community Places, which is an organisation funded by the Department in order to empower local citizens to assert their rights and interests when it comes to planning. Not only are we funding it, we have guaranteed it funding for the next two years. I sent out a note over the weekend to one of the officials, who is probably here, saying that I wanted that funding to pass into the next CSR because I do not think that funding an organisation such as Community Places for two years would allow for the transition into RPA in 2015-16, which is a right place to be. I will continue to fund it because it is the organisation that puts citizens and communities first when it comes to planning applications. If it is working with communities to say no to some planning application in some part of the North, I will not turn around and refer to them as serial objectors or in some way deride or denigrate the contribution they make. There should be more Community Places-type organisations because otherwise Mr Agnew's concern will be manifest. It will be manifest that those who have least resources will have the least authority and least influence around planning.

Mr Molloy: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a second. So, I very much support Community Places — if that is who he was referring to in terms of supporting communities. I do not think that those comments were helpful in terms of that organisation or the interest it serves.

Mr Molloy: I thank the Minister for giving way. It is important that he quotes correctly. On Supporting Communities, I said where there were not valid objections and where his Department's approval of an application proved the case that there were not valid objections. My question was this: how do you assess the support that is given by Community Places or anyone else who is funded by the Department, funded by the ratepayers in relation to that? The community who are looking for jobs also need to be supported and to have somebody speaking on their behalf.

Mr Attwood: In point of fact, the Department currently funds only two third-party organisations for their planning capacity and input: Disability Action and Community Places. Subject to correction, those are the only two that we fund. There is an argument that we should fund a lot more through Environment Link. We give them substantial moneys — not as much this year as last year because we were able to give them in-year moneys — to fund community organisations through an environmental grant. I would like to see whether there is more opportunity to fund community organisations in terms of planning grant in order to empower citizens and communities.

6.45 pm

My problem with Mr Molloy's analysis of a current planning application, about which I will be quite silent,

is that he gave only a partial narrative. I criticised Ms Lo in that regard because there was a partial narrative. If I were to criticise Mr Molloy, I would do the same. If he wants to bring to the attention of the Chamber a planning application and where it currently sits, he should give the full history of that planning application. That full history might include not that a planning official may currently recommend something, but the history going back a long time of the planning system refusing that application. That is a full narrative, not a partial narrative.

If Mr Molloy wants to come to the Chamber, give his opinion on a planning application and use the preposterous phrase that we should not put into development lines something that does not work, that is running a coach and horses through planning policy and development plans. When we are meant to have planning-led development in the North, Mr Molloy suggests that you should not put into development lines a proposal that does not work. What does that mean? It means that there is a settlement limit in a town in Northern Ireland where the development plan says that there should not be industrial development outside that settlement limit. What has happened? Perhaps a third-party organisation has come along and planted its development, without permission, on lands outside the development limit, and the planning system says that there are multiple other locations. That is the full narrative, not the partial narrative. I anticipated that individual planning issues would be brought to the Floor. If you want to do that, tell the full narrative, not one that serves the ambition — legitimate though it may be — of any planning application.

Mr Molloy: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a second.

I know that there are serial objectors. I do not know who precisely he might be referring to, but I know that there are also genuine and well-motivated people with real concerns. I do not refer to them as serial objectors; I refer to them as good citizens.

Mr Molloy: I, again, clarify to the Minister that I was very clearly talking about a new application on a new site; not the site that he is referring to, which there were objections to. It was also an enforcement site. That is not what I was talking about whatsoever. The Minister knows what the application is about: it is a new factory that will provide jobs in Coalisland.

Mr Attwood: I do not want to get into it; I have probably gone too far as it is. Even the latest statement from Mr Molloy about a development on an enforcement site is part of the wider narrative. Perhaps we will leave that matter.

I make it clear that party politics does not influence local decisions. For what it is worth — it is probably not worth very much — when I came into my Department, I told my permanent secretary that if there was any application in which I thought that there was a conflict of interest or a perception of a conflict of interest, I would discharge myself from making a decision. The permanent secretary looked at me — I hope that I am not speaking out of turn, because you are not meant to mention those people in the Chamber — and I knew from his look that I should ask a further question. I asked whether anybody else had done that previously, and he said no. I am the only planning Minister who has done that. When it comes to casual

phrases such as “party politics influencing local decisions”, I suggest that you might want to reflect on that.

That theme was picked up by Danny Kinahan when he talked about public perception. It was reflected in an article in the ‘Belfast Telegraph’ by Friends of the Earth, which is a great organisation, even though I disagree with some of its terminology about certain things. The assertion was that we may not know about a brown envelope containing £10,000 or £20,000. As a former Assistant Chief Constable for crime said to me about the involvement of MI5 in the North, we do not know what we do not know. That was not much of an argument about MI5 intelligence gathering in the North, and it is not much of an argument from Mr Kinahan in that regard. That is except to say that, at a Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) conference in Lisburn a few weeks ago, I made the point that this issue was going to arise and that we needed to build into the devolution of planning functions — and all functions — a rigorous governance, accountability and ethics regime in order to address these issues if they arise. If they are brought to my attention I will investigate them.

Mr Kinahan referred to a matter that might have received some public attention recently. However, no information at all, hardly — no evidence — has been brought to me that this is an issue, never mind a significant issue in the planning system. If there was evidence, I would like to hear it because the evidence from other jurisdictions suggests that it might arise. However, it has not.

That is why we need to build into the RPA Bill a regime around governance, accountability and ethics that militates against that risk. One of the proposals that we will have in the RPA Bill is that complaints about the conduct of a council go to independent investigation through the Commissioner for Complaints and are not handled in-house, in order to try to deal with that issue.

Mr Kinahan also touched on how we are going to ensure that when we get to the point of transfer there will be people capable of doing the work that is going to be demanded of them. That is why I do not think that you can do enough training and capacity-building in the rundown to councils taking planning powers. That is also why I hope that on Thursday every member of the Executive will put their hands up for the very substantial bid for RPA transfer moneys that I am looking for, part of which is to help fund training.

Mr McElduff, who has left — no, he has not — referred to the Fintona decision. I do not know what it was but I presume that it predates me, but he made some good points in that regard. If there is an issue around erection of signage, bring it to my attention. I will give you a small example. This issue arose in Belfast around signs being placed in shop windows but not on the frontage of a shop and not on the front of its window — they were within the curtilage of the building. The planning system sent out letters to three or maybe four businesses immediately after Christmas, which was unfortunate, given all the circumstances around Christmas, trading and streets-wise. The planning system has apologised for that. Those notices should not have been sent out.

There is not an issue about signage being displayed within buildings that is not on the frontage of buildings. I have said to planners that there is a need for some guidance, so

that our beautiful shop frontages in a city with a wonderful heritage do not end up getting cluttered and dominated by signs. However, the notices that were sent out were wrong, and I will issue a statement about that tomorrow. I understand that we did not have legal cover for what was proposed. The Department has been upfront in saying that it got that wrong. I said that I would look at the case. I have looked at it. That is the outcome. I believe that letters are being sent to the four shop owners concerned.

Now, where would I start with Mr Allister? He made an enormous number of comments, and I do not think that I am going to be able to touch on them, for the reasons that I outlined in my opening remarks. They were very extensive. However, I have tried to indicate that the reconfiguring of the planning appeals system is to serve the interests of good decision-making and to penalise those who use appeal unreasonably, be they an appellant, applicant or the Department, although I cannot imagine that the Department would do that. In those circumstances, and mindful of the comments that I made about a third-party appeal, I do not think that that is draconian. In trying to ensure that the planning appeals system works to achieve the outcomes that I am talking about, that turnaround times are not used for improper purposes and that the system does not become just a routine place to re-engineer arguments or make new ones, I do not think that that is an unreasonable approach.

I accept the principle that Mr Allister outlined, and that was part and parcel of a lot of what he said. The citizen cannot be prejudiced, or the reasonable citizen at least must not be prejudiced in appealing a process. Given his comments about there being no legal aid and the absence of third-party appeals, that is a fair argument. In taking forward that proposal, if we need to think further about safeguarding the public or the citizen or the community interest, I will do so.

I talked about clause 2 in my earlier remarks. Mr Allister was the only Member to comment on clause 2(2), which touches on promoting or improving well-being, and he asked what it meant. We will have to interpret that and issue guidance as to what it means, because, although that is new, it clearly needs some further interpretation.

The three issues of material economic criteria, well-being and sustainable development are integrated. That integration is the protection against the concerns that Steven Agnew outlined in his commentary. The Bill does not give determinative weight. The material consideration of economic gain must also be read in the context of the legislation's other supporting principles that deal with sustainable development and well-being. In any case, they have to be read in the context of all planning policy, and so forth.

None of that will change in advance of the single planning policy statement that will come out before 2015. It may be further interpreted, because of the further PPSs that I will bring to the Executive that will deal with enabling development, tourism, and so forth.

Mr Allister raised a range of other issues. He probably knows the answer to his question about fixed penalty notices. A fixed penalty notice does not mean the end of enforcement but that you can follow up with a further fixed penalty process. Indeed, the Department has been deploying that for unauthorised developments, where, in

my view, acute issues have arisen that led to economic disadvantage to neighbouring businesses through repeated enforcement action. I hope that that addresses that issue.

Clause 5 deals with pre-application community consultation and makes reference to a "class prescribed". I will read the following into the record so that Mr Allister and others can reflect on it. A class prescribed is one prescribed for the purposes of clause 5. Classes of development will be prescribed in subordinate legislation — in other words, in regulations. Some of the clauses will require for there to be pre-application community consultation. For example, the class prescribed for clause 5 may be a major application, meaning that pre-application community consultation would apply only to major applications.

I have already dealt with the awarding of costs by the Planning Appeals Commission.

There is an issue around publicity for planning applications. Mr McDevitt, who is behind me, probably chides me on occasion — I was certainly chided by some journalists recently — that I am not into the changing world of mass communication. I am a conservative in that regard, Mr Molloy. I am a traditionalist. *[Laughter.]* The point is that the new provisions for publicity arrangements for planning applications, which are set out in clause 4, will provide an opportunity for the Department to examine a range of options based on efficiency and effectiveness. They will provide the flexibility to keep up with the rapidly changing world of mass communication.

I was at an event recently at which it was explained that online BBC news gets twice the number of viewers that 'Newslive' does. I should have known that, but I did not. That certainly changed my perspective on the media.

7.00 pm

I am sure that I have not touched on everything, but Lord Morrow encouraged me to conclude by 7.00 pm. I do not know how long I can speak for this time —

Mr Weir: Too long.

Mr Attwood: Too long — right.

I will conclude by saying that I thought that Steven Agnew's speech was very balanced. In many ways, that is because of his party allegiance, and his commitment to the green agenda is arguably more unambiguous than that of anybody else in the Chamber.

A lot of Members acknowledged all the elements in the Bill that had been rehearsed previously and that would create a better architecture in the rundown to RPA and post-RPA. When talking about the economic clauses, Steven Agnew referred to a "knee-jerk reaction" — I think that I see a press release coming that has not already been issued; actually, I have it here. Although he may wish to visit that analysis on others, which is his right, I hope that I have done enough to convince him that that is not what I have been about and that this is not a knee-jerk reaction. The Bill is trying to capture in law the right statement that we should be making in a way that does not prejudice other material considerations or our full range of planning policy precedent and guidance. That is all.

Some people may think that we should have gone for more than that. However, the fact that the Bill has been drafted in this way is, I think, an acknowledgement by those who might have thought that it should have gone further that they cannot do that without the certainty of a legal challenge being made or having muddled planning practice. Nonetheless, we wanted to send out a very positive message about where we see this place at this time and about what we want to encourage going forward. We do not want to do that in a prescriptive, dogmatic or partial and party political way but in a way that says to people that this is the right thing to do in the weeks that are in it, never mind the times that are in it.

The Bill will not be retrospective; it will apply to planning applications that will arise after the passing of any legislation that includes those two clauses.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Planning Bill [NIA 17/11-15] be agreed.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Mental Health Services: South Antrim

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

Ms Brown: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am very pleased to have secured the debate and welcome the opportunity this evening to raise the issue of mental health and the provision of services in my constituency of South Antrim.

In bringing the topic before the Assembly, I hope to continue to raise awareness of the tragedy of suicide. I also wish to highlight the need for greater promotion of mental health issues and to examine what more we can do to support those groups that do such worthwhile work in our community. When I say "groups", I am speaking about not only the statutory services that are available but the very many voluntary and charitable groups.

I am not seeking an opportunity to be critical of the Department. In fact, I am pleased that, in launching the Protect Life strategy in June last year, the Minister has already demonstrated a significant commitment to tackle this problem that affects so many. I welcome his efforts to date, and I hope that he can update us today on the progress that has been made since his announcement last year.

This debate focuses on my concerns for my constituency. However, it of course goes without saying that thoughts today are with all those communities that have suffered loss from suicide and with all those groups across Northern Ireland that, in their own way, are working hard in their areas to help people to cope with the aftermath of suicide and with mental health issues in general.

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

Turning to South Antrim, I will begin by highlighting a recent meeting that I attended, which was organised by a newly formed group called Antrim Together. I pay tribute to that group, not only for organising the meeting and highlighting such an important issue in the public domain but for its determination to help others who are suffering with mental health issues. The meeting occurred in the aftermath of the loss to suicide of four young people in my constituency since October. The organisers of the meeting were motivated by that series of tragedies to tackle the scourge of suicide and to raise awareness of mental health problems in the community. At that meeting, I was struck by a number of things, not least the real benefit to our communities when ordinary people decide to take action and work together across all divides for the greater good. At a time when community relations in Northern Ireland are under severe strain, this is a real example of a positive and uniting initiative, and I hope that it continues to make progress. I will, of course, do whatever I can to ensure that it does.

What also struck me was the sheer number of groups — statutory agencies and voluntary and charitable organisations — that were there on the day to talk about their work and highlight their services in the field of mental health. Many of those present were not aware of the existence of other groups in their area or of the extent of resources that are available and in place. I, therefore, respectfully observe that one of the key difficulties that we face is highlighting those services, ensuring that they can operate in a joined-up way, avoid duplication and develop common themes and strategies in a cohesive framework.

Across government today, we constantly look at means of delivering more for less, particularly in the health and community and voluntary sectors. The meeting that I attended seemed to have the potential to do just that. We in government should recognise the effort and do all that we can to promote it.

I urge the Minister and his officials to consider how his Department can work with groups such as Antrim Together to explore how best to harness the work that is being done. I would be very happy to facilitate any such meeting in my constituency.

The meeting also provided an insight into some of the challenges that face us in trying to promote mental health awareness. You might think that in performing an online search to research suicide, the internet might be a useful aid, and perhaps it is. However, among the search results are guides to how one might successfully commit suicide. That is a small but truly shocking example of how the world of the internet and social media can be such a negative influence and source of anxiety and depression. Used properly and positively, it can, of course, be truly informative and beneficial, but the negative impacts of some of the more dubious aspects of life in cyberspace can be devastating when our young people are simply too vulnerable to cope with mass cyberbullying, social humiliation or exclusion.

For the purposes of this debate, it may be appropriate to note that my party colleague and MP for South Antrim, William McCrea, has sponsored a private Member's Bill in the House of Commons that is aimed at the establishment of an office for the prevention of suicide and self-harm. The body would aim to work with internet providers and others to reduce access to information on the internet and through other sources on methods of suicide and to develop a system of alerts and blocks for internet searches that relate to suicide and for connected purposes. If passed and adopted by Her Majesty's Government, the Bill would mean that the body would operate at a national level, including Northern Ireland. This is a Bill that I would support, and I encourage the House and the Minister to do likewise.

My final observation about the meeting was how it highlighted the range of ordinary people who are affected by mental health issues, and, sadly, the stigma that still surrounds it. It strikes me that if we were all honest, most of us would admit to having struggled with our mental health at some point, be it depression, anxiety, prolonged stress, eating disorders or whatever. In my case, it was postnatal depression. I still recall the absolute fear that I felt at not being able to cope. It was never diagnosed, I asked for no help and I suffered in silence.

Politicians are often accused of talking endlessly; sometimes, that is true. Maybe it would be better if we spoke not endlessly but honestly. Perhaps fear of what might be said or written about us is the reason why many stay silent, but when it comes to mental health, we have to be real. People want real politics to deliver in ways that are meaningful and relevant.

It is not enough for us just to have this debate; we must do more. Our life experience as individuals should help to define us, and the lessons we have learned should shape our policies and strategies. Only when we do this will we really demonstrate to the people of Antrim Together and other groups that we are with them, not just because we feel we should be but because we have the same concerns, worries and needs.

I ask the Minister to outline, by way of reassurance, the work that his Department is undertaking in South Antrim, and for his thoughts on how that work might directly impact on the community to ensure that there is no more suffering for families. In bringing my remarks to a close, I must say that South Antrim is fortunate to have so many dedicated individuals and groups working to address mental health issues. I pay tribute to them and I ask the Minister to offer his full support as we all endeavour to ensure that, as a society, we work together to aim for good mental health for everyone.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I congratulate and thank my colleague from South Antrim for bringing this important issue before the House. I was elected to local council four times and I have been elected to this Assembly since it was established following the Good Friday Agreement at each subsequent election, but this may be the first time that I find myself in total agreement with what a DUP spokesperson has said. It was a very comprehensive exposition of the issue.

In these modern times, particularly when there is economic decline on a global scale, it is quite evident that many societies will be under stress. That will be reflected both in incidences of mental ill health and in suicide statistics. Our society will be no different in that social and economic dynamic. Of course, we also have the legacy of many generations of conflict and division, which also takes its toll.

Ms Lewis has presented the scenario: there is no room, nor should there be any tolerance, for people who would not attempt to maximise the amount of understanding and empathy that exists right across our community. South Antrim is blessed with the involvement of the community and voluntary sector. It has a community network model and an architecture between the Public Health Agency, the Department and the Minister, who has, on a number of occasions, addressed this issue with empathy and sympathy. If we were to come at this from the point of view that it is an invest-to-save issue, we could not only avoid the human toll of suicide on families and community networks, but avoid the huge recurring expense that is imposed on the health service.

Building up awareness, understanding and education, and removing any hint of stigma for people who have the courage to come forward and say, "I need support. I need help," is a way in which we can address resources in a more intelligent way, without the human cost. That is the path of development. I have heard the Minister speak

about this before, and it is a subject that is quite close to my heart. He can speak with some authority on this matter, not only about what has been done, but the direction of travel and what he intends as the way forward.

The architecture that I have mentioned works in the urban as well the rural setting. That connection into the community is, in fact, the most direct intervention that we can make. That type of ready and accessible support, if those involved are properly resourced and properly trained — of course, we have to establish that we are meeting what we might describe as minimum thresholds of capacity, skill and knowledge — is the way in which we can recognise the difficulties before there are tragic outcomes or circumstances that are very difficult to recover from or to treat properly.

7.15 pm

Early recognition, empowering people, especially family members, to seek the help that is there, and ensuring that no stigma is attached are the ways in which we can make the most effective intervention. Thank you very much for bringing this debate before the House today.

Mr Kinahan: I, too, congratulate Pam Brown for securing the debate. I am in total agreement with everything that she said. I also feel that we should all share our sympathy with anyone who has lost someone due to mental illness. As I am not on the Health Committee, I was intrigued about what the exact focus of today's debate would be. So, I will touch on one or two other matters as well.

We know that Northern Ireland has greater mental health needs than the rest of the UK. Some 24% of men and 17% of women here have mental health problems, which is 20% higher than the rates in Scotland or Wales. We know that mental health has been linked to high levels of deprivation. The Northern Ireland deprivation measure of 2010 showed that some 17,900 people in South Antrim are on deprived income. That is frighteningly significant to today's debate. The Troubles will also have played their part, and South Antrim is not entirely free of those at the moment.

A few months ago, I attended a bus-stop event here in Stormont, at which Belfast children discussed these matters. Their clear message was that they want included in their curriculum at least one lesson on mental health issues — how to deal with it, how to help each other and how to recognise it. I echo what Mitchel McLaughlin said about education being a key part. We should be including that in our curriculum.

I, too, attended the Antrim Together suicide awareness event the other day. As Pam Brown said, there were fantastic people there; they are the gems of our society. However, there is duplication. There is a need to avoid that and to find common themes and ways of working together so that we get the best out of all those volunteers and all the different mechanisms that they have in place to help people.

A few weeks ago, I attended a post-19 Mencap event in Mossley. There I found another angle to mental health issues, namely those children who, on leaving school, find themselves unable to get jobs and still in need of care. They need just as much help as they did when their parents looked after them. It really frightened me to see that although the system works very well for some, when the system does not find people jobs, the whole problem is

left with the family. We need dynamic resources and help for those people there and then. I ask the Minister to look into that.

In South Antrim, we have Holywell Hospital. It is an excellent resource for Northern Ireland that we have had for years. However, it is well past its sell-by date, if I could put it that way. It is a great facility, but we need a new facility. From talking to the Minister earlier, I know that he has ideas. Maybe this is an area in which we can look at public-private solutions or other ways to get funding.

This is a matter that we all need to look at and focus on. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about what other things he may be able to do for South Antrim. I congratulate Ms Brown and the MP for South Antrim for raising the issue of cyberbullying and trying to tackle that side of life.

Mr Clarke: I, too, thank my South Antrim colleague for securing this debate. As she said in her opening remarks, I was also at that event at Dunadry Inn.

Pam mentioned the stigma, and one thing that struck me when I was there was the stigma attached to people acknowledging mental health problems. The owner of the hotel, John Mooney, as many will know, has been actively involved for many years in mental health issues through the Lions Club and its feathers initiative. John said that he was struck by the number of agencies that had taken the time that Saturday, when the community united to arrange the event, to attend and to produce leaflets. However, he said that there were so many leaflets that it was difficult to know which one to read. I say to the Minister that, with his Department and those he has influence on, there has to be a coming together to make the information easier to find.

One of the criticisms that day — it was dispelled — was that there were no services or that people were not aware of the services. Pam made a point about cyberspace and what is on it, and, unfortunately, some people focus on the negative aspects of cyberspace and not the positives. On that day, our colleague from Westminster and South Antrim, the Reverend William McCrea, said that people were explicit in telling other people how to commit suicide. That is alarming, and the sooner those situations are brought to an end, the better. However, John Mooney's comments about all the different leaflets struck me. He was not criticising the organisations. They are there, but they are not reaching the people who are hard to reach. Some of the recently bereaved families were in attendance that day and were amazed by the number of agencies that were there because they had not had contact with them.

There was a follow-on event on the Monday night in Parkhall school, and all the agencies were on display because it is a very topical issue in Antrim given, as my colleague said, the four deaths since October. They went there to promote themselves, but, unfortunately, the young people are not coming out to pick up that information.

However, it goes further than young people. I am a parent, and there is a responsibility on parents to look for the signs in their household and to be aware of the difficulties and challenges that young people face today whether in education, jobs or unemployment. They should even be aware of the company that their children keep and whatever forms of trouble they veer towards. Families are under pressure, and, unfortunately, tragic events have happened recently. More has to be done to educate

parents to look for the telltale signs of their children struggling, and to signpost them in the right direction.

Pam shared her story tonight, and, as I said that day, I suffered from a mental health problem 25 years ago. I am grateful for the good grace of my parents in signposting me to the health service. There was no internet at that time, and we did not have as many services as we have now. Although we can sometimes deny, after a death, that the services are there, they are there, but sometimes people find them difficult to get at.

The debate is more about education for everyone, not just those who are directly involved. Where people see the signs, there should be sharing of information, and they should be pointed in the right direction to the much needed services. I can relate back to my own story: if I did not seek the help, I would not have got help and I could be in the same place as many others are today. However, I sought and got help, and I am thankful for the help that I received at that time. The help is there for others, and I encourage them, if they feel in a low place, to seek the help to get them back on to the right path.

Mr Girvan: I thank my colleague for bringing the debate to the House. A lot of people have focused on what groups are out there to help. Unfortunately, the first people who normally deal with someone who is suffering from a mental illness, whether it is depression, bipolar disorder or another illness, are the family. The telltale signs are sometimes not so evident, because they are well hidden. There are very good GPs who are brilliant at signposting people and sending them in the right direction, but, unfortunately, a number of GPs, with the time that they have for their patients, come in through the door and the first thing that they reach for is the prescription pad. The number of people in our society who are living on tranquilisers, are basically existing on them and have built up a habit on them is phenomenal.

I come from a family that has been affected. In 1984, my father had a total nervous breakdown and had to spend almost one year in Holywell in Antrim. I can tell you that that is not a nice experience and that it has a major impact upon a family. Those sorts of real-life situations bring you back to reality, and, unfortunately, in our society today, there are many organisations that set themselves up to deal with and, supposedly, signpost people in the right direction. I appreciate that there are very good charities, but I also say that there are some that do not necessarily do what it says on the tin. That can be a problem. The joined-up approach is not necessarily there with some of those agencies.

We hear about young people taking their lives, some of them due to abuse of drugs which have actually created some of the paranoia and the problems that they have. Others are living through a lot of stress. Our current economic climate has been mentioned, and that can have an impact upon breadwinners in a family, who may try to hide some of their problems. Unfortunately, the ostrich mentality does not necessarily work. It will come back to bite them, and the rest of it will be seen.

We need to highlight the fact that employers also have a responsibility. A number of people say that MLAs do absolutely nothing. I guarantee you that 90%, and maybe 99%, of the people in this forum are hard-working and conscientious. The point of the matter is that the number

of hours that they work on a weekly basis, if all added together, can culminate in them having, or contribute to, depression, which many of them are probably living with and unaware of. Employers have a responsibility. You can cope with one wee bit of pressure, but, unless you deal with it, if you keep adding and building on that, it will eventually overflow. I have heard people talking about it being just like filling a jam jar and starting to pour it into a drum. You can take an awful lot, but eventually it will overflow. When that happens, it is too late.

We have to identify all of these issues. Bullying online seems to be one of the easiest ways that young people are getting attacked. There are people out there who can become faceless and target others. I have met young people who have been bullied online by so-called friends who put up a different name and work under somebody else, and therefore they come in as a friend and they use that to get back at them. This is a form of bullying that needs to be dealt with.

It is not only a health service issue. Danny Kinahan alluded to the issue in relation to young people with learning difficulties and — some of them — serious mental illnesses. Hillcroft school is one in particular. Unfortunately, once they reach the age of 19, there is nowhere for them to go. Some of those young people end up in what are called elderly people's homes, and that is not a suitable environment for people who are 19 or 20 years of age. We have to seriously look after young people like that.

This debate has to be brought forward. In south Antrim, we have some wonderful services. We have Tobernaveen, and we also have one that is connected to the Belfast Trust in our area: Muckamore. I appreciate that there are issues associated with Muckamore, and there is a reduction in the service that is provided —

7.30 pm

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give away?

Mr Girvan: I will surely.

Mr Clarke: The point is that, although we have those services and they are well established in our area, early intervention is needed to keep people out of such places. Therefore, it is important to get people early intervention, before they get to that stage.

Mr Girvan: That is the point. Another Member mentioned invest-to-save, and that is something that we have to consider seriously. A stitch in time can save nine. I know that, had a number of issues been dealt with earlier in my father's life, we would not have wasted many years as he tried to recover from what was a very serious mental illness. Early intervention is key to dealing with these matters, and so is having people in place who are properly qualified. Unfortunately, a number of GPs are not necessarily picking up on mental illness and signposting it early enough to ensure that people get proper treatment. However, I totally support and thank our Member for tabling this evening's Adjournment topic.

Mr McDevitt: I thank Ms Brown for giving the House the opportunity to discuss this issue, and I thank colleagues from South Antrim for the opportunity to join them in my capacity as health spokesperson. I will step in until such times as we can restore the obvious democratic imbalance in the constituency, and by that I mean that there is not an

SDLP MLA currently in a seat to speak directly on behalf of the people.

It has been interesting to hear colleagues' perspectives on mental health, and it has been interesting to listen to some of what is going on in south Antrim on the ground. Speaking from the perspective of the Health Committee, I can say that there are a couple of themes that jump out every time that we get together in the House or at Committee level to talk about mental health. The first is summed up by the idea that we have medicalised mental illness and that it is something for which there needs to be a medical solution. Mr Girvan, with whom I empathise — my father had a very similar life experience — captured what can happen. There is a determination to try to find a medical solution when, in fact, the problem is much bigger than just a pill or much bigger than just something that a GP or another generalist medical practitioner could ever possibly deal with. However, we still as a society end up, nearly by default, searching for and requiring the medical system or clinicians to deal with mental health.

We were reflecting on the Protect Life strategy last week in Committee. There are others in the House, to whom it is not appropriate to refer, who dedicate a lot of their professional life to that aspect of public policy, and I want to thank them for that. One of the things that struck us about the feedback on Protect Life is that, although the Department of Health is doing what it can, other Departments are doing very little. There is a sense that mental health is a Health problem — not just a medical problem, but, departmentally, just a Department of Health problem — when, in fact, we all know that it is a workplace problem and an education problem. Take Mr Clarke's reflection on his own brush with mental illness. If I look at him and take a guess, I might say that it was probably not too long after he left education. It may even have been when he was in education. It is also a problem that has an impact on other aspects of public policy not immediately obvious to us: housing, planning and even environmental policy. The factors that contribute to poor mental health are factors that can sometimes be traced back to development, lifestyle or the way in which we choose or choose not to get some proper exercise. They are all connected issues, yet as a Government we often fail to join up those dots and take responsibility for something as pervasive as mental health, leaving it to the Department of Health.

I wish to make a couple of other observations. One is a point that I always like to make when we are talking about mental health issues — particularly suicide — and that is the outstanding issues that we have with the coronial services. It takes a long time for suicides to be recorded as such, so there is basically a data lack. It is a couple of years before you know, and that has a big impact on perception. From time to time, we get the impression that there has been a spate of suicides in a particular community or in part of our region. Unfortunately, we cannot really validate that because the coronial service is so tardy in just saying, "Yes, that was, and that was not". We need to address that to move the debate beyond some of the perceptions and eliminate some of the myths that might or might not exist.

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr McDevitt: I will, of course.

Mr Clarke: I want to dispel that myth. I appreciate what you say about how a death can be recorded, but we are clear and certain that social media fed this in our area. I think that that is why my colleague proposed the debate. There have been four deaths, and the last two deaths were linked. I am only guessing, but I think that it was the vacuum of the third death that probably contributed to the fourth death, because a relationship had been formed. However, social media were feeding this and making people aware of the problem.

Mr McDevitt: I appreciate Mr Clarke's remarks. It is funny that he should bring that issue up because it is a huge factor and one that those in positions of expertise would caution us to move on very carefully. The Minister may reflect on that in his remarks. Things that appear to be great ideas, such as websites being established in tribute, can often become forums for everything that is exactly the opposite to the original intention. Therefore, what starts off as a good idea can often become a focus for future self-harm or can bring people together in a very negative way that can have fatal consequences. There is a huge amount of work to be done, from cyberbullying to social media, to understand the impact that they have on people, particularly young people, at times of crisis.

The community response has been one of the great good news stories in Northern Ireland in the past decade. Communities have been able to get together and organise themselves to try to identify the early warning signs. That is fantastic, and several Members — I remember Mr McLaughlin saying it most clearly — reminded us of the need to make sure that, when we allow communities to take more ownership of a problem such as mental illness or to promote mental well-being, they must have the capacity to do so. There is a great duty on us to ensure that, if we are giving money and support, we must make sure that that support is sustainable and that people are able to offer the right level and appropriate type of support to improve the situation and not accidentally make it worse.

It is always a pleasure to get the opportunity to talk about these issues, even if they are difficult and challenging. I pay tribute to the House because, in the past seven years, one thing that it has done very successfully is to blow the lid off some of the myths about mental illness to allow us all to speak honestly about the fact that it is much closer to every one of us than we would have been able to acknowledge a decade ago.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I thank the Member for proposing the debate and all Members for their valuable contributions. I hope to respond to Members on the points raised.

My Department has spent around £32 million over the past six years on suicide prevention. That investment supports a range of evidence-based interventions, which include counselling, bereavement support, the Lifeline service, awareness raising, the promotion of help seeking and next-day mental health appointments for people presenting at A&E in distress. Although we make that investment, we do it against a backdrop of a rising trend in the number of suicides over the past number of years.

Although south Antrim is not one of the areas with the highest rates of suicide, suicides have, nonetheless, increased in south Antrim. From 1997 to 2001, for example, there was an average of 5.9 deaths per 100,000

of the population. More recently, that has risen to over 11 deaths. That is almost a 100% increase in the rate of suicide over the past 12 to 14 years, and we should, rightly, be concerned about that. We need to be of the view that one suicide is one suicide too many. I understand that there have been nine suspected deaths by suicide in the south Antrim area since April 2012. The deaths of a number of young people over recent months have prompted some other young people locally to take action because they want to prevent further loss of life among their peers. I cannot commend them highly enough for that. The energy and commitment that they will bring to the efforts to tackle the issue can only be of benefit to people in the south Antrim area as they raise awareness and seek to help. Often, people affected by suicide wish to help so that others do not have to experience the loss that they have suffered.

One of the problems is knowing where to start and what services already exist. Mr Clarke, rightly, pointed out that there seemed to be a plethora of advice, support and help at the event. We need to be cognisant of the fact that an awful lot of people want to be helpful. However, sometimes, it can be a bit of a jungle. We need to be a bit more defined. The groups that we support need to have more connectivity, work more closely together and, perhaps, join with one another as opposed to having separate and distinct groups. However, I am heartened by the fact that the young people in this case have linked with existing groups and have held an event to identify what is available locally and how that could be better co-ordinated and promoted. Knowing where to turn for help is an important factor in keeping safe. Following the initial event, the northern area Protect Life co-ordination committee met to consider the next steps in response to the recent deaths and concern about the lack of awareness of services among the public. It was agreed to partially activate the northern area community response plan for intervening in suspected emerging suicide clusters, although I should say that, at this stage, there is no evidence of a suicide cluster in south Antrim. That has not been recognised at this point.

The community response plan provides for the implementation of a range of very local interventions aimed at reducing the risk of further suicides. The reason for activating the plan was to address the local community's perception that nothing was happening in response to the deaths. The initial focus of the response was to co-ordinate a number of local events being organised by local groups and improve communication in the services currently available to support those in the Antrim area. I believe that the young people who initially raised the issue have also set up a Facebook page called Antrim Together to provide information and signposting for others in the area. That is an excellent idea. Frequently, we hear negative stories about cyberbullying and about the promotion of suicide on the internet. As has, rightly, been said, the Member of Parliament for South Antrim has been leading on that issue at Westminster and doing good work. Antrim Together is an example of how the internet can be used for positive purposes. We would like there to be more use of social media in combating suicide rather than the appalling sites that promote it.

The Public Health Agency is charged with implementing the Protect Life suicide prevention strategy. The agency will contact the founders of Antrim Together to give them support in their endeavours. Other organisations are also

involved, such as the Youth Service and the Northern Trust, which will offer relevant training to the young people. The need for greater awareness of suicide prevention services in the area has clearly come to light. One of the agreed actions is that the Northern Trust, the PHA, Lifeline and Aware Defeat Depression will compile an information sheet for distribution to local public representatives, media and community organisations. The group will also explore other means of ensuring that information is accessible to young people and will work with Antrim Together. Mr McDevitt, rightly, pointed out the role of other Departments. The Northern Trust has done leading work with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development called maximising access to and uptake of grants, benefits and services in rural areas (MARA). This is outreach work aimed at people who live in rural communities. It deals with people who are, very often, isolated. That piece of work may be followed by others.

There are tremendous opportunities to work with other Departments. I have stated over and over again that I believe that every Minister has a responsibility for health. Although I front the Health Department, every other Minister has a role to play in ensuring that Northern Ireland's public have better health. Certainly, on suicide issues, there is considerable help that I can receive from other Departments that will save lives. I have said frequently that the approach to suicide prevention must be rooted in partnership working and maximising community involvement so that it is not just about government.

That is exactly the approach that the Public Health Agency has taken in the wider Northern Trust area, which, of course, covers the South Antrim parliamentary constituency. The recent developments in South Antrim need to be part of that wider approach, and I believe that proper arrangements are in place to ensure that that is the case, and that the whole South Antrim community will benefit from that.

In conclusion, I think that it is excellent that the group is responding. We need to work closely with, develop, and co-ordinate such groups so that we can maximise the number of well-meaning and good-intentioned people out there who can help us to drive down the scourge of suicide in our society.

Through that work, we in Northern Ireland can turn a corner and go from having a very high suicide rate to having one of the lowest in the world, making us a leading place that other parts of the world will look to. That is what we all need to aspire to, and I know that I have the support of the House in doing this. I will also give Members my support when they come to me and my Department on these issues, so that we can make the best possible case for the reduction of this awful scourge.

Adjourned at 7.46 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 28 January 2013

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership: Committee for Employment and Learning

Mr Speaker: The first item on the Order Paper is a motion on Committee membership. As with similar motions, it will be treated as a business motion, and, therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

*That Mr Alastair Ross replace Mr George Robinson as a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning.
— [Mr Weir.]*

Ministerial Statements

EU Fisheries Council: 18-19 December 2012

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, I wish to make a statement on the outcome of the negotiations that the Fisheries Council held in Brussels on 18 and 19 December, which determined fishing opportunities for 2013. Members will find in the annex to my statement a map of fishing areas, a summary of the main total allowable catches (TACs) and quotas of interest to the local fleet and a provisional summary of the landings made into the County Down ports by the fleet in 2012.

My fellow Fisheries Ministers Richard Benyon, Richard Lochhead and Alun Davies and I, following consultation with our respective industry representatives, agreed that our first order negotiating priorities for the Council would be securing a freeze in the annual effort reductions applied under the cod recovery plan and a mechanism that would allow for a rollover in the North Sea cod TAC; ensuring that fishing opportunities for area VII nephrops were at least maintained at 2012 levels; resisting the proposed cut for Celtic Sea haddock in area VIIb; supporting the realignment of the TACs for areas IV and VI megrim but securing more flexibility in the transitional arrangements; ensuring that the reduction in the haddock TAC for area VI followed the management plan; removing unnecessary obstacles and disincentives to the successful catch quota schemes, such as the prohibition on quota leasing to vessels participating in the scheme, which had been proposed by the Commission; and, in the absence of robust scientific data, Ministers wanted to resist an overly precautionary approach to the so-called data-poor stocks and take them on a case-by-case basis. In developing our priorities, fisheries Ministers applied three core principles: science, by making use of all the available information and scientific advice in setting fishing opportunities; sustainability, by moving towards maximum sustainable yield by 2015 where possible; and reducing discards, by ensuring that the TAC and effort decisions that we take continue to support the work under way to eliminate discards from our fisheries.

Members may recall that discussions on effort control dominated Council in December 2011. Fisheries Ministers made important commitments to improve the selectivity of their fisheries and to reduce their impact on vulnerable cod stocks. Our negotiating approach then was successful in getting the Commission to accept our interpretation of the way that member states could buy back days at sea if their

fleets complied with measures to reduce cod mortality. Those could include technical measures, such as the use of more selective fishing gears, or management measures to avoid fishing in areas where there are concentrations of juvenile cod or places where cod spawning happens.

The cod plan was a key issue on the agenda of the December 2012 Council. Member states, the Commission, its scientific advisers and the fishing industry all recognise that the current cod recovery plan has serious flaws and urgently needs changed, particularly in relation to the automatic year-on-year reductions in effort required under the plan. Those reductions are counterproductive, as they do not support sustainability objectives and threaten the viability of fishing fleets.

Despite the assurances that Ministers were given at Council in 2011, the Commission failed to bring forward a replacement cod plan. It did, however, make proposals for a regulation to amend the plan last September. That amendment covered several elements, such as providing more flexibility to set TACs in data-poor conditions, allowing Council to freeze effort and strengthen measures to address discards. However, because of ongoing difficulties between the European institutions, it had no prospect of being agreed in time for 2013.

Fisheries Ministers from member states that have fishing opportunities in the cod recovery zone, which includes the Irish Sea, the west of Scotland and the North Sea, have pressed hard for reform of the cod plan. Ahead of the Council, the presidency brought forward two proposals: one to be adopted under the normal process of codecision with the European Parliament and another to be agreed by the Council of Ministers.

The regulation that Council considered proposed to amend articles 9 and 12 of the cod recovery plan relating to the fixing of the TACs for cod stocks in the cod recovery zone and of the allowable fishing effort. The task for Council was, therefore, to reach a political agreement on the presidency's proposed amendment to the current cod recovery plan and to approve a letter to be sent to the European Parliament informing it of that agreement.

It was important to get a resolution to the effort problem, and, in the circumstances, the only available remedy was to secure agreement to the presidency proposal. However, it was recognised that that could strain relations in the European Parliament and have implications for the rest of the cod plan package and, more widely, for other legislative proposals subject to codecision, including common fisheries policy (CFP) reform. I had concerns that the matter would occupy a considerable period of time, leaving less time for negotiations on TACs and quotas. In the event, Ministers came to a quick agreement on the presidency proposal, which secured a freeze on fishing effort at the levels agreed in December 2011. That is in the interests of the cod stocks and the viability of our fishing fleets that work in the cod recovery zone.

I now turn to the outcomes for the fish stocks that are of interest to our local fleet. Negotiations on TACs and quotas began on the afternoon of Wednesday 18 December with a series of trilateral talks between member states, the Commission and the presidency. The first compromise proposal was presented on the afternoon of 19 December, and a second compromise at 4.30 am on 20 December. Negotiations were not concluded until nearly 7.00 am.

That was an unsatisfactory process, but it was a complex negotiation, and, as with other member states, we were holding out for a better deal.

My number one priority was area VII nephrops or prawns. Members will be aware of the importance of that stock for our local fleet and the fish-processing sector, which is almost totally dependent on it. Preliminary figures for 2012 indicate that our fleet landed in local ports some 7,165 tons of prawns, worth approximately £16.6 million. The Commission's initial proposal had been for a cut of 12%. At the trilateral talks, I argued that the TAC had to take full account of the fishing patterns of member states that have an interest in that stock. Of course, the Commission is fully aware that that has been the practice for many years.

Some months before Council, I supported a rollover in the TAC, which would have meant maintaining fishing opportunities for 2013 at the same level as in 2012. However, further scientific evidence made available by the South's Marine Institute led to the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) revising its catch advice in November 2012. These data indicated that nephrops stocks throughout area VII were being fished sustainably and that the sum of the catch advice for the various functional units in area VII was some 6% better than was the position last year.

Members will be aware that my Department, its scientists and the local industry have been working together to introduce more selective gears to ensure that cod catches are less than 1.5% and to achieve a significant reduction in other unwanted catches. It was, therefore, important that I secured improved fishing opportunities for prawns to encourage our local industry to continue the process of continuous improvement in gear selectivity and to help us to achieve the ambition of having as clean a nephrops fishery as possible. The robust scientific advice enabled me to make a strong case for the TAC to increase by a similar 6% for 2013. That objective was achieved, but only at the final plenary session, when the Commission agreed to move from its compromise position of a rollover to an increase of 6%. That increase was fully justified and means that there is a sustainable supply to our local fish-processing businesses, which have sales in excess of £70 million and employ over 550 workers. Also important to our fleet is the nephrops stock in the west of Scotland, where some 2,500 tons are taken by our vessels. The scientific advice published in June indicated that the stock was in good condition, and ICES catch advice was for an increase in the TAC of 18%. That was reflected in the final agreement. This is further good news for our local fishing fleet.

In relation to other Irish Sea stocks, following my statement last year, a number of Members expressed concern about the 10% cut that was imposed on Irish Sea herring. This happened because the Commission regarded the stock as data-poor due to the absence of a full analytical stock assessment. This was a completely arbitrary figure that had no scientific basis. The herring stock was subsequently benchmarked in February 2012, and a full assessment became available. As a result and following agreement with our industry and the South, which has a share of this stock, I secured a deal with the Commission last summer to uplift the 2012 TAC to 5,280 tons and to set the 2013 TAC at 4,993 tons. There were therefore no discussions at Council last December on the herring TAC.

Where there is good scientific advice and evidence that fishing levels are sustainable, I will argue that the TACs should be maintained or increased as appropriate. However, for some stocks, such as Irish Sea haddock, there is insufficient data for a full analytical assessment, and the Commission's policy is to propose cuts. Fellow fisheries Ministers and I believe that, in such circumstances, it is important to consider all the available data before coming to a decision about fishing opportunities and that it is counterproductive to simply take an arbitrary slice off the TAC, as the Commission seems inclined to do. Throughout the negotiations, we pressed this point about data-poor stocks at trilateral meetings and in written submissions. For Irish Sea haddock, the original 20% proposed reduction was revised to a 5% reduction. Sole and whiting were cut by 36% and 5% respectively, however those stocks are not of economic importance to the local fleet. The TAC for Irish Sea plaice is unchanged. All scientific evidence indicates that Irish Sea cod remains in poor condition, and this stock closed with a 25% reduction in the TAC. However, there is still ongoing correspondence with the Commission about that because the regulation to change the cod plan, which Ministers agreed, should have meant a decrease of 20%.

The Clyde herring quota has still to be decided, and this will fall to Britain and to the North of Ireland under arrangements that allow member states to determine the quota if the entire stock lies within a member state's waters. Area VII monkfish was reduced by 5%, compared with the 20% originally proposed, and the fishing opportunities for hake in area VI and area VII are unchanged. Members can see the impact of these TAC movements in tonnage in the summary that is provided in the annex to my statement.

I appreciate the opportunity to bring Members up to date on the outcome of the 2012 fisheries negotiations, as far as they affect our local fleet. I put on record my thanks to my colleagues Richard Benyon in DEFRA, Richard Lochhead in the Scottish Government, Alun Davies in the Welsh Assembly and Simon Coveney in the South for their strong support throughout the negotiations.

Mr Byrne (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): First, I apologise for the Chairman, who cannot be here; he has an engagement in Ballymena.

I thank the Minister for her statement updating the House on the recent fisheries negotiations. The prawn catch is of vital importance to the Northern Ireland fishing fleet, and the 6% increase is to be welcomed. However, there are some long-term concerns regarding the gear used by the prawn fleet. Will the Minister update us on what is happening in the negotiations about the type of gear that can be used in the future? Scotland managed to get an 18% increase in its allowable catch. Given the scientific data, why did Scotland get such preferential treatment against our 6%? Lastly, what is the current situation regarding the herring quota for Northern Ireland in the UK context?

12.15 pm

Mrs O'Neill: I am happy to update the Member on the highly selective gear and to pick up on the issue of Scotland. All the increases I talked about in the statement came about because of having strong, solid scientific

evidence to back up the case. The scientific evidence we have for the area that we fish — area VII — supported a 6% increase. That is how we were able to secure that, which is obviously a very positive opportunity for the local fleeting fleet and rewards them for taking positive steps to deal with the discards issue by taking on the highly selective gear.

Last year, I made a commitment to the Commission that our prawn fleet would fish with gears capable of achieving exemption from the cod recovery regime. Exemption requires vessels to use highly selective gears all the time. Although we have yet to gather enough data to exempt the gears we use, we must use the gears all the time to honour the commitment that was made. There will be a new obligation to land all catches that will be included in the reformed common fisheries policy. It is designed to address the problem of discarding fish. Fish are usually discarded because there is no quota, they are below the minimum landing size or there is no market for them. So it is in everybody's interest that we get to a position where we have the cleanest prawn fishery possible. The industry is working hard to make sure that the selective gear being used is the best possible. Trials will continue in the early part of this year, and we continue to work with the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF), the science body in Europe, to make sure that it is content with the selective gear that our industry uses.

The other point was on the herring quota. As I said in the statement, we were able to secure agreement based, again, on solid scientific evidence during the year and agree the tonnage, so that was not discussed at the December Council. However, the industry was very much involved in the discussions on setting the quota for last year and this year, which happened, I think, around June last year.

Mr Irwin: You said in your statement that the Commission, scientific advisers and the fishing industry all recognise that the current cod recovery plan has serious flaws. Will the Minister assure the House that she will continue to press for a cod recovery plan that is sustainable and ensures the viability of our fishing fleet?

Mrs O'Neill: I can absolutely give that assurance. As I said in the statement, it is widely recognised that the plan has failed, given the fact that it has been in place for quite a number of years and there has been no improvement in stock levels of cod. There is no doubt about it: cod is in a very poor state. We have to take action to remedy that. We need to move to a position where we have more of a mixed fishery, so our local fleet is not dependent on one type of fish. Any changes that are necessary will be achieved through the cod recovery plan. Two regulations are expected to come forward in the early part of the year. CFP negotiations may overtake those, but I will continue to push for improvements in the plan.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she tell us when a long-term management plan for Irish Sea herring will be included?

Mrs O'Neill: For Irish Sea herring, we have the deal struck in the middle of last year on the basis of ICES advice. However, we need to look towards a longer-term management plan in general for all stocks. For herring in particular, the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute

is working with the industry, and the Pelagic Regional Advisory Council is going to draft a plan. It is hoped that that will be presented to the Commission this year. However, all those management plans are currently being held up by an interinstitutional dispute between the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament about who has legislative competence to approve them. I cannot give an estimate of the introduction of the herring plans until that dispute is resolved. As I said, plans are expected to come forward at some stage this year.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for her statement and welcome much that she has said. Given that the industry has welcomed the majority of what the Minister has said and will have greater catching opportunities in 2013, will the Minister give a commitment that, in reviewing the European Fisheries Fund (EFF), she will commit to providing additional assistance to an industry that has the potential to expand?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, the industry has welcomed the position that we achieved at the December Fisheries Council. It rewards the industry for the hard work it has taken forward in moving towards highly selective gear. It has been a difficult year in that there have been high operating costs for our fishing industry. However, it is getting good prices, so that, in a way, balances it out. We have opportunities under the EFF to ensure that we look after and protect the sustainability of our local fishing communities. We will continue to do that and make sure that the funds are best directed towards those communities. There are groups in place that look at the wider area, and they will continue to do that in the time ahead.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the statement. I sympathise with the Minister and her colleagues, who had to hang around until 4.30 am and then until 7.00 am before they reached agreement.

The Minister said:

"Some months before Council, I supported a rollover in the TAC".

Given the success that the Minister had in coming up with the 6% increase, if there was continuous involvement, even at this moment in time, would the Minister hope that, come next year, you would have an increase of even more than 6% in order to sustain and, indeed, bring back the proud tradition that we have in the fishing industry in Northern Ireland?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. I suppose the obvious answer is that we will continue to strengthen our science. Where we have science to back up our case, we will continue to make that case to the Commission in Europe. The reason why we were able to strongly push and advocate the 6% increase was the new science that we had. As we continue to work in partnership with Simon Coveney in the South and with Scotland, Wales and England, there is a lot more potential to be explored for our local industry. An increase of 6% makes a lot of difference to the local industry. Every year that we go out there we will go out with the intention of getting the very best deal for the local industry.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for her statement. There were references to poor data. Is the Minister not concerned that the Commission is making unfair and

unbalanced decisions based on poor data? Whose responsibility is it to make sure that the data is correct, and what confidence does she have that it will be correct in the future?

Mrs O'Neill: The Commission makes all its decisions firmly on the basis of the scientific evidence. We have very strong evidence and continually argue that point with the Commission. AFBI and our science people here do great work and have come up with sound scientific arguments to support our case when we go out to Brussels. However, we get into a debate about the science when we meet the science experts from Brussels, and that is what they rely on. Our job is to make sure that we impress on them how effective our science is and that we can stand over the science that we present. We will continue to do that. We will probably always have that battle between local science and the Brussels-based STECF. We will continue to have that battle, but, if we are able to stand over the evidence that we produce, that puts us in a strong position.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement and the outcome of the 2012 fishing negotiations, bearing in mind that 95% of our fishing fleet fishes for prawns and was faced with the threat of a proposed cut of some 12% in the quota. The successful negotiation of a 6% increase comes as a massive boost to our fishing industry. Will the Minister outline whether there are likely to be any further proposals for the management of nephrops next year?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. I suppose the Commission may again propose spatial management arrangements for the nephrops stock. It had intended to do so last year, because it made a commitment to do so in the 2012 TAC and quota regulation, but that work had to be set aside due to other priorities. We need to look carefully at any proposals that emerge, because the arrangements brought forward in 2010 were totally unacceptable in a number of respects. We will of course have to consult our local industry, make sure that we take on board all the formal views of that industry and then respond to the Commission. We will see how it develops from there.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her statement. It appears that the cod recovery plan has been fraught with various difficulties from other member states and various stakeholders. I note that the Minister said:

"the only available remedy was to secure agreement to the presidency proposal."

Can the Minister elaborate a little more on the implications that that agreement may have for the rest of the cod recovery plan?

Mrs O'Neill: While recognising that the plan was completely flawed and given the fact that we are still sitting in a data-poor situation for cod, it is very evident to us that there is a lot of unexplained mortality when it comes to cod. I do not think that the Commission has even got to the bottom of why that is and come up with any robust arguments. The two proposed changes that were to come forward came too late. They will certainly improve the situation, although they will not sort everything out, but the two regulations that came forward came too late in terms of codecision-making in Europe, getting it through

the Parliament and getting it through the Commission. So, we hope that something will come forward in the early part of this year. However, as I said, the CFP negotiations will maybe take precedence over that. We will continue to push for changes to the cod recovery plan and monitor the situation as the Commission comes forward with additional regulations and proposals. The plan simply does not work at the moment.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for her statement. She said several times that changes needed to be made. Following the Prime Minister's recent welcome announcement that he is to seek a renegotiation of powers between the UK and Brussels, does the Minister agree that the deeply flawed CFP needs to be significantly improved or dropped and replaced with something new?

Mrs O'Neill: I am glad to see that the UUP is on board with the DUP position that was put forward by Diane Dodds before December. Any such decision would have to be taken at member state level, so there would have to be a lot of consultation. There will be strong arguments for and against pulling out of the CFP, and the Member will be aware of those. I am sure that he has heard that from the industry. However, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to withdraw from the CFP without withdrawing from the entire EU. That would be unwise, given the large amount of funding — £300 million — put into the agricultural community. I do not know whether the Member is advocating that that should be the case and we should withdraw that support from farmers. We need to be very careful about that. The decision will be taken after a lot of consultation, but it will be taken at member state level.

Mr McAleer: What proportion of Irish Sea fish stocks is being fished sustainably? Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs O'Neill: We are always trying to move to a position where all our stocks, because they are all at different levels, are fished at the maximum sustainable level. That means that, where stocks are fished, enough are left to support the industry in the future.

The state of each stock varies, but the stocks that are most important to our fleet, particularly prawns and Irish Sea herring, are fished at sustainable levels. Other stocks, such as cod and whiting, are still below the required levels, and continued action needs to be taken to reduce the fish mortality of those stocks to the lowest possible level.

The Irish Sea cod stock remains below precautionary limits. Fishing mortality is uncertain, and total mortality remains very high. As I said, the cod recovery plan that is in operation provides for an annual decrease in the TAC, but a range of cod conservation measures need to be taken until the stock recovers.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for her statement. I welcome the increase in the prawn quota, which is good news for Kilkeel, Portavogie and Ardglass, but I would still express caution about the sustainable supply for the fish processors; they need more fish.

The Minister has said "data-poor" quite a lot when talking about the analysis. What cognisance is taken of the fishing industry, particularly the fishermen who have spent their life out at sea, when it comes to the determination of the likes of cod stocks?

Mrs O'Neill: There has always been a difference between what the science says and what the fishermen feel. There

will always be that battle. All fishermen recognise that cod stocks are in a poor state. They, perhaps, do not support the view that it is in as poor a state as the science suggests. I will continue to work with the industry. We have a sentinel fishery in place — a scientific fishery, really — in which the fishermen were involved. They came back and gave me the science and the figures that they had gathered. We will continue to work with the fishing industry because I believe in taking its views on board. Those are the people who are out exploring all the fishing opportunities day and daily. It is about getting a balance. It is about taking on board what the fishermen are saying and listening to the science as well. We will continue to do that. We have some more plans for this year to further explore the sentinel fishery, and I will be happy to update the House when more results are available.

Mr Wells: The Minister indicated her dissatisfaction with the way in which fisheries policies are determined in Brussels. She tells us about 7.00 am deadlines and boiler house-type atmospheres. What are she and her fellow UK Ministers doing to stop this ridiculous way of determining the livelihoods of fishermen in County Down? There must be a better way than spending the week leading up to Christmas in that type of atmosphere, where mistakes are bound to be made.

Mrs O'Neill: I agree totally with the Member. Last year, I called it the "December dance". It is ridiculous to be sitting, year on year, determining the following year's quotas for the fishing industry. It is particularly difficult for the industry, as it cannot plan beyond that year because it does not know what the quotas will be. My colleagues in England, Scotland and Wales, Simon Coveney in the South and I continually make the same argument.

We hoped that it would be addressed under the CFP, but unfortunately that was not the case. We are arguing very strongly for regionalisation under the CFP, which I believe will give us a bit more control in setting the future priorities for our industry.

12.30 pm

We continue to lobby the Commission, and we make the arguments very strongly. It is the Commission that decides when we have the negotiation. Unfortunately, we have to be out there and involved in the discussions the whole week before Christmas. It goes down to the wall, but I assure the Member and the industry that we are very alert, regardless of whether it is 7.00 am and we have been negotiating all night. We are very alert to the facts and the figures. We are making sure that our industry's needs are well-reflected and that we get the best possible deal.

Mr Allister: I will ask the Minister to explain one specific of her statement. If I understand it correctly, she indicates that the presidency proposal on the cod plan, which we are told was agreed, would have resulted in capping any reduction in cod at 20%, yet the outworking is a 25% reduction. Will she explain how she squares that circle and how those two things sit together? Does she look forward to the day when the people of this United Kingdom decide, in an in-out referendum, that they are better off out of the EU and that we should set our own fishing policy according to our own needs and not according to Brussels diktat?

Mrs O'Neill: The Commission's original proposal was for a cut of 25%, as I said in the statement. That was on the

basis of the original cod plan. However, representations were then made to the Commission during the Council to point out that the cut should be reduced to 20% in keeping with the amendment made to article 9 of the plan, which Ministers had agreed on the day of the Council. Despite this being raised on two occasions at the final plenary session, the Commission absolutely refused to move on it. Officials have also been in communication with the Commission post-Council.

We await the outcome of that process. We dispute the fact that it was 25% as opposed to 20%. If that proves successful, an in-year amendment will be made to the TAC and quota regulations. We hope that we will be able to get that changed. We were not the only people who were sitting with that understanding, so we expect that it will be changed.

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

The Member can have his own personal view about the CFP and pulling out of the EU. I raised the issue with Robin Swann earlier. It is not a decision that should be taken lightly because of the impact that it will have on local agriculture and the wider rural community and the fishing community. The Member may be advocating pulling out, but, personally, I would not want to be in the position of doing that because of the loss that there would be to the local industry: £300 million to the agriculture community and £500 million to the rural development programme. Those are opportunities that are very much favoured and welcomed by local people. The Member can explain that to the electorate.

Mr McNarry: Is the Minister aware of the current Sainsbury's promotion of alternative tasty fish, partly to introduce new fish to the public and partly to help with the preservation of popular fish stocks? If she is, will she consider adding to that supermarket initiative by recommending fish alternatives to help the industry as a whole?

Mrs O'Neill: I am aware of it. On Friday, I attended Sainsbury's to help launch that promotion. It is all about encouraging people to look at eating alternative fish, as opposed to the cod and salmon that people traditionally buy. It is about encouraging people to look at mussels, herring, mackerel and other types of fish. It is a fantastic project that Sainsbury's is taking forward. I hope that it helps people to explore other fish. Sainsbury's is giving out free samples, so I encourage people to avail themselves of those when they can.

North/South Ministerial Council: Aquaculture and Marine

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): A Cheann Comhairle, I begin by sending my deepest condolences to the family of Thomas Sloan, who died last week. Thomas was from Kilkeel, and he was our party's representative on the Loughs Agency board. He was a long-standing party member and an active member of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission board's aquaculture and shell fishery subcommittee. He will be sadly missed by his wife Eileen and stepchildren Brian and Bronagh. I extend my sympathies to the family.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement in compliance with Section 52 of the 1998 Act regarding the recent meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in aquaculture and marine sectoral format. The meeting was held in the NSMC joint secretariat offices in Armagh on Wednesday 12 December 2012. The Executive were represented by Nelson McCausland and myself. The Irish Government were represented by the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Pat Rabbitte TD. The statement has been agreed with Minister McCausland, and I am making it on behalf of us both.

Minister Rabbitte informed the council that they are hosting the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organization's (NASCO) annual meeting in Drogheda in June 2013. NASCO is an international organisation that was established by an intergovernmental convention in 1984. The objective of NASCO is to conserve, restore, enhance and rationally manage Atlantic salmon through international co-operation, taking account of the best available scientific information. Ministers and colleagues from the sectoral area will be invited to participate.

We noted that the Loughs Agency CEO, Derick Anderson, is unwell and so approved the appointment of John Pollock as acting CEO. We sent our best wishes to Derick for a speedy recovery.

Liz Ashton of Queen's University gave a presentation on the Loughs Agency-led IBIS project, which is researching the native oyster fishery in Lough Foyle. Jennifer Dodd of Glasgow University then gave a presentation on the impact of river barriers on the migration of Atlantic salmon through the Foyle catchment. We noted the valuable contribution those research projects will make to the management and development of those important fisheries and as reference work for application elsewhere. We also noted the potential for an event, such as a Foyle oyster festival, following on, perhaps, from the legacy of Derry City of Culture 2013.

We received a progress report on the work of the Loughs Agency from its chairperson, Winston Patterson, and the acting chief executive, John Pollock. We welcomed the reduction in violent incidents against Loughs Agency fishery protection staff, with no significant issues occurring since the last meeting. Recent custodial sentences for two offenders were also noted. We noted the agency's engagement with the Lough Foyle native oyster fishermen, including a meeting to present the IBIS project on the native oyster fishery and to discuss restoration works and ongoing trials.

We welcomed the agency's work with the City of Culture offices, with a view to incorporating the River Foyle into the festivities planned for 2013. We also noted the latest position on the survival of Atlantic salmon in the Foyle and Carlingford catchments and the agency's ongoing conservation and protection efforts.

We noted that the Loughs Agency has prepared a draft business plan for 2013, pending receipt of further guidance from the Finance Departments. We noted the finalisation of an economic appraisal of the options to regularise pay and pension arrangements in the Loughs Agency and the recommendation that the agency takes the necessary steps to join the North/South pension scheme. Legal and financial implications are being considered by sponsor and Finance Departments in the context of the wider review and the reform of public sector pensions, North and South. Recommendations will be brought to a future NSMC aquaculture and marine meeting for approval.

We approved two sets of regulations: the Foyle Area and Carlingford Area (Angling) (Amendment) Regulations 2012 and the subsequent Foyle Area (Control of Fishing) (Amendment) Regulations 2012. Those amendments are a response to requests from angling stakeholders to facilitate angling methods where catch-and-release applies to salmon fishing and in Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) waters in the Loughs Agency's jurisdiction.

We welcomed progress by the agency in developing an aquaculture management agreement with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM). We noted in particular the aim to have an overarching operational agreement between the agency and other agencies with technical responsibilities that relate to aquaculture licensing in the Foyle and Carlingford areas that are in place during 2013 to enable aquaculture licensing by the Loughs Agency in Lough Foyle to progress.

We approved the appointment of Laurence Arbuckle to the board of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission. Mr Arbuckle succeeds Tarlach O Crosain, and we expressed our appreciation to Mr O Crosain for his significant contribution to the board. That appreciation has since been provided in writing to Tarlach on behalf of Ministers by our joint secretariat.

Finally, we agreed to meet again in aquaculture and marine format in March 2013. Go raibh mile maith agat.

Mr Byrne (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): I welcome the Minister's statement, but I have to say that I am disappointed by its lack of content and detail. That does not do the North/South Ministerial Council's reputation any good when it comes to detail and clarity.

The statement refers to a progress report on the work of the Loughs Agency, but there is nothing about what that progress report says. Will the Minister give us the highlights of the report? Like the Minister, I welcome the reduction in the number of violent incidents against Loughs Agency staff and hope that there is no resurgence in the coming fishing season. Will she expand on the recent custodial sentences that she mentioned were given to two offenders?

The Minister told us that the meeting noted:

"the latest position on the survival of Atlantic salmon in the Foyle and Carlingford catchments".

Will she update us on whether the position of salmon in the Carlingford and Foyle areas is improving?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. There are a number of questions there. On the substance and detail of the statement, I, like the Member, support the inclusion of other areas of work. I want an expansion in the work of the North/South Ministerial Council's bodies. The Member will be aware that, as a result of the St Andrews discussions, there was to be discussion on how we can expand those groups. I see a lot more potential, not just in this body but in other bodies, for expansion of the work. We look forward to that in the time ahead.

The Member asked about assaults on staff. I am happy to note that there have not been any instances since the last meeting. That can sometimes be because of the time of year. This is not the time of year for salmon fishing and poaching incidents. Since the last meeting took place, the agency has reported seizures for 2012 of 76 fishing rods, 136 nets, 16 boats and two vehicles. It also reported that 75 offenders have been identified and that 50 cases are in preparation. That shows the seriousness of the issue of assaults on staff who are out doing their work, and we look forward to the courts dealing with those cases. Since the July meeting, two men have been convicted of poaching and assaulting fisheries officers, and they received custodial sentences in Letterkenny District Court. Others have received sentences ranging from fines to community service.

The meeting received a general update on the work of the Loughs Agency, but I am very happy to provide the agency's report to the Member. It was just about the general operational issues of the Loughs Agency, particularly the attacks on staff, work on the IBIS project and all the other marine tourism strategy work that is being taken forward.

Mr Irwin: The Minister's statement touches on the survival of Atlantic salmon in the Foyle and Carlingford catchment areas. Will she elaborate on that? I agree with the Deputy Chair of the Committee that some of the information is quite vague.

Mrs O'Neill: It is not for me to speak for the other Member, but I think that he meant that there was a much greater remit to expand the work of North/South bodies. I am glad that the DUP is on board with that one.

I think that the Member is asking, given the low salmon counts in rivers in the Foyle area in recent years despite the suspension of commercial fisheries, what action the agency has taken to protect salmon. It has taken a number of measures on angling to maximise the conservation of salmon stocks, including three catch-and-release declarations under the Foyle area regulations 2010.

The agency has also undertaken extensive consultation with the fishery owners, angling clubs and associations and other interests to, in all cases, encourage them to maximise the conservation of fish that do not make it back into the rivers. The initial issue of carcass tags to anglers has been restricted to one blue and five black. Blue carcass tags are issued between January and the end of May each year for the spring salmon run, and black carcass tags are issued from June to the end of the season for the summer grilse.

A topic being considered under the IBIS project is salmon migration in the Foyle. The agency hopes that that will help to inform salmon fishery management and ensure that fishing opportunities are consistent with achieving the objectives of the water framework, the habitats directive and the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organization principles.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she give us some information on the new interim CEO?

Mrs O'Neill: Absolutely. The Loughs Agency CEO, Derick Anderson, has advised the board of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission that he is likely to be on sick leave for the foreseeable future. To ensure the continued effective operation of the agency, the board invited applicants from within the Loughs Agency directorships to temporarily fill the position. John Pollock was successful in his application to the board subject to the approval of the NSMC, which proposed his appointment as acting CEO until Mr Anderson returns from sick leave. We did that at the meeting, and John Pollock is now in place. In line with the Loughs Agency's financial memorandum, we needed to have someone in place.

Mrs Dobson: I also thank the Minister for her statement. I note that the Loughs Agency has prepared a draft business plan ahead of receiving guidance from the Finance Departments. Does the Minister endorse the agency's approach of creating a costed business plan ahead of making important decisions?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said in the statement, we await approval from the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), and I am not in a position, even at this stage, to provide a timeline for when that will happen. The Loughs Agency has prepared a draft business plan for 2013, but it cannot be finalised until the 2013 business plan and budget guidance have been issued by the two Finance Departments. I am led to believe that that will happen within the next two weeks.

12.45 pm

However, I assure the Member that the Loughs Agency is accountable to the NSMC. Its financial management appears to be prudent, and it regularly gives us updates at the meetings and discusses its plans for the time ahead. As sponsor Departments, we have our role to play in the scrutiny of that work, and we will continue to do that. So, I do not think that there is any issue with the planning or with the financial decisions that are being taken.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her statement. She said that the agency has been working with the City of Culture office in Derry to incorporate the River Foyle. We know of the excellent contribution that the City of Culture started off with last week through the 'Sons and Daughters' event. Can the Minister give any indication of what is being or has been planned for the River Foyle in the continuation of the 2013 City of Culture year?

Mrs O'Neill: Absolutely. The agency has been liaising with the City of Culture offices on the events that have been planned for this year, and we are very keen to ensure that the River Foyle is included in all the festivities. By talking to stakeholders and the interested groups, the Loughs Agency is looking at innovative ways in which we can do that. The agency wants to encourage use of the river and

intends to provide support for a series of maritime tourism and angling events that will coincide with and complement the City of Culture events plan. That will be facilitated through our sustainable development funding programme for 2013.

As I mentioned, we had discussion at the meeting about the potential for an event that is linked to the Loughs Agency's work with local fisherman. There is a lot of scope for and potential in some sort of oyster festival, which could become a regular event. If that were successful, I think that it would be very positive for that local industry in Derry and for the wider tourism potential. So, it benefits the tourism end of things and the people who are involved in catching oysters.

Mr Clarke: To correct the Minister, my colleague's suggestion was that the shortness of her statement proves how inefficient and what a waste of resources the North/South Ministerial Council meetings are. The statement contains only words such as "noted", "finally" and "welcomed" and no substance on what work is being done. What assurances can the Minister give me that they will maybe cancel the meeting in March and wait until they get something useful to meet about for the progression of the fishing industry in Northern Ireland?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member must have taken my point very sorely to have felt the need to get up and defend his party's position. I am happy to answer any questions. You do not seem to have come forward with anything new. I am very happy to take any question from the Member on any of these issues. I think that there is quite a scope of work, which I included in the statement. I will answer questions from Members who need any further clarification. My office is on the first floor, if the Member wants to come along and talk about it some more.

I think that a lot of the work that is going on is very important. The Loughs Agency's work is key to the Foyle and Carlingford catchment areas. We need to be very firm on the issue of ongoing attacks on staff, and we need to work together across the island on that issue. We have been able to do that and have had some success, which, again, is in the statement. The potential of the City of Culture year, the business plan, the regulations that have to come forward, the licensing of the Foyle and Carlingford catchment areas and salmon conservation are all valid issues and warrant discussion at this meeting. We will continue to do that. The Member is part of this institution, which is linked to the Good Friday Agreement, as is the NSMC. It will continue to meet, regardless of the Member's views.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Similar to the Minister, I pay tribute to Thomas Sloan, who sadly passed away last week. Thomas was a friend and a colleague, and he represented the party with great distinction on the Loughs Agency. Can the Minister give an update on some of the agency's other INTERREG projects?

Mrs O'Neill: The Loughs Agency is the lead agency in the IBIS project, and it partners with the University of Glasgow and Queen's University in Belfast. It is funded through INTERREG IVa, and it is now well under way, given that it has completed the first year of its programme, which runs until June 2015. We have had a full complement of 12 three-year PhD students, and half the 34 one-year masters

students are now in post also. The remaining 17 of the one-year studentships that are due to complete research in the remaining 13 months of the project are to be appointed over the coming 18 months.

Two knowledge-transfer workshops were held at the Queen's University marine lab in Portaferry in September 2012, where 68 delegates explored current issues in shellfish management and regulations. At the Four Seasons Hotel in Carlingford in November, over 30 delegates examined the contribution made by the small streams to trout and sea trout populations. The latter workshop was organised jointly with the Atlantic Salmon Trust. The foundation course, Identifying Freshwater Invertebrates, was delivered by the Freshwater Biological Association, and it completed its third cycle in the IBIS programme of continuing professional development with over 30 attendees trained across two sessions, one in Scotland and one in Derry. Encouraging progress was made in the intense first full summer session of fieldwork, mostly in the Lough Foyle and Carlingford lough areas. Fieldwork for the native oyster PhD also commenced over the summer, with a survey of the spawning activity of oysters in Lough Foyle.

I hope that that gives the Member a flavour of the IBIS project. The Life project is also progressing. We are very pleased with the progress that we have had with both groups and there is so much potential for all those INTERREG projects to be taken forward.

Mr Buchanan: I do not welcome the statement because, like my party colleagues, I am critical of it and its lack of content. I question the value of the North/South meetings.

I ask the Minister about the salmon in the Foyle. The survival of Atlantic salmon in the Foyle is of paramount importance to the fishing industry. Will the Minister elaborate a little more on what negotiations there have been with those in the fishing industry on the survival of salmon in the waters of the Foyle?

Mrs O'Neill: I assure the Member that we have a stakeholder advisory forum that discusses all those issues. Salmon conservation will obviously be a key issue. The agency continually reports at the NSMC meetings about the survival rates of our salmon. We need to be very strong in conservation measures and look at what we can do to improve the current situation.

As I have said, the agency reported at a previous NSMC meeting that the sea-survival of Atlantic salmon had dropped from levels in excess of 30%, as recently as the 1990s, to 3% or 4% at the current time. So that is a drastic drop. It is obviously of major concern, and so we have to continue to work with industry and fishermen, and we do that through the stakeholder advisory forum.

Earlier today, I outlined a number of the initiatives that we are taking forward. We will continue to do everything we can to maximise the conservation of fish that make it back to the rivers, because, obviously, not all fish make it back. For those that do, we need to ensure that we can maximise their conservation.

Mr Swann: Minister, I refer to point 15 of the statement, and this is perhaps more about the minutiae of what happened at the meeting. DCAL has a very specific set number of tags now. It is one tag, unlimited number per season. The Loughs Agency has a fixed number of

seasons per tag. In point 15, the Minister referred to DCAL waters and Loughs Agency jurisdictions. In those waters, whose regulations or guidance takes precedence? Is it that of DCAL or the Loughs Agency?

Mrs O'Neill: Obviously, we will continue to work very closely with DCAL where there are areas of common interest. That is an ongoing piece of work. The Loughs Agency regulates for the Foyle and Carlingford areas. It brings forward the regulations, two of which we have put forward today. However, when it comes to working with DCAL, that Department has a position similar to ours. It wants to preserve the salmon and ensure that proper conservation measures are in place. So, any decision that is taken will be made in the best interests of the area and of the survival of the salmon.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister give us an update on progress towards an aquaculture licence regime for the Loughs Agency?

Mrs O'Neill: I am happy to provide that in writing to the Member. It is detailed, in that we worked with the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources in the South. That Department recently facilitated a meeting between itself, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Loughs Agency on 4 December 2012.

The purpose of that meeting was to discuss the progress of the aquaculture management agreement. DAFM and the Loughs Agency did some research but, in principle, they reached an agreement on overarching issues, and the operational issues that need to be addressed to deliver the aquaculture management agreement were also agreed. DAFM and the Loughs Agency also agreed that discussions should now take place with the agencies that have the technical responsibility in the Loughs Agency's areas relating to aquaculture, to ensure that all operational aspects within the aquaculture management agreement are finalised effectively. It is envisaged that that will happen early this year.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for her statement. On the death of Thomas Sloan, I, too, offer my sympathies to his wife Eileen, his brother Felix and his extended family.

I have a general point on aquaculture. Was there any discussion on the proposed fish farm at Galway Bay, and are there any plans to develop aquaculture in a similar manner here?

Mrs O'Neill: There was no discussion on the Galway Bay situation. However, there is so much potential for the aquaculture industry here that it is something that we need to be very mindful of, not just because of tourism potential, because an oyster festival would bring in tourists, but for the opportunities to the local industry. I think that there is a lot of scope for that, and we are certainly exploring it. However, I am happy to propose it as a firm agenda item for the next meeting, and talk to the Member about it.

Mr Allister: Can I be the third or perhaps the fourth Member to refer to paragraph 12 of the Minister's statement, in the hope of a more fulsome answer from her? The paragraph states that the meeting:

"noted the latest position on the survival of Atlantic salmon in the Foyle and Carlingford catchments".

I have a simple question. What is the latest position on the survival of the Atlantic salmon and how is it being measured?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member might have popped out, but I did actually answer that question some time ago. I said that the current position was this: the survival rate of Atlantic salmon has dropped from levels in excess of 30% as recently as the 1990s. It is now down to 3% to 4%. That is quite a dramatic drop. We have had ongoing surveys, and there is the IBIS project — all those things are looking at the levels of stock. It is a major concern, and action is being taken.

The survival of salmon is very high on the agenda of the Loughs Agency's work. We will continue to draw on local and international research on the issue, and to do everything that we can to maximise the conservation of the fish that make it back to the rivers and improve freshwater survival from egg to seagoing smolt.

Committee Business

Welfare Reform Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, Mr Alex Attwood — Mr Alex Maskey — to move the motion. That was a Freudian slip.

Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 19 February 2013 in relation to the Committee Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill (NIA Bill 13/11-15).

Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I will speak to you later about that.

The House will be aware that the Committee began its scrutiny of the Welfare Reform Bill on 10 October 2012. On 20 November 2012, the Assembly voted in favour of the motion to refer the Welfare Reform Bill to an Ad Hoc Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements. The Ad Hoc Committee has now completed its scrutiny and, as Members will be aware, its report will be debated in the House tomorrow.

On 20 November, the Committee for Social Development's task to scrutinise the Welfare Reform Bill was suspended until the Ad Hoc Committee had reported, leaving the Committee with five working days to complete its scrutiny. Departmental officials and others told us that, once the Ad Hoc Committee was established, the Committee would be able to do no further work in considering the Bill. The Assembly took a decision to adopt the Committee's position and establish the Ad Hoc Committee. We were later told that we could do some consideration of the Bill. I want to point out that, in my opinion, we were not treated in the best possible way. Nevertheless, the Committee's consideration of the Bill was suspended from 20 November.

I would like to set out the tasks that the Committee still has to undertake within those five working days, if that is all that we have left, which should clarify the reason for the request to extend the Committee Stage. The Committee has to consider the Ad Hoc Committee's report; it has to receive a briefing from the Minister, which will happen on Thursday 31 January, on his response to the paper that was sent to the Department in November; and it then has to consider its response to the Minister's presentation. We then have to consider all the proposed amendments, a number of which have been discussed and debated. I put on record that the Committee unanimously put forward a number of views to the Department for consideration, which would require amendments to the Bill.

Of course, I also state for the record that all Members will have the opportunity, in due course, to decide if they wish to table any amendments or support any amendment that may be tabled. Nevertheless, we have to consider all the amendments. We also have to undertake clause-by-clause scrutiny and agree the Committee's report. With five remaining days and with those tasks still to be carried out, I think Members will accept that the Committee agrees that it requires more time to robustly fulfil its responsibilities to stakeholders and to the House.

1.00 pm

The Bill is undoubtedly the most comprehensive reform of the benefit system in a generation, and many people will live with the consequences of it in years to come. Therefore, it is essential that the Committee carries out a robust scrutiny of the Bill, which, it should be noted, contains 134 clauses and 12 schedules. The Committee knows that the Minister is concerned about the potential costs associated with any delay in scrutinising the Bill, as are we all. However, we need to strike a balance, and that balance has to be about any costs associated with further delay and the necessary scrutiny, especially at such a crucial stage, of a very large and contentious piece of legislation. That was evidenced by the range and breadth of organisations that came to make presentations to the Committee.

I have continually told the House, members of the Committee and stakeholders that there are no delay tactics here; in fact, some of us resent that argument. Nevertheless, I want the Assembly to know that the Committee has requested a two-week extension as a precaution. We have made it very clear that we may not necessarily take the full two weeks to complete the scrutiny, and it is our intention to wind the scrutiny up as quickly as we can.

In conclusion, to allow the Committee for Social Development to complete its scrutiny as fully and robustly as it can within an achievable time frame, I commend the motion to the House.

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development):

I welcome the opportunity to respond to the motion.

I appreciate that the Committee has an important role to play and wishes to take its time to carry out a robust scrutiny of the Welfare Reform Bill. I thank the Committee for the time that it has allocated already to the scrutiny by sitting additional and, indeed, longer days.

I am not opposing the motion to extend Committee Stage, but I consider it important to remind the Assembly of the financial and societal repercussions of further delays in the passage of the Welfare Reform Bill. We are already operating under a very tight timetable and framework. The existing timetable for the passage of the Welfare Reform Bill has no flexibility, due to the delay in securing Executive agreement prior to the summer recess last year and the establishment of the Ad Hoc Committee on 21 November 2012 to consider the Bill's conformity with equality and human rights requirements. Transferring the Bill to the Ad Hoc Committee extended the timetable by 30 working days, during which time the work of the Social Development Committee on the Bill was stalled. I have already indicated that there are elements of the current reform programme that I have difficulty with and that I sought to address those through dialogue with Lord Freud, Iain Duncan Smith and, indeed, others at Westminster. I am, therefore, considering the concerns raised by the Social Development Committee and the Ad Hoc Committee, and I will respond as appropriate. In view of the concerns raised by the Social Development Committee, I will brief the Committee on Thursday of this week.

I remain deeply concerned that any further delay in the passage of the Bill could have an impact on our position in terms of costs and, indeed, support from DWP. When

I spoke against the motion to establish an Ad Hoc Committee in November last year, I pointed out that, if the process is delayed by 10 days, the cost to the Northern Ireland block is £4 million and that a 30-day delay would be £13.1 million.

During his visit to Northern Ireland last year, Lord Freud publicly expressed his disappointment that the Assembly had voted to transfer the Bill to an Ad Hoc Committee, as it will mean that we will not be able to maintain parity with DWP on the timing of changes to the two social security systems. Lord Freud also pointed out that the current delay in taking the Bill through the Assembly will cause difficulties and make his job of supporting Northern Ireland and its need for flexibility in implementing welfare reform that bit more difficult.

There is a need to fully understand that securing agreement to change IT systems or, indeed, adopting different policies that have long-term costs to the Exchequer require its support and goodwill. That will be difficult to achieve when there are delays to the passage of the Bill. If the Bill is delayed unduly, it will have a detrimental effect on the Northern Ireland block and for the people of Northern Ireland, particularly if we do not have enough money to mitigate some of the effects of welfare reform. Therefore, in the circumstances, I strongly urge the Committee for Social Development to complete its scrutiny of the Welfare Reform Bill before 19 February if possible. In that context, I welcome the Committee Chair's comments that every effort will be made to ensure that, if possible, that work can be done in less than the two additional weeks that are being sought.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. First of all, I thank the Minister for his acknowledgement that the Committee has devoted a lot of time to the Bill, as is appropriate. In my opening remarks, I made it clear that, as it has been described, it is the most important reform to the welfare system in a generation. It is, therefore, critical that the Committee devotes as much time and energy to it as is needed. That is why we seek the extension.

I want to reiterate one point with regard to our response to Lord Freud. I have met him on a number of occasions, both as a party representative and as Chair of the Committee. Of course, he met the Committee along with the Minister. Lord Freud made it very clear that the Bill is the direct responsibility of this House. Some of the remarks that were taken to be almost a chastisement of the Committee were actually ill advised and unwelcome. We have a responsibility. The Minister, rightly, makes it clear that we have a responsibility. We have taken it very maturely on board. We will continue to do that.

Mr Campbell: Will the Member give way?

Mr Maskey: I am just finishing off my remarks.

I have made it clear on the Committee's behalf that it has no interest in delaying the Bill. We are aware that there may be financial consequences, but we are also very aware of our direct responsibility. The Bill will have societal repercussions and consequences. Therefore, I want to make it very clear, on behalf of all its members, that the Committee does not intend to delay its deliberations any further than is necessary. It intends to complete its consideration of the Bill as quickly as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 19 February 2013 in relation to the Committee Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill (NIA Bill 13/11-15).

Private Members' Business

Programme For Government: Social Disadvantage

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

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to outline what steps his Department is taking to deliver on the commitments relating to tackling social disadvantage contained in the Programme for Government which the Department for Social Development is responsible for delivering.

One of the priorities in the Programme for Government is creating opportunities, tackling disadvantage and improving health and well-being. The Minister has said:

"As a Department, with our strong mission to tackle disadvantage, we contribute directly and indirectly to all of these priorities."

The priorities are growing a sustainable economy and investing in the future; creating opportunities; tackling disadvantage; improving health and well-being; building a strong and shared community; and delivering high-quality and efficient public services, such as to implement new structures to support the improved delivery of housing services.

The demand for social housing continues to grow, with nearly 40,000 people seeking social housing and over 20,000 of them in housing stress. The Minister has committed to develop and consult on a new housing strategy, which is ongoing. It has been introduced for consultation and is already contentious. The Minister is also committed to reducing the number of social homes that fail to meet the agreed standard. Much more planned maintenance is required. He has committed to better regulation of the private rented sector. So far, we have a light touch, going nowhere near what is needed. He has committed to assisting vulnerable people to live as independently as possible, so far promoting benefit cuts and implementing welfare reform, which will impact adversely on the most vulnerable. The Minister has said that the current levels of benefit claims are likely to be unsustainable, yet one third of our population relies on social security, not through choice, and nearly 60,000 children live in poverty. He says that the approach to welfare reform in tackling poverty must be focused on reducing benefit dependency whilst protecting the most vulnerable. Can the Minister explain how that might be achieved? Also, can he explain how the proposed reform of the welfare system will tackle the root causes of poverty?

The Minister has said that through welfare reform, through our developing housing strategy etc

"we will focus on initiatives that can build our economy, provide jobs".

Those are indeed all worthy aspirations. The underlying principle of welfare reform is to get people into work and off benefit, and no one would disagree with that. The reality, however, is that there are no jobs and to introduce cuts and penalise people at this time can only make a bad situation worse.

A recent report in Britain stated that, to have a reasonable standard of living, a person needs to earn £7·20 an hour, yet the minimum wage here is £6·19 an hour. A report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has found that half of children in poverty live in a working household. Maybe the Minister can explain his rationale when he said in October 2011:

"At the centre of my Department's approach to tackling poverty is implementing universal credit as part of the welfare reform agenda, with its focus on helping people to escape the benefit trap, supporting those who can work into work and making work pay through a reformed system of income disregards." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 67, p270, col 1].

Where is that work at present? In some of the most deprived wards in the North, child poverty figures stand at 63%, which is an appalling statistic, while the average in council areas in Britain is 21%. In explaining to us how his Department is tackling social disadvantage, perhaps the Minister could spend less time selling the concept of welfare reform and get on with the real task of alleviating hardship and deprivation across the Six Counties.

Ms P Bradley: Poverty and deprivation have significant impacts on life's outcomes. That has been known for many years, and I am particularly happy that the issue is being addressed so robustly by the Assembly. There have been promising signs that measures put in place by Departments so far are beginning to have real impacts on lives in our society. I welcome the statistics on poverty — absolute and relative — that have shown a decrease in the number of people who find themselves living in these conditions.

Working in the area that I represent has highlighted to me the true effect that living in social deprivation has on our young people as individuals and on communities as a whole. It is easy to read statistics and reports about how people cannot afford to feed their children or heat their home or are even homeless because they cannot afford their housing costs. That, of course, is a reality. Often, the stigma attached to living in such conditions causes people not to seek help or speak about the reality of their life.

The Department for Social Development has implemented a number of initiatives that are obviously having a real effect on our communities. For example, there is no doubt that campaigns to encourage people to claim the benefits that they are entitled to have made a direct contribution to raising people out of poverty. The time is right to continue building on that success and to try to ensure that, with the current economic climate that we find ourselves in and with the impending necessary welfare reforms, we keep the momentum on this issue. It is important to ensure that people realise that the system is in place to help them when they need it but that life on the system should not be considered as an acceptable alternative to employment.

I know of schools that were so concerned that children were coming to school hungry that they implemented

breakfast clubs, which were free for everyone to attend. That initiative had the benefit of ensuring that those who needed it most were able to access it, while none of their peers would be able to single out those who did not have the monetary means to pay for the service. In such initiatives, all sectors will be vital partners in working with all our Departments to ensure that we come up with initiatives that the community will use and will be able to access. I believe that the Department for Social Development has realised the potential of the third sector to encourage those who work day and daily with the issues faced by deprived communities to come up with new ideas to help those communities to help themselves.

The commitment to tackling social disadvantage is an integral part of the Programme for Government. Children in social disadvantage grow to be adults in social disadvantage, who then raise children in social disadvantage. We need to break that cycle. Children in social disadvantage are more likely than their peers not living in social disadvantage to become adults in the same situation. We already know how social disadvantage has affected educational outcomes for Protestant working-class boys, thanks to the study conducted last year. We must ensure that we continue to address that issue to encourage better outcomes for all our communities.

1.15 pm

Mr Copeland: I also welcome the opportunity to debate and highlight the issues in the motion. Tackling social deprivation must surely be an issue that truly unites all parties. We may differ on the methods we think are best or the programmes we think are more effective than others, but, on the whole, no one could disagree with the broad objective of tackling fuel poverty and social exclusion.

Unfortunately, recent economic difficulties have made what was already a difficult life for many people in Northern Ireland even harder. We have the highest level of economic inactivity in the United Kingdom. Just last week, we learned that the number of people claiming unemployment-related benefits in December 2012 — the month in which Christmas occurred — stood at a startling 65,200, which was an increase of 500 on the previous month. When we talk about unemployment figures or the proportion of people claiming benefits, we must always remember and reiterate the point that it is not as clear-cut as it may at first appear. Unemployment itself is only part of the overall picture for people who lack but want paid work. A large proportion of all those who lack but want paid work were and are considered to be economically inactive rather than unemployed, either because they were unable to start work immediately or were not actively seeking work.

Unfortunately, there is not enough time in the debate for me to go through every commitment in the Programme for Government, but, following the wording of the motion, I will make specific reference to a number that the Department for Social Development is responsible for delivering.

The Minister will not be surprised to hear that I believe that he is failing to deliver adequate social housing. He will no doubt stand up and say that he has met his targets, but I put it to him that the fact that the social housing development programme has significantly underspent this year to the tune of £8 million shows, in some way, a lack of ambition on his part. When I look at the number of people

on the waiting list, especially those considered to be in housing stress, I do not see that being reduced enough to merit the handing back of so much money in a single year. There are also, of course, the housing issues associated with the Welfare Reform Bill, as and when that goes through, and the Minister's subsequent failures to adapt to meet the changing pressures there.

Under priority 2 — creating opportunities, tackling disadvantage and improving health and well-being — there is a commitment that the Department will tackle fuel poverty. I am sure that the Minister is aware that recently published figures show that the rate has fallen by only 2%, from what was a record high of 44%. I know that those figures reflect a time before the current Minister was in position, but I respectfully put it to him that, so far, there has not been enough innovative or radical thinking and that that must also be judged as a less than adequate reduction. We will talk more about that matter next week.

I will take a brief moment, if I may, to refer to another key challenge, this time in the field of education, which was mentioned a few moments ago. It is intractably linked to the demands placed on DSD. There is huge educational inequality across Northern Ireland. Children receiving free schools meals are much more likely not to attain the expected levels of educational qualifications. Annual statistics reveal that young people living in an area of deprivation do significantly worse than their peers who perhaps live a few miles or, in some cases, a few hundred yards away. That is particularly prevalent in my constituency. Such an obvious correlation between wealth and educational achievement in Northern Ireland is, to me, abhorrent. The Minister will be well aware of the pressures that low education qualifications place on the social security system.

It is highly regrettable that much of the work that Departments do across the Executive has not led to a tangible decrease in social deprivation. That individualistic approach is perhaps part of the problem. Too many people are doing slightly different things, and nobody is really talking to anyone else. I am aware that there is an intention in OFMDFM to tackle the silo mentality, which I feel contributes to some of the difficulties.

In conclusion, I ask the Minister to detail exactly how tackling social disadvantage is monitored. Given its relatively few overarching commitments on the issue, the Programme for Government relies heavily on all Departments doing the best that they can. Unfortunately, until people on the ground start to see real changes and real differences to their life, they may still have the feeling that the Chamber, the Executive and the Departments are failing them.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. The SDLP had sought to amend the motion by widening it to learn what other Departments are doing to tackle social disadvantage, rather than concentrating solely on DSD's delivery, or otherwise, on its commitments to do so in the Programme for Government.

Although DSD is charged with this responsibility, poverty and social deprivation can meaningfully be tackled only through a collaborative and cohesive approach by Departments, involving DARD, DEL, the Department of Education, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and — last but by no means least —

OFMDFM. It is vital that a proper cross-departmental approach be taken to mitigate the poverty that, despite what the Northern Ireland poverty bulletin may say, is increasing in the North. Do not take my word for it, but ask and listen to those on the breadline and those on the front line: charities, churches and community organisations trying to keep —

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that some of the very good work that not just DSD but DETI and others are doing to prepare people, particularly young people, through providing training, skills and adaptable skills to get them into work, is a good example of cross-departmental work? We should see more of that.

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

Mr Durkan: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

I thank the Member for his intervention. I certainly agree that there are good examples of cross-departmental work. The Member gave one example. There are others but, sadly, not that many others and certainly not enough others.

If we listen to charities, community organisations and churches, which are trying their best to help their people to keep their head above the rising tide of despair, we can only conclude that poverty is increasing here. The global economic situation has had a profound effect here, and, although the Assembly is not responsible for creating those problems, it is responsible for mitigating them. Focusing on the motion and on the steps that DSD is taking to deliver on commitment 2 of the Programme for Government, we can also refer to the Department's corporate plan, entitled 'Together, tackling disadvantage, building sustainable communities', which certainly recognises its role. Long-term goals, the creation of positive engagement with communities and striving for economic prosperity in communities are works in progress, and I am sure that the Minister will update us on any successes therein.

Explicitly under commitment 2 is the delivery of 8,000 social and affordable homes, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's assessment of progress on that. The SDLP was concerned that the figure of 8,000 was nowhere near enough to meet what is an ever-growing demand for social housing. We are now convinced that it is not. Furthermore, in our eyes, it is nothing short of disgraceful that, in the face of that demand, DSD has handed back money designated for social newbuilds. Although we support co-ownership schemes, they are well beyond the reach of those on the margins of society.

In June, the Minister issued a statement in June welcoming a reduction in poverty here, on the basis of figures in the Northern Ireland poverty bulletin. I have alluded to questions that I had on how those figures were calculated. Absolute poverty is calculated as an income below 60% of the UK median in 1998-99, which was a year of some prosperity, taking no account whatsoever of the huge increases in fuel and food costs, let alone inflation. That is an easy way to make absolute poverty seem lower than it is. Whatever was in that bulletin, which the Minister regurgitated, bad times are here, and worse times are just around the corner for thousands of people, thanks to welfare reform.

The Rowntree report is somewhat more realistic in its conclusion that poverty for children, working-age adults and pensioners is rising and that welfare changes will hit those groups harder in Northern Ireland than elsewhere. We have seen an increase in pensioner poverty while it has dropped in Great Britain. We have a higher percentage of adults not in paid work than the other regions do. I reiterate our disappointment that our amendment was not accepted, particularly as we need to focus on OFMDFM's responsibility to tackle child poverty and its failure to do so meaningfully thus far. We acknowledge the various schemes that DSD has brought forward to reduce fuel poverty. As Mr Copeland said, we will speak in greater detail on those in a debate next week. However, I feel that even those schemes, particularly the boiler replacement scheme, can be improved so that they have a bigger and better impact.

We welcome the motion and believe that the Assembly —

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

Mr Durkan: — and the Executive, not just DSD, should take additional steps to reduce disadvantage here.

Mrs Cochrane: I welcome the opportunity to join others in focusing on tackling social disadvantage.

The Programme for Government sets out a number of ways in which the Department for Social Development will seek to reduce and prevent social disadvantage during this mandate. That includes tackling fuel poverty, ensuring that there are adequate and affordable social homes, ensuring that those who are entitled to benefits receive them, maintaining a superb voluntary and community advice sector and improving the thermal efficiency of all Housing Executive stock. We should recognise that, when delivering on those commitments, the Department faces financial restraints, due to the reduction in the block grant. We also face challenges as a result of welfare reform. Therefore, we need solid policies to deal with its impact and to support those most affected. Our Executive, therefore, must develop new and innovative measures in response to social deprivation.

Others have discussed benefit dependency, education and child poverty. I will focus on fuel poverty and housing. Deprivation cannot be addressed while maintaining divisions in our society that drain resources and deter investment and growth. There is a clear correlation between the areas that have suffered most from division and segregation and those that are lowest in a range of health, education and economic indicators.

The Programme for Government commitment on reducing fuel poverty remains a real challenge. By not taking forward the green new deal plans, we missed a great opportunity for government to work in partnership with a coalition of all parts of civic society on a comprehensive programme to tackle energy inefficiency and to address fuel poverty and rising energy costs while creating sustainability, jobs and a low-carbon economy. The Minister will, no doubt, remind me that the £12 million set aside for the green new deal is now being used for the boiler replacement scheme. Although I obviously welcome any steps that are being taken, I ask whether he recognises that that scheme will probably deliver far less than the green new deal would have done for the same investment.

Energy inefficiency in homes is a key cause of fuel poverty. There is a challenge in whether it is better to carry out small measures on a large number of homes, thereby spreading resources thinly, or to take a section of homes at a time and really make them energy-efficient.

Continuing that theme, although the DSD target to ensure that all Housing Executive properties are fitted with double glazing is commendable, it may have limited benefits on its own. The Minister should also be working to ensure that lofts and cavity walls are well insulated and that homes have efficient heating systems. I wonder if the Minister has considered whether energy-proofing homes through an area-based approach might be more effective in dealing with fuel poverty. Making areas more attractive due to their quality of provision might also lead to movement in the housing stock in a much more positive way than the bedroom tax.

1.30 pm

The recent announcement about the future of the Housing Executive also provides an opportunity to develop a regional shared housing strategy, which eliminates fear and intimidation in housing choice and delivers social and affordable housing in areas free from permanent political allegiance to any party, group or identity.

In some of our most polarised estates, more than 80% of the residents are from the same religious background, and the fact that an area is perceived as belonging to one side of the community or another results in all sorts of negative economic and social consequences, such as a loss of investment, a paramilitary economy and people less willing to use basic services. Even worse, that interacts with other aspects of poverty to create multiple pockets of deprivation.

We should, therefore, seek to promote shared housing in all sectors. It can promote good relations and create a diverse, inclusive and aspirational environment in which to live. Although I welcome the work that has been undertaken by the Housing Executive around shared housing, such as the shared neighbourhood programme and the signing of shared future charters, a lot more needs to be done.

We, in Stormont, have an opportunity and a chance to address the underlying divisions and hostilities that have undermined economic and social development. Those divisions will continue to prevent dynamic development, deter investment —

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Cochrane: No; not at the minute, thank you. They will also combine with poverty to produce a toxic mix of division, exclusion and disadvantage. Therefore, all Ministers have their part to play in addressing those divisions and in ensuring that Northern Ireland becomes a better place for everyone. I look forward to hearing from the Social Development Minister today on where he has made progress and what areas he intends to focus on in the future to best address the needs of our most vulnerable.

Ms Brown: There is no denying that social disadvantage and poverty remain major issues in our society. Every day, we are confronted with evidence of whole communities struggling to come to terms with the realities of the current

climate of economic hardship. It is how the Assembly tackles those issues that will ultimately define whether it really delivers for those who elect us. I am firm believer in devolution. I believe that locally elected MLAs and those who become Ministers are privileged to be sent to this place on behalf of their communities so that they might deliver real change.

It is incredibly frustrating that the recent terms of the Assembly have been truly hampered by the dire economic climate in which we find ourselves. However, that should not deter us from being determined to deliver change. It should also not deter us from truly scrutinising and challenging the decisions taken centrally at Westminster that impact on us. I am pleased that the Minister has worked closely with his counterparts in London to ensure that the vulnerable in our society have a voice.

Those at a disadvantage include people from all walks of life, be they disabled, unable to work at all or wholly dependent on benefits through no fault of their own. It can also include those at an educational or training disadvantage for the purposes of securing reasonably paid employment. Although it is reasonable that we target geographical areas deemed to be most in need, the current climate means that we can no longer rely on postcodes to highlight disadvantage. Nowadays, those in need can be found in relatively affluent areas of towns that previously might have been regarded as immune from poverty and its causes.

It is appropriate to step back from the definitions and detailed policy for a moment and look at the human aspects of poverty and social disadvantage and how they impact the lives of those at the centre of this debate. As stated, those at a social disadvantage may lack the necessary qualifications to secure work. They may not have the educational ability to manage modern society's complex methods of interaction themselves or on behalf of their children. In the home, they may not be able to provide food or heating, and each day will bring harsh choices about priorities. We know that many parents face the choice of whether to feed their children or pay for other necessities. Inevitably, that can begin the descent into poverty, not just for the parents but for their children in future years.

Many of the issues that challenge us across government — antisocial behaviour, poor educational achievement, pressures on healthcare or, indeed, community tension — can have poverty and disadvantage at their root or as a contributory cause. Many of those classed to be in absolute or relative poverty will be dependent on benefits in some shape or form. In fact, some may not be receiving any of the benefits that they are entitled to. That is a concern that I know the Minister shares, which is why he has launched a number of initiatives to increase benefit uptake. Such actions have seen benefit uptake increase by £40 million since 2005 and made a real difference to the lives of some 12,000 people.

Tackling social disadvantage is not a responsibility for the Department for Social Development alone: the Departments of Justice, of Education and for Employment and Learning also play roles in assisting those communities. Members will be aware of the concessions that the Minister recently secured from London in the implementation of the Welfare Reform Bill. I welcome those, and the Minister has my full support in holding

to account policymakers in London. It is time that we all moved on from the politics of the past and fully engaged in this place and in Westminster to ensure that our fledgling institutions here can properly develop into full devolution that delivers real change.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. We, as an Assembly, face nothing more important than tackling the serious problems of poverty and social deprivation, but dealing with that has to be focused and done with objective need at its core. While we try to find ways of dealing with the serious economic problems that face the North, we should never forget those in most need in society. For some communities, these problems are not new. Many of our communities have suffered deprivation for a generation or more. That is why it is so important that we get whatever the strategy is right.

The Programme for Government sets out its commitment to tackle the scourge of disadvantage. The Minister, in his foreword to the Department for Social Development 'Corporate Plan 2011-2015', speaks of the challenge of "tackling poverty". He also speaks of "supporting our poorest communities" and states that most of the departmental work is directed towards the "most disadvantaged" citizens. That is to be commended, but we need to be constantly reminded of where that will take us and where we are at present. That is at the core of the motion. It is also important that we take time to evaluate where we have arrived in delivering strategies and commitments, particularly those in the Programme for Government. We need to ensure —

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: I will indeed.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member. The Minister's constituency and mine, North Belfast, has many deprived communities too. Does he therefore agree with me that the way to really tackle this is for the Department for Social Development, the Department of Health, the Department of Education, and other Departments — working with Belfast City Council, the education and library board, and so on — to have a joined-up strategy in taking forward these initiatives? It cannot be done by a Department in isolation.

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

Mr F McCann: I would not say that it is only for the Department, but the core responsibility to deal with deprivation rests with DSD. I was and still am a big supporter, as the Minister knows, of neighbourhood renewal. I believe that, at its core, neighbourhood renewal is a good programme. It lacked buy-in from other Departments. I and our party have consistently said that that is where the problem lay in neighbourhood renewal: partly with the Department, but mostly with other Departments not buying into it, which was key.

In any of these strategies, you need to take time out to look at how it is being delivered and what impact it is having. We need to ensure that we are on the road to delivery. That is why we tabled the motion. I and the people I represent live in a constituency that has suffered the ravages of poverty and deprivation for many decades. Only recently, it was declared the unhealthiest place in the

North to live. In fact, five of the top 10 most deprived wards across the North are in my constituency. Whiterock and Falls are one and two. The New Lodge is three. Shankill is in fourth, followed by East and then Crumlin, Clonard, Creggan Central, Ardoyne and Twinbrook.

Over the past few weeks, I have heard representatives speak about poverty in communities that are being left behind in dealing with deprivation. It is right for them to do so, but I advise them to look at the facts. The statistics will clearly tell you where the difficulties rest. Would it not be great if we spoke of dealing with poverty no matter where it exists? Would it not be better if we recognised that we face serious challenges in making things better for those most in need? Poverty does not know that there is a religious divide in our society. It bites as hard on the Shankill as it does on the Falls.

I recently had the Minister for Social Development in my constituency. He has seen for himself the difficulties faced by people in an area in serious social stress. An inner city area that has seen its population shrink over the past three decades, it has battled against some of the worst housing conditions, in what were the Divis flats, and come out the other end through hard campaigning for change. It also battles against the worst social deprivation across the city. To add to that, it is viewed as the worst area for anti-community activity. I again emphasise that, across the interface, we have the Shankill, another area of high social deprivation. The area is divided by a wall, but not by social consequences of inner city living. There is more that binds us together than divides us.

The motion asks the Minister to outline what steps his Department has taken in delivering what is contained in the Programme for Government. Maybe we can bring communities together to tackle the real evils of poverty, social deprivation and, just as importantly, sectarianism.

Mr Eastwood: We welcome the motion before the House today. Like my colleague Mr Durkan, I express my disappointment that our amendment was not taken. Our amendment attempted to do what many Members have said today; to try to widen out the responsibility for dealing with social disadvantage across the Departments. It is clear that DSD has a central role in dealing with social disadvantage. However, it is also clear that, when we talk about social disadvantage, we understand that poverty is at the heart of it all. Of course, OFMDFM has a real responsibility to tackle poverty.

We all know that things are not rosy in the garden when it comes to the economy here. Some very good things are happening. In my constituency, a lot of work is being done this year to try to lift the mood of the people and leave a legacy of economic good fortune. However, figures released last week show that 30 young people leave our city every week, 2,000 people are on the housing waiting list, and we have one of the highest unemployment figures across these islands.

We have to understand that things are very, very difficult, and that each and every one of us has a responsibility, not least OFMDFM. I want to touch on that. It is important that we understand that this is wider than just DSD. Look at the social investment fund. We are now finally seeing some movement in delivering on that. That has taken far too long. We need to ensure that, whatever money is spent, we leave a real legacy of tackling social disadvantage.

One of the real difficulties we face in this part of the world is our very high level of child poverty. In fact, the figures show that over 120,000 of our children live in child poverty. Last year, the Executive's own performance delivery unit, when looking at the Executive's delivery on the targets in the previous Programme for Government, left a lot of lines in red writing. That means that those particular targets had not been met. There was a target to halve child poverty by 2010. That was not delivered upon. There was a target to work towards the ending of severe child poverty by 2012. Obviously, that was not delivered upon. There was a target to meet a 15% reduction in the rate of suicide. That is still in red. There was a target to reduce by 50% the life expectancy differential between the most disadvantaged areas and the Northern Ireland average. That is still in red, too. There was a target to increase attainment levels in primary schools, with the majority of pupils from neighbourhood renewal areas moving to within 5% of the Northern Ireland average. That has still not been delivered upon. So, we have a real difficulty, with 120,000 of our young people and children still living in poverty.

1.45 pm

I am not going to stand here and defend the Minister for Social Development. I understand that he has a very particular role in dealing with this. It is very difficult when we look at what is coming down the tracks; all of those things that I mentioned are there already. There are 120,000 children still in poverty. We have not even factored in what the oncoming onslaught of welfare reform will mean for our most disadvantaged children and young people right across the board. I encourage the Minister, in his dealings with the Social Development Committee going forward, to ensure that all that can be done is done to mitigate the real difficulties that are coming down the track from welfare reform.

I will finish by saying that it is important that we all accept a responsibility in this House and especially in the Executive. None of us can stand on the sidelines and pretend that it is Mr McCausland's fault or somebody else's fault. Each and every Minister in the Executive has a responsibility to deliver an end to social disadvantage and child poverty. I hope that all parties take that very seriously and understand that it is a cross-cutting issue. In fact, it is the most important issue in trying to end social disadvantage in our society.

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development):

I have listened with interest to all of the Members who spoke in the debate, and I thank all who contributed for their input. I hope that I am able to respond to all of the issues raised, but if I miss any, I will certainly write to the Member concerned.

My Department has direct responsibility for six commitments in the Programme for Government 2011-15. Those commitments cover a wide range of issues, from supporting social enterprise growth to providing social and affordable homes and reducing fuel poverty. I will refer to some of the comments that people made, because folk did stray beyond the confines of those six commitments in the Programme for Government, but I still want to respond to them.

All six commitments are interlinked, as they are all directly or indirectly targeted at addressing poverty and disadvantage, with a focus on those individuals, families and communities that are the most deprived. I am,

therefore, pleased to report that my Department has made, and is continuing to make, good progress in meeting our targets.

I will talk about each of the commitments and our achievements to date in more detail. Four of the six Programme for Government targets concern housing issues. Housing plays a hugely significant role in creating a safe, healthy and prosperous society. My housing strategy — the first housing strategy in Northern Ireland — which I launched for public consultation in October, set out my vision for housing in Northern Ireland. In it, I set out my proposals for housing as a means to help support and sustain economic recovery, create employment and help regenerate some of our most deprived and socially disadvantaged communities. The strategy not only focuses on the delivery of the Programme for Government-specific targets but goes much further in creating the conditions for stable, sustainable, accessible, good, affordable and well-managed housing to support economic growth and prosperity.

Achieving those aims presents many difficult challenges as well as opportunities and will mean some significant structural change in the housing sector. I will return to that later. First, I want to focus on specific targets related to housing. My Department is committed to delivering 8,000 new social and affordable homes over the life of the Programme for Government. In 2011-12 we delivered a total of 2,053 new homes and have a similar number planned for 2012-13. We are, therefore, making good progress towards fulfilling our commitment in full by 2015. That will help a significant number of those in housing need to access new homes while assisting a significant number of families and individuals onto the first rung of the housing ownership ladder. That investment in new homes also provides some much needed support to our construction industry —

Mr F McCann: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: Yes.

Mr F McCann: In relation to the 8,000 houses, I think there has been some confusion about that commitment. You talk about social and affordable houses. Will you give me a breakdown? Does that take in co-ownership — I believe that it does — or is that additional to the 8,000 that are being built?

Mr McCausland: No, there are various forms of affordable housing included within that 8,000.

This investment in new homes also provides some much-needed support to our construction industry in these particularly difficult economic times, bearing in mind that we know that for every 10 jobs created through the social housing market, seven will be sustained elsewhere.

My Department is also making significant inroads into fuel poverty through the delivery of our fuel poverty strategy. The key aim of the strategy is to remove fuel energy inefficiency as a cause of fuel poverty. It is worth mentioning the warm homes scheme, which has exceeded its target year-on-year to assist 9,000 vulnerable households per annum with a range of insulation and heating measures.

I have, however, a number of other ongoing initiatives that complement and assist delivery against the commitment to reduce fuel poverty. On behalf of the Department, the

Housing Executive runs a heating replacement scheme, which aims to improve energy efficiency in the social housing sector. Furthermore, the boiler replacement scheme, which is also run by the Housing Executive on the Department's behalf, will ensure that 16,000 inefficient boilers are replaced over the next three years.

Thermal efficiency is also a part of my Department's target to ensure that all Housing Executive properties are double-glazed. The Programme for Government target requires full double glazing by the end of March 2015. The Housing Executive currently has 22,500 dwellings programmed for double-glazing insulation across Northern Ireland over the three-year period from 2012-13 to 2014-15. In excess of 6,000 double-glazing installations were started by the end of December 2012. I have also approved a further 13 schemes for some 2,400 dwellings, which should help the Housing Executive to achieve the target of 8,600 dwellings to have double-glazing installed in 2012-13. A further 9,000 dwellings are programmed for 2013-14 and the remaining 4,000 are programmed to be completed in 2014-15.

My final housing-related commitment concerns the delivery of new structures to support and improve the delivery of housing services to the citizens of Northern Ireland. Meeting that commitment will help us to ensure that social housing delivery is on a sound basis to meet the demands of the future.

I have already mentioned the social housing reform programme. Details of my plans for that reform were set out in my written statement to the Assembly on 9 January. Those proposals set out the strategic direction for the way in which social housing will be delivered in Northern Ireland to ensure a sustainable housing system that is fit for the 21st century. They build on the success of the past but create structures that will ensure that social housing delivery is on a sound and sustainable basis to build for the future. There is still much detailed work to be undertaken to develop the proposals, and I am keen to move quickly to begin detailed consultation, design and engagement on how we can collectively realise that vision. I remain committed to working closely with key stakeholders throughout this process.

My Department's remaining Programme for Government commitments concern social enterprise growth and encouraging inward private investment through improving public spaces. Our work to invest in social enterprise growth is becoming increasingly important as we seek to increase sustainability in the voluntary and community sector and, thereby, reduce dependency on grant aid.

One of our milestones in 2012-13 is to develop a policy framework for community asset transfer across government, and that work is well advanced. The policy will facilitate the transfer of surplus public assets to the voluntary and community sector, often at below market value. In other regions, such a policy has proved to be a real catalyst for community regeneration. It can also provide a sound financial base for organisations to prosper and grow.

The work to invest in social enterprise growth is being taken forward on a number of other fronts. We have appointed Development Trusts NI as a delivery partner for the community asset transfer policy. It will have a specific role to increase capacity in the sector, to ensure that organisations are equipped to take control of assets and

to test the policy framework by taking forward a number of pilot projects in 2013-14.

My Department, together with officials in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), has also commissioned a baseline research study to identify opportunities for growth in the social economy sector and to inform future policy development in both Departments. The study will be published before the end of March 2013.

My Department has also supported a social economy growth pilot project with the Resurgam Trust in the Old Warren estate in Lisburn. The project will create new business start-ups and local employment opportunities in disadvantaged areas of Lisburn. The model has the potential to be replicated in other areas. It is a fine example of local people identifying community needs and taking positive action to meet those needs.

As a contribution to the Executive's commitment to building a strong and shared community, I am committed to delivering at least 30 schemes to improve landscapes in public areas to promote private sector investment in towns and cities across Northern Ireland. The schemes will be delivered by March 2015. Schemes in Belfast, Londonderry and other regional towns across the Province are well advanced. The main impacts of the schemes are to strengthen the quality of the public realm and stimulate an increase in footfall and major commercial investment. This will enhance our towns and cities as locations for inward investment and create increased employment opportunities for all.

In developing those schemes, I have been mindful to include social clauses in construction contracts, offering apprenticeships and training opportunities to young and long-term unemployed people. Public expenditure this year amounts to approximately £12.8 million.

The key focus of my Department throughout our work in social security, child maintenance and regeneration, as well as housing and community development, is tackling poverty and disadvantage. Meeting our Programme for Government commitments is crucial if the Department and the wider Executive are to address disadvantage and protect the most vulnerable. Achieving these commitments alone, however, cannot deliver the real and sustainable change that we need to tackle the persistent poverty that characterises our most deprived families and, indeed, communities.

When talking about disadvantage, it would be remiss of me not to mention at least briefly some of the other work being undertaken by my Department to deliver the Programme for Government priorities and the vision of a shared and better future for all. This work includes taking forward area-based initiatives, most notably the neighbourhood renewal strategy, to improve the life chances of those in our most deprived urban areas. It necessitates the Department's working with a wide range of delivery partners to target and address those local issues rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach to urban regeneration.

The provision of decent and affordable housing is crucial to our regeneration activities. As mentioned, it is a prerequisite to addressing poverty and disadvantage. I outlined the aims of my recently launched housing strategy.

Officials in my Department are also playing a lead role in progressing the Delivering Social Change framework, which is a Programme for Government commitment led by OFMDFM. This contribution includes working jointly with the Department of Education and DETI in the delivery of two signature projects. The first of those involves the rolling out of an additional 20 nurture units that offer a balance of educational and domestic experiences aimed at supporting the social development of children's relationships. Our second signature project is designed to tackle dereliction and the lack of local employment by taking forward the development of approximately 10 social enterprise hubs in areas of multiple disadvantage over a two-year period. Both projects complement and assist the Department's mainstream work and will provide valuable insights into how we need to develop policies for the future.

Officials are also actively engaged with their counterparts in OFMDFM and other Departments to develop policy proposals for the medium to longer term to assist and inform our thinking for the next Programme for Government. We will still have much work to do, and I am encouraged by our achievements so far. As such, I am content that we are on the right track to deliver real and sustainable outcomes for our most disadvantaged individuals, families and communities.

In my last couple of minutes, I want to pick up on, in no particular order, a few issues that Members raised. Judith Cochrane spoke about the green new deal. I encourage her to go to the Library, pick up a copy of today's 'Guardian' and read the warning about green new deal home insulation loans. When you look at how that is working out in GB, you will see that it is not the magnificent silver bullet solution that was portrayed by many people. The £12 million that had been suggested for the green new deal was wisely, properly and correctly put into a scheme that the Member fully endorses, which is the boiler replacement scheme. I will talk more about the issue next week in a debate about fuel poverty.

I believe that we made the right choice. There are better ways of spending our money than on some of the unnecessarily expensive approaches in the green new deal. I thought it important to mention that.

2.00 pm

Mrs Cochrane also picked up on division and segregation in social housing. I repeat what I said the last time this was discussed in the Chamber: there is as much segregation in private housing, yet that is often ignored. In areas of middle-class and private housing, it is ignored. I suggest that the challenge for the Alliance Party is to face up to that. It is not simply an issue for social housing and the social housing sector; it applies across housing in Northern Ireland. That needs to be recognised. Somehow, the focus is on working-class areas being divided, but middle-class areas are equally divided. We see that again and again. So please do not pick on working-class communities. Recognise that the problem is endemic in our society, including throughout the middle class. The issue needs to be addressed, but let us be comprehensive and inclusive in our approach to it. Pamela Brown picked up on —

Mrs Cochrane: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: I am running out of time. I apologise.

Pamela Brown picked up on benefit uptake. We have trebled benefit uptake to £13.1 million.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Minister bring his remarks to a close?

Mr McCausland: That exceeds greatly the limited success of some previous Ministers in previous years.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle.

The acknowledgement from the Minister of an article in 'The Guardian' this morning is welcome. I recommend that the Minister read a range of informative, damning and critical articles on welfare reform that have appeared in that paper in the past year or more. So it might be informative for the Minister to read 'The Guardian'. If you can quote from one article, you might want to quote from a number of others. However, I appreciate that the Minister is looking at the Welfare Reform Bill from a critical point of view in many respects.

First, I thank all Members who spoke in the debate. The motion is very simple and is designed to put the spotlight back on the core issue that faces us all: tackling at source a lot of the problems that our communities face. We have talked about welfare reform, and we know that a lot of people work on the basis that welfare reform may well have a serious negative impact on a lot of people in our community. We want to make sure that we can get people into work, which means that they must be eligible for work and have the capacity to work. Obviously, work needs to be available to them. We also want a community that is empowered to be a part of economic growth in the wider sense, out in the broader community, so that people can benefit from that. So it is very important that we do not deal only with welfare reform and whatever mitigating measures the Minister and all his ministerial colleagues can develop to tackle the problems arising from the Welfare Reform Bill. It is more important that we look at the source of the problem. As I said, that was the primary purpose of tabling the motion.

Again, I thank all Members who spoke in the debate. Some Members addressed a particular aspect of welfare reform, which is fair enough because we all have a lot of particular issues that come to mind. Some Members addressed a range of those issues. It is important that we arrive at a situation in which we continue to outline the steps required to tackle disadvantage and poverty. It is also important that we then set those actions into a time frame and continue to monitor and evaluate their outcomes and outworkings.

It is important that the core of the motion is directed at the Social Development Department. That is no accident, and it is not meant to suggest that only DSD has a responsibility in this area. Other Members rightly pointed out that tackling disadvantage, poverty and so on is the responsibility of a range of Departments. I place on record our thanks to OFMDFM, which has created the social investment fund and taken other measures such as Delivering Social Change, and to every other Department that has played its part in trying in some way to tackle at source the problems that our communities face. Again, however, the reason why the motion specifies DSD is that it has a lead role on behalf of the Executive on a range of commitments and on the various building blocks that are in the Programme for Government. Indeed, the Minister acknowledged that. The Minister's foreword

in the Department for Social Development's corporate plan 2011-15 says that core to its mission of working to ensure that our most vulnerable citizens are supported and protected the Department has at its disposal a budget of over £6 billion per annum and more than 6,000 staff, most of whom are focused on our most disadvantaged citizens, families and communities. Social security, child maintenance, providing social housing, addressing homelessness, supporting our poorest communities through neighbourhood renewal and a range of other issues, not least the responsibilities for revitalising town and city centres, mean that the Department's role and functions will have a clear impact on communities across the whole of the North.

As I said, we have to tackle the problems at source and on the basis of need. I do not want to go into a rehearsal of where the most deprived communities are, because deprivation and poverty know no boundaries. However, we have to have a matrix and core values at our disposal, because it is clear that we have to work through the problems that are worst in particular communities. Obviously, we know that a lot of those problems are comprehensive and complex and fundamentally require cross-departmental working.

The Minister outlined the Department's role in housing, regeneration and tackling deprivation. I welcome all the comments so far this afternoon, particularly the Minister's about his continuing commitment to tackle those issues on a comprehensive basis. However, I want the Department, in an ongoing and structured way, to continue to outline the steps that are being taken. We heard this afternoon from the Minister about initiatives that are pilot schemes or limited projects. Due to their very nature, it can take time for those to present evidence. We already have at our disposal a plethora of evidence and experience, not least in the Department. The Minister indicated that in his foreword. So, a massive amount of talent and experience is available, including those of the officials who deal with neighbourhood renewal and a wide range of other issues so that disadvantage can be tackled at its core. Some smaller pilot schemes are important and appropriate, but we know what the figures are. The statistics have been available to us for a long time.

It is important that there are building blocks in the Programme for Government and key priorities that Departments and the Executive as a whole have to address. Crucially, we need to know what responsibilities are at this Department's door. It is important that we have all those building blocks identified, as well as the lead responsibility of the Department and how the Department has taken those forward, not just in pilot schemes but on a more comprehensive basis. More crucially, we need to identify subgroups that exist or cross-departmental initiatives that are under way. It is only when the steps are indicated and outlined to us with a set of time frames that we can have a process that will monitor and evaluate the outworkings. Ultimately, the Assembly is now almost two years into this mandate. I recognise entirely that the Executive are working in very difficult circumstances, having had £4 billion lopped off the block grant a number of years ago. We should not allow other commentators to forget that this Executive came into place with one hand behind their back, given the drastic cuts to the Budget coming from the British Government. Those cuts were

shameful, and the Executive are still labouring under a significantly reduced budget.

I will finish by saying that the motion is not designed to be critical of any Minister or any Department — far from it — but wishes to place on record our thanks for all the work that is going on. However, we need to put it on record that we want a comprehensive programme with time frames so that outworkings and outcomes can be monitored. By the end of the mandate, we do not want to be in the position where are not sure how far we have advanced in meeting all of the targets in the 2011 Programme for Government set of commitments, albeit given the very difficult economic environment in which the Executive have to work. On that note, I urge the Minister, when he indicates what the building blocks, steps and time frames are, to make a commitment to work in partnership with a lot of very important allies, not least the business community, the voluntary and community sector and others, to get comprehensive plans in place to tackle poverty and disadvantage at their core in those areas.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to outline what steps his Department is taking to deliver on the commitments relating to tackling social disadvantage contained in the Programme for Government which the Department for Social Development is responsible for delivering.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As you will appreciate, business has moved more quickly than we thought. The next item of business will be Question Time. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.30 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 2.10 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Business: Flag Protests

1. **Mr A Maginness** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps they have initiated to help and support local businesses affected by the violence following some flag protests. (AQO 3223/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): It is clear that the ongoing protests that have affected Belfast have led to difficult trading conditions for many local businesses. I was delighted at the announcement of a £1.5 million marketing campaign, Backin' Belfast, to which the Executive have committed £600,000. I met representatives of the traders and hospitality industry this morning to further commit our support. They told me that, over the weekend, two million tweets had included the Backin' Belfast hashtag. I think that the House would join me in wishing the campaign every success.

The Executive continue to discuss what help may be possible. They are fully behind the Backin' Belfast campaign. It will encourage people to come to Belfast to shop, enjoy a meal or avail themselves of the excellent leisure facilities and attractions that the city has to offer. It is vital to the economy of Belfast and our wider economy that the protests do not affect the confidence of people to come and enjoy the activities that Belfast has to offer.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the deputy First Minister for his detailed reply. It is encouraging that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister supports the Backin' Belfast campaign. I think that all Members of the House would be supportive of that.

Apart from financial and moral support, in the present circumstances, is it not necessary for the First and the deputy First Minister to publicly and visibly work together —

Mr Speaker: The Member must come to a question.

Mr A Maginness: — in order to calm the situation and to condemn violence and illegal protests?

Mr M McGuinness: I think that, first and foremost, the important thing as we move forward is to see an end to protests, conflict and violence on the streets. I am aware that all the political parties represented in the Assembly have made their opposition to the violence and the protests clear.

Naturally, I think that as we go forward, the key is to see stability and confidence restored so that traders in Belfast can get on with the business of supplying services to citizens. That is why, over two weeks ago, I actually met some people who were involved in the protests. That may come as a surprise to some people in the House. I also met some people who I believed could influence the

ending of violence on the streets. I know that the First Minister is as committed to ensuring that there is an end to the violence as I am or any Member of the House is.

Therefore, it is hugely important that we recognise the damage that it is doing. There is a wonderful opportunity for all of us to move forward, given that we have, for example, the World Police and Fire Games here later this year and the ongoing City of Culture celebrations in my own city. They have started with resounding success with the Sons and Daughters concert, which will be followed by other important events. It is crucial that we all work together and that we are seen to work together.

As was the case with the killings of the two soldiers at Masserene, Stephen Carroll, Ronan Kerr and David Black, it is very important that we send a clear message to those anti-peace process violent extremists, whether they be of the so-called republican type or so-called unionist type, that we will not kowtow or bow the knee to their activities.

Mr Campbell: Hopefully, everyone right across the community will support the Backin' Belfast campaign. Does the deputy First Minister agree that what the entire community would also like to see is the First and deputy First Minister standing shoulder to shoulder to condemn utterly not only the violence of today but all violence, past and present?

Mr M McGuinness: Given that we are speaking specifically about events on the streets of Belfast over the past four or five weeks, it is hugely important that all of us are seen to be standing together.

The issue of the past will probably come up later in today's Question Time. Different parties have different analyses of how to deal with that, but in this instance, it is vital that all Members and all political parties in the Assembly speak with one voice. People have issued individual statements, and I accept absolutely that all Members in the Assembly are totally opposed to violence of any description whatsoever, and all political parties have made it clear that they want the protests to end. Our efforts have to be bent towards bringing the protests to an end.

It is hugely important that we offer to speak to the people who are involved in the protests. I am willing to speak to more people who are involved in the protests. On Radio Foyle this morning, I heard people from the unionist tradition in the Waterside saying that nobody was speaking to them. I extend my offer to speak to them and am willing to go to the Waterside to speak to people who are protesting.

This is a very important year for the city. If it is a success, every community, every political party, all the Churches, as well as the community and voluntary sector, will benefit from the way in which, in the first instance, we worked together to bring the City of Culture to the city and to ensure that it is a resounding success with a legacy that can provide much-needed employment for our children, whether they are from the Protestant or Catholic tradition.

Mr Copeland: I note the Minister's comments. Does he agree with the president of Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce, Joe Jordan, that the timings of the vote taken at Belfast City Hall that led to the protests so close to Christmas was, to say the least, unhelpful?

Mr M McGuinness: I have heard that said over the past couple of weeks, and I am tempted to think that it is

excusing the violence that happened on the streets, which is a big mistake. Our focus needs to be on the violent, anti-peace-process extremists, whether they are from the unionist community and are the sort of people who call for the resignation of the First Minister of our Executive, or the violent, anti-peace-process extremists who are so-called republicans who thought that it was a good idea to kill prison officer David Black or to attempt to kill a police officer in Omagh over the weekend, as appears to be likely.

We need to stand up against all those people. In my opinion, it is much better that we are seen to be doing that together. I, for one, will not kowtow to any of them, no matter how much we are threatened, and I have been threatened by those people as an individual in the past. I will not bow the knee to any of them. This peace process belongs to all our people, and we will work forward on the basis that the overwhelming majority of unionists, nationalists and republicans are behind the peace process and these institutions. Elections clearly showed that in the past.

People with Disabilities

2. **Mr McQuillan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action they are taking to ensure that the diversity of people with disabilities is recognised. (AQO 3224/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: Junior Minister McCann will answer that question.

Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities places an obligation on government to promote, protect and ensure full and equal enjoyment of all human rights by all persons with disabilities. The involvement of persons with disabilities and their representative organisations in all facets of public life is an important aspect of the convention. The Executive's formal response to our obligations under the United Nations Convention and the findings of the 2009 Promoting Social Inclusion report on disability will be delivered in the context of a new disability strategy.

Article 33 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires that people with disabilities and their representative organisations not only are consulted by the Administration as part of the development of government policy and strategy but are required to be actively engaged.

To fulfil our obligations, a specialist in disability was engaged and worked with our officials to develop a draft strategy, on which we consulted last year. The sectoral expert also advised us on arrangements for consultation, including the development of fully accessible documentation and consultative events. With that support, we completed a consultation exercise and have developed a comprehensive strategy, which incorporates many of the views expressed during the consultation. Arrangements are now being finalised to launch and publicise the Executive's new disability strategy.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the junior Minister for her answer. Does she agree with me that the onus is on us as legislators to introduce legislation to ensure that that happens?

Ms J McCann: Yes. As I said, the purpose of the strategy, which is titled 'A Strategy to Improve the Lives of Disabled People: 2012-2015', is to set out a high-level policy framework to give coherence and guidance to Departments' activities across all the general and disability-specific areas of policy. The actions that follow the strategy will also provide a framework for the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and take forward the work to improve the lives of children and adults with a disability here, based on the recommendations in the PSI disability report.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What awareness-raising actions does OFMDFM plan to take forward on the disability strategy?

Ms J McCann: As I stated, article 33 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires that the Administration not only consult but engage with people with disabilities and their representative organisations as part of the development of government policy and strategy.

As I said, we engaged with someone from the sector, who worked with our officials to develop the draft strategy and the consultation exercise. With that support, we completed the consultation exercise and developed a comprehensive strategy, which incorporated many of the views that people put forward.

Mrs Dobson: Will the junior Minister join me in supporting those who want the way in which people here register for organ donation to change from an opt-in to an opt-out system?

Ms J McCann: I thank the Member for that. We have discussed this, and I know that there are different viewpoints. I certainly believe that we should have further discussions. From talking to many families, I know that there are people who favour that system. However, as I say, there has to be more consultation and discussion.

Mr P Ramsey: Does the junior Minister accept that there is fear, concern and apprehension across Northern Ireland about the imminent welfare reform changes, particularly among disabled people and the groups who represent them? Will she tell the House when the Executive will be in a position to outline the disability action plan that will coincide with the agreed disability strategy that she outlined?

Ms J McCann: Yes, I certainly agree with the Member's analysis of welfare reform and that there is a sense that people are very frightened.

As everyone in the House knows, the coalition Government's Welfare Reform Act became law in Britain on 8 March 2012. I know that the Minister for Social Development has brought proposals to the Executive for a Welfare Reform Bill to give effect locally to those proposed changes.

The people who responded to the ongoing consultation expressed a range of views on welfare reform. It is very clear that disabled people feel vulnerable because of the potential changes, especially to the likes of disability living allowance. The potential for many to lose what they see as their primary source of income, and a very important one, means that much of the strategy would ring hollow if the changes, as they are understood by the disabled community, were introduced. Therefore, we must consider

the potential impact of welfare reform in the context of what we aim to achieve through delivering the disability strategy. We will look at that as well.

Delivering Social Change: Signature Programmes

3. **Mr Irwin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the progress of the Delivering Social Change projects. (AQO 3225/11-15)

11. **Mr McAleer** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their vision for addressing inequalities and tackling deprivation through Delivering Social Change. (AQO 3233/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask junior Minister McCann to respond.

Ms J McCann: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to take questions 3 and 11 together.

Delivering Social Change is not simply a delivery framework. Rather, it is a testimony to how we need to shape our society. There is no doubt that many individuals and communities have been plagued by inequality, poverty, deprivation and missed opportunities to fulfil their potential. We have to seriously address those issues if we are to offer any hope at all to our people, give them heart and make them feel that they have a valued place in society.

2.45 pm

In the midst of managing government and budgets, at times it can be very easy to forget the impact on people of the decisions that we make. Of course, as we make our decisions, there are always competing priorities and challenges to be faced. However, we believe that, in addressing poverty and deprivation, providing our people with a route out of those evils is fundamental to our becoming a better society.

In that vein, on 10 October 2012 the First Minister and the deputy First Minister announced six significant signature programmes, to the value of £26 million, under the Delivering Social Change framework. The programmes are designed to tackle multigenerational poverty, to improve children's health and well-being, and to improve the education and life opportunities for our children and young people.

Since the announcement, the lead Departments for each of those signature programmes have appointed senior responsible owners and have developed initial programme delivery plans. Work on the implementation of those plans is ongoing, and our officials have been meeting each senior responsible officer over recent weeks to review progress and expedite delivery. It is our intention that work will be rolled out on each of the signature programmes at the earliest possible opportunity.

Mr Irwin: I thank the junior Minister for her reply. The programme aims to improve education opportunities and proposes rolling out 230 new teaching positions to deliver one-to-one tuition. How many of those positions will be realised in the Newry and Armagh constituency?

Ms J McCann: I cannot really tell the Member how many positions will be in the Newry and Armagh constituency, but I can say that newly qualified teachers will be rolled out. The Department of Education has now appointed

the Western Education and Library Board to take the lead on the programme. The plan is that schools will recruit teachers and work in its progress on the selection criteria for participating schools and on how the additional resource will be used in the classroom context. The Department of Education remains confident that the programme is on track to have the teachers in place at the start of the 2013-14 academic year, which is in September this year.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the junior Minister for her responses so far. I welcome the Delivering Social Change framework and the £26 million that has been allocated for the signature programmes. Does she agree that, given the amount of money in a range of other Departments' core budgets, it is more important to get the policy and strategy embedded in those various Departments' policies?

Ms J McCann: You are right when you say that the biggest return that we can get to address poverty and deprivation lies in departmental budgets. Part of the Delivering Social Change framework is about getting those Departments to work together and to test new ideas. Implicit in all that, we are shaping a new way to address poverty and disadvantage, as well as how they impact negatively on society, particularly certain parts of our society — our most disadvantaged and most vulnerable.

I believe that Delivering Social Change's greatest influence will be to change the culture within Departments' core spends. We have often talked in the Chamber about the silo culture that exists. We hope that Delivering Social Change will change that culture and that Departments will work collaboratively. The issue is more about directing where money from Departments' core budgets goes.

Mrs Overend: I thank the junior Minister for her answer. For one of the six signature programmes, the Department for Social Development (DSD), along with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), was tasked with the development of 10 social enterprise incubation hubs. Can the junior Minister tell the House how many jobs have been created so far as a result? What is the job-creation target over the project's two-year lifespan?

Ms J McCann: There have not actually been any jobs created so far as a result of the social economy incubation hubs. What is happening at the moment is that DSD and DETI are working together. We are trying to ensure that the social economy hubs are rolled out in a way that will create employment opportunities for people. However, that all has to be discussed and the best possible way put forward.

When doing this work, we have to remember that we need to create employment opportunities and regenerate communities in the top 10 most deprived areas, because that is the whole ethos of the social economy sector. Certainly, I will give the Member any update that I can once decisions have been made on those hubs and where they will be going.

OFMDFM: Equality Unit

4. **Mr Rogers** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister why the equality unit is yet to respond

to correspondence from the Ad Hoc Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements, Welfare Reform Bill. (AQO 3226/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: The Ad Hoc Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements, Welfare Reform Bill, wrote to our Department asking for a briefing from our equality unit on the role of the Equality Commission in screening legislation. A response was issued to the Ad Hoc Committee on 23 January 2013. That set out the Equality Commission's role in relation to Departments' equality schemes as per section 75 and schedule 9 of the legislation.

It is for the Department for Social Development, in the first instance, to assess whether there is a need to carry out an equality impact assessment on the Welfare Reform Bill. The Assembly agreed to the establishment of an Ad Hoc Committee to consider and report on whether the provisions of the Welfare Reform Bill were in conformity with the requirements for equality and observance of human rights.

Tomorrow, the Assembly will debate the report of the Ad Hoc Committee and make a decision on whether the Bill is in conformity with our obligations. If the Equality Commission has any concerns, it will direct those to the Department for Social Development. OFMDFM is not responsible for carrying out screening or an equality impact assessment (EQIA) on policies that are the remit of another Department, and the relevant information is clearly set out in legislation and in Equality Commission guidance.

Mr Rogers: Thanks to the deputy First Minister for his response. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that the best interests of the child is of primary consideration in any legislation. Surely the children of the North have many tiers of social disadvantage. Does he believe that in order for our children to have a level playing field an equality impact assessment should be carried out on the Welfare Reform Bill?

Mr M McGuinness: I think we are all very conscious of the responsibilities that we have under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. DSD published a completed EQIA on its departmental website in May 2012. The Minister for Social Development is on record as saying that the EQIA was a living document and would be updated as additional data became available.

DSD has informed us that it intends to publish an updated EQIA shortly, using data from the 2010-11 family resources survey. The Social Development Minister has also advised that DSD analysts expect to receive an updated policy simulation model from the Department for Work and Pensions, and that further scrutiny of equality issues will be carried out in the form of screening and, if necessary, full EQIAs. We have also been advised that DSD has an extensive programme of work to meet its equality obligations. Minister McCausland informed us that any mitigation has to be considered within the context of the rules governing the funding arrangements for social security spending. So, no doubt the issue raised by the Member is something that can be considered under the EQIA.

Mr Swann: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. A central plank to the Welfare Reform Bill is also the lack of a childcare strategy. Will the deputy First Minister give us an update on when the £12 million held by OFMDFM will be used in developing a strategy?

Mr M McGuinness: Obviously, this is something that will be dealt with in due course. It is hugely important that we move forward to see the outworking of the funding that is going to be made available to ensure that we have a childcare strategy that meets the needs of citizens. No doubt during the course of the discussions that were held by the Ad Hoc Committee, this issue was fully debated and, no doubt, will be debated again here tomorrow.

Dealing with the Past

5. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their response to and action taken regarding the victims commissioners' report on dealing with the past. (AQO 3227/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: In preparing its report, the previous commissioners took due cognisance of the report of the Consultative Group on the Past, which was submitted to the Secretary of State. The key areas of the report are reflections on the consultative group's report, government and politics, victims and survivors, justice and truth, and citizens and communities. Dealing with the past is a key area of our victims and survivors strategy and we have provided, and will continue to provide, support and space for dialogue on this very important topic.

As we all know, this is an emotional and contentious issue, and we all need to reflect seriously on how we might find a way forward in an inclusive and independent way. We are committed to the voices of our victims and survivors being heard and their contributions being acknowledged.

We approved the commission's comprehensive needs assessment in November 2012. The commission's advice and recommendations, including those relating to dealing with the past, have proved invaluable in shaping the new Victims and Survivors Service. Through that, we will provide a high-quality service to victims and survivors, based on their individual assessed needs and the provision of high-quality interventions to meet those needs.

Provision of services will focus on the seven areas of need identified in the comprehensive needs assessment under the three funding streams of health and well-being, social support and financial assistance. Those services will be delivered through groups, directly procured services or individual financial assistance. Along with the service, we remain committed to providing the best possible help and support to victims and survivors to ensure that they receive what they expect and, indeed, deserve.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer in so far as it highlighted some of the work that is being done to meet the needs of victims and survivors. However, what about the substantive issue of dealing with the past? That has been raised and we have seen it characterised by some of the violence on our streets. What specific actions have the First Minister and the deputy First Minister taken to deal with the past and to bring closure to many of the families who want answers? Have you had any discussions with the Secretary of State on those matters?

Mr M McGuinness: Given that the question first proffered by the Member related to the Victims and Survivors Service, my answer was in the context of relaying how that service, established under the tutelage of the new Victims' Commissioner, Kathryn Stone, is decisively moving forward to ensure that all who approach it for assistance

receive it in a way that is bespoke to their individual circumstances. I think that that is of huge importance.

When the question was first asked, there was some confusion as to whether it was about how we are supporting people who were victims and how they dealt with the past through the Victims and Survivors Service. The Member's supplementary question relates to the bigger issue of how we deal with the past.

Arising from the events of the past couple of weeks, there is no doubt that issues need to be dealt with. The past is one of those, and it is best dealt with by achieving agreement, certainly among the five large parties in the Assembly. A wide range of discussions were held prior to Christmas and after the new year, not just about that issue but a number of other issues that are of importance to people in the community, such as symbols, emblems, flags, parades, etc. A job of work needs to be undertaken in a credible way that provides an outcome that, preferably, all of us in the Assembly can sign up to.

Mr I McCrea: Sadly, many victims of the Troubles are from the Mid Ulster constituency. Indeed, I am working with people at the moment to try to set up an organisation to speak on behalf of the innocent victims of the Troubles. Will the deputy First Minister outline what funding opportunities are available to people who wish to set up organisations to help and assist people who are innocent victims?

Mr M McGuinness: Obviously, in the first instance, responsibility for dealing with those issues resides with the Victims' Commission and the Victims and Survivors Service. I have no doubt whatsoever that, if people make an application for support, it will be very seriously considered.

As someone who also represents the Mid Ulster constituency, I am very conscious that, right across the community, there are many who are suffering as a result of the legacy of the past. If people believe that a further group should be established, I respectfully suggest that the best way forward would be to make a submission. No doubt, that will be considered by those with responsibility to take decisions on that matter.

3.00 pm

Education

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

Schools: Homophobic Bullying

1. **Mr Dobson** asked the Minister of Education to outline the level of training which teachers undertake to address homophobic bullying in schools. (AQO 3238/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Bullying, for whatever reason and in whatever form, is unacceptable. Schools are required by law to have policies in place to tackle bullying. Addressing the issue of bullying is a shared challenge, which is why my Department funds and is a member of the local Anti-Bullying Forum. The forum has produced a new resource for schools called "Effective Responses to Bullying Behaviour". Its overall purpose is to promote an anti-bullying culture in schools

to help staff to provide support to pupils who have been bullied, for whatever reason, and pupils who engage in bullying behaviour. The resource is underpinned by a training programme for schools that is being delivered by education and library board staff.

The forum's website has a resources section aimed specifically at dealing with homophobic bullying, including a teachers' fact sheet. The forum has a task group devoted to tackling homophobic bullying and promoting best practice. That group has consulted young people — those who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual and those who do not — about their experiences of homophobic bullying in our schools. This will inform the development of themed anti-bullying guidance for schools. In-service teacher training is provided by the education and library boards and focuses on the needs of all children and young people and is supplemented with school-based advice, ongoing telephone guidance, support in relation to specific anti-bullying issues and advice on the content of a school's anti-bullying policy. Whilst training provided by education and library boards is generic, if a school needs support with a specific type of bullying, such as homophobic bullying, it is signposted to resources or agencies with specific expertise in that area.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he detail how incidents of homophobic bullying are recorded across schools, and can he explain whether, through increased awareness, there has been a notable increase in reports of homophobic bullying?

Mr O'Dowd: The recording of bullying and how it is recorded is a matter for schools. I am aware of engagement with gay rights groups etc and that they are concerned that there is an increase in homophobic bullying throughout our schools. However, as I said, it is a matter for schools how they record bullying. Any form of bullying is wrong, and that includes homophobic bullying. Bullying is often the product of forces exterior to the school and attitudes towards homosexuality within the community, sections of the community or perhaps even in the household. Society has a major role to play in ending the use of the type of language and behaviour that we see among adults in relation to homosexuality. If we do that, we will see a decrease in homophobic bullying in our schools.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Is the Minister content with the existing bullying guidelines for all our schools?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. The guidelines are open to review. Indeed, there is some research going on into the issues around homophobic bullying etc, as I outlined in my original answer. Guidelines are always open to being reissued or strengthened. As that research and the work of the Anti-Bullying Forum continue, if there is a need to strengthen the guidance or bring particular attention to any section of it, I will certainly do that.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his responses so far. Has a training needs analysis for dealing with bullying been carried out for all staff, and when?

Mr O'Dowd: The Anti-Bullying Forum contains members and representatives of the teaching profession and teacher training organisations, as well as gay rights groups. So there is a forum for all these matters to be raised and dealt with. If there is a feeling among teaching staff and the

profession that they require refresh training on the matter, it should be raised with the Anti-Bullying Forum, which can bring it to my attention and recommend what, if any, changes are required.

Mr Agnew: Does the Minister believe that the teaching in some schools that homosexuality is a sin is in contradiction with a teacher's duty to protect pupils from homophobic bullying?

Mr O'Dowd: It has not been brought to my attention that any individual school is teaching that homosexuality is a sin. The ethos of any school is a matter for the board of governors of that school. I clearly put it on record that it is not my job to deal with morality issues; it is my job to deal with educational and community issues. However, I do not believe that such practices are beneficial to the well-being of our community. In the 21st century, we should treat all our citizens with equality and respect. Being gay and being in a loving relationship with anyone is not a sin in any context of the word as I understand it.

School Leavers: Higher Education

2. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Education for an estimate of the reduction in the number of school leavers going into higher education because they choose other paths such as learning a trade, based on the school curriculum as well as advice given by careers departments in schools. (AQO 3239/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Different pathways, whether into higher or further education, training or employment, are valid for different young people. Our workforce, now and in the future, needs to be able to respond to and seize the new opportunities presented by the global marketplace in rebalancing our economy. Increasing the skills and employability base here are key drivers for growth as set out in the Executive's economic strategy, as is the need for higher professional and technical skills and higher education qualifications. The annual statistics show that, in 2006, 38.5% of school leavers entered higher education. The most recent available figures show that, in 2010-11, 41.7% entered higher education. Statistics do not reveal information on what precisely has influenced a pupil to choose a particular pathway.

My priority is to ensure that pupils are ready for work and life by the time they leave school. My policies are about putting the pupil first. That is why I am introducing the entitlement framework. The entitlement framework is about ensuring that pupils have access to a range of relevant, engaging and economically relevant courses with clear progression pathways. It is about schools, as well as young people and their parents, having high aspirations and then achieving them. The joint DE/DEL careers strategy aims to ensure that young people have access at the right time to high-quality careers education, information, advice and guidance, so that they can make informed choices leading to the most appropriate route for them as individuals.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for his answer. Is the Minister content that the careers advice given is sufficient and of benefit to those who struggle to find employment post education?

Mr O'Dowd: I can point to the most recent Education and Training Inspectorate report, which shows that

career guidance advice is good or very good in the vast majority of our schools. Over the past number of years, interventions at departmental level from DE and DEL, the policy and guidance issued to our careers teachers and the strategies that have been put forward have assisted in that. It is also down to the good work of the schools and the careers advisers from DEL and DE. We can be more confident than we were in the past about the type of career advice being given, but there is also a responsibility for parents in the equation. Parents should be imaginative about the pathways their children choose. The traditional pathways of academia will perhaps not always bear the fruit of employment in the modern global economic market we operate in. I encourage parents to explore all options with careers advisers and with their children before making choices for the future.

Mr Kinahan: Will the Minister detail where skills and further education have a place in the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) and in area planning?

Mr O'Dowd: I am of the view that education is a skill. A good education is a very valuable skill to have moving forward. That is where that fits into the title, as far as I am concerned. The entitlement framework, which is now at the core of the educational policies moving forward, allows young people to study 24 to 27 different subjects across a range of areas, in academia, general and applied. That allows young people to make decisions about going forth in the future.

I can understand why Members are focusing on the ESA Bill; it is before the Committee. The ESA Bill is one part of our education system — a very important part — setting out how education will be managed in the future. However, underneath that is a range of policies that allow our young people to move forward with confidence into an international employment market.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's answer, in particular the reference to the involvement of parents. Does he understand my concern that there is not a sufficiently collaborative approach by careers departments and schools towards pupils, parents and colleges and that a more defined approach has to be taken to make sure that young people move towards the creative industries rather than the traditional pathways, which, as we know now, are not the future?

Mr O'Dowd: Again, I point towards the Education and Training Inspectorate's most recent report, which highlighted that the careers advice is either good or very good in the vast majority of our schools, but we are always seeking ways of improving that. I believe that we are getting the general direction right. There will always be exceptions to the rule, and, if the Member has any instances that he wishes to raise with me privately, I will happily investigate them further.

Later, in February, I will issue an information leaflet and publicity drive — specifically aimed at parents but also at young people — around the entitlement framework. That will give them further information about exactly what the entitlement framework is designed to do. It is designed to allow our young people to equip themselves with the necessary skills across a range of subjects to ensure that they can go out into the employment world with a flexible approach across a number of subjects, which employers

will find attractive, whether they are in academia or the range of industries that are out there.

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Education Bill: Shared Education

4. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Education how shared education is promoted in the Education Bill. (AQO 3241/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education Bill contains two sets of provisions that will enable and facilitate greater sharing, in my opinion. First, the provisions on area planning will span all school sectors and types. Through shared planning, we will have more shared provision, driven by the educational needs of children and young people. Secondly, establishing ESA as a single employer will help to facilitate schools' sharing of staff where there is agreement to do so. There is already much good sharing practice in education, including excellent work within area learning communities. The provisions will enable schools to build on that good practice to the benefit of all. I await the outcome of the report from the ministerial advisory group on advancing shared education, which I should receive in early February.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister for his reply. Will he say whether he shares the aspiration of moving to a single education system in Northern Ireland, and, if the answer is yes, will he give an approximate timescale for when he would like to see such a system introduced?

Mr O'Dowd: My aspiration at this time is to see the ESA legislation over the line. That will be a first step towards a greater sharing of sectors than there has ever been before. We had the education and library boards and people around the one table. We also had CCMS etc. What we are doing now is bringing all the sectors around the one table, in the one authority, responsible for the delivery of education policy in the North. That is a major step forward.

Education has been pointed to many times as the solution to sectarianism in our society. Education has a significant role to play in resolving sectarianism in our society, but education is not the cause of sectarianism in our society. Therefore, it cannot be held responsible for all the ills in this society. Communities, politicians and all of us have to move forward to ensure that we can reach a stage where everyone is comfortable with a single education system, as the Member has portrayed. However, at the moment, I believe that the Education and Skills Authority is a significant step in the right direction.

Lord Morrow: The SELB viability audit showed that, of 52 post-primary schools, there are 13 — 11 voluntary plus two integrated — that have a nil deficit, while the remaining 39 have a projected deficit of £8.7 million. Why would ESA seek to destroy something that has shown that it is effective? It appears that the Minister continues to target successful schools in the Education Bill.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member either has not read the Education Bill or has read someone's version of it. I suggest that he reads the Bill and then comes back to the House to ask questions about it. There is no provision in the Bill that destroys the voluntary principle. Not a single clause in the Education and Skills Authority Bill destroys the voluntary principle. It allows for the facilitation of the voluntary principle moving forward. Indeed, it will allow for

schools in the future to adopt the voluntary principle if they are willing to do so.

The Member's measure of a successful school cannot be based on the deficit or surplus of a school. There is a much broader range of issues to measure. I suggest to the Member that the continued subservient relationship of his party to certain grammar schools is not helpful. It is not helpful to the Protestant working-class communities that, you have been telling us, you have been defending over recent weeks. I suggest that, if you spent less time tugging your forelock in front of them, less time wringing your cap and more time challenging them over their responsibilities for education, our society would move forward much better.

3.15 pm

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister agree that shared education may be an opportunity for some rural schools to survive in the context of area planning?

Mr O'Dowd: There is no general threat to rural or urban schools. There will always be a need for rural schools, which will have to be met in a different configuration from that which applies in urban areas because of distances travelled and other factors. We also have isolated rural communities who believe that their school gives them stability and confidence. I am not prepared to invoke any act that would see that eroded.

The current policy protects rural schools. They have been analysed under that policy in area planning, and they will continue into the future. Rural communities should have equality of educational provision. If schools can no longer provide equality of education, taking all the other stipulations into account, it is only right and proper to take action against such schools to make sure that rural communities are provided with top-quality education.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. He went some way to answering my question in his response to Mr McCallister. Does he believe that shared education provision will be strengthened by the Education Bill?

Mr O'Dowd: As I said to Mr McCallister, I believe that it will. The Education Bill allows for partners in education to sit at the table on an equal basis. They will have to work together on an equal basis, plan school provision together and be in a model that ensures that everyone is treated fairly and equally under the law.

I can understand that, while a Bill is progressing through the Assembly, there is continuing negotiation in public on some of its aspects. People raise concerns, some of which are genuine and some not so genuine. I urge people to read the Bill in its totality and look for the objectives and the direction in which we are heading and not simply concentrate on the needs of a minority of a minority of schools.

North/South Ministerial Council: Cross-border Education

5. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the North/South Ministerial Council survey on cross-border education. (AQO 3242/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The North/South Ministerial Council survey on cross-border education took place in the North between

30 October and 16 November 2012, and the survey in the South began on 11 December and finished on 18 January. Officials from the respective Departments are working towards a joint analysis of the data, and a report will be presented to the next North/South Ministerial Council meeting in education format on 27 February.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As a result of the area planning process, does the Minister foresee closer co-operation in border communities between primary schools and post-primary schools on either side of the border?

Mr O'Dowd: That is the logical outcome of closer co-operation under the North/South Ministerial Council and in the education sector. We require closer co-operation between public services along the border corridor. The proposals are in place for the benefit of the people who live along the border corridor. If it makes sense to do it in the health sector, it makes sense, in my view, to do it in education. I will raise the issue with my counterpart, Minister Quinn, when we next meet on 27 February.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that. Does he think that the outcome of the survey will help to secure schools such as St Mary's High School in Brollagh, Belleek, and St Aidan's High School in Derrylin?

Mr O'Dowd: Those issues are best dealt with under two formats: the survey and area planning. Both formats have interlocking outcomes, responsibilities and information. If there is a local solution that is viable and works for the benefit of young people, I will commit to moving it forward, but it has to be taken into account in area planning and under the North/South Ministerial Council format.

I am aware that detailed work has been done in the areas that the Member mentioned. I am studying the details of the education and library board's response on area planning, and I will comment on that when I come to the House to respond on area planning.

Teachers: Permanent Posts

6. **Mr McGimpsey** asked the Minister of Education what proportion of newly qualified teachers have found permanent teaching posts. (AQO 3243/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: From 1 April 2012 to 21 January 2013, there were 639 graduates. Of the 484 registered with the General Teaching Council, 5-17% have found permanent teaching posts.

Mr McGimpsey: The Minister's answer seems to indicate a substantial deficit in the number of students who graduate as teachers and find work. How does he plan to address that deficit?

Mr O'Dowd: This relates to an earlier question that I was asked about careers advice, careers information and career choices. There is no career that, if you study for it, guarantees you a job at the end. Teaching is clearly one of those areas. Indeed, for the graduates and postgraduates in a wide range of subjects coming out of our universities, there is no guarantee.

Over the past number of years, we have reduced our trainee teacher intake by 32%. Our teacher training colleges just about operate on a basis on which they are viable. So we have a choice to make. We can decide to continue to dramatically reduce our teacher training

intake to the point at which our teacher training colleges become completely unviable. If we do that, our students will travel to England, Wales or the South of Ireland to train as teachers. When they come back, whoever is in the ministerial post at the time will be asked, "How many of our trainee teachers are not in work?". The figures will be similar, but we will have lost our teacher training colleges. We will have lost the ability to train our teachers in our curriculum.

The Member may well shake his head, but he was the Minister of Health. I am sure that, when he was looking at the training numbers for nurses, doctors and other medical professionals, this was also in his head. Do we completely abandon training here, or do we plan a provision that allows for an intake that is currently around 600? In tandem with that, we have encouraged schools to recruit newly qualified teachers. We have encouraged schools to ensure that, when looking for substitute teachers, they use newly qualified teachers instead of bringing back retired teachers. The Department has done everything in its power to ensure that newly qualified teachers are given a fair playing field when seeking employment in our education system. However, Members will have to answer this question: do they want teacher training to occur here, or do they want all our students to travel elsewhere? That is the decision that will have to be made.

Mr Dallat: I have listened carefully to the Minister's response. I certainly do not suggest that we do not have teacher training in Northern Ireland. However, given our awful levels of literacy and numeracy, I suggest to the Minister that he consider finding places in schools to at least give newly qualified teachers an opportunity to get their qualifications and stop the mass exodus to other countries to find a job.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member will be aware that we have introduced a scheme whereby, over the next couple of years, over 200 newly qualified teachers will perform exactly that task in our schools. The Executive have made a financial commitment to do that. However, the Member will also be aware that the block grant — for want of a better term — provided by the British Government has been slashed dramatically and all Departments are operating on a cut budget. Where would the Member like me to take money out of the education budget to employ all the unemployed newly qualified teachers? If you are going to do one, you have to do the other. There are no simple answers to any of these questions.

Mrs Hale: What action is the Minister taking to ensure that there is a level playing field and that newly qualified teachers can move between the controlled sector and CCMS?

Mr O'Dowd: The only barrier, if it is a barrier, relates to the Catholic certificate. I assume that that is what the Member refers to. The Catholic certificate is available through St Mary's and through distance learning from Stranmillis, so all qualified teachers can obtain it.

In my answer to Mr McGimpsey about removing barriers to achieving employment for all teachers, I referred to my Department making it less attractive for newly retired teachers to return. We have made it less attractive for schools to employ retired teachers on a temporary basis and more attractive for them to take on newly qualified

teachers. So, I am not suggesting for one moment that it is not difficult for newly qualified teachers out there. It is difficult, and I have had representations from many newly qualified teachers who have not obtained employment. However, we have reduced the intake by 32%. The next reduction, if we do that, will likely see the removal of teacher training colleges altogether. That would be an economic mistake, and it would be a mistake for our educational strategy. Teacher training colleges here teach towards our curriculum. If you go to England, Wales or down South, you learn to their curriculum, which is not what our young people learn. So, let us ensure that the actions that we take are measured and that we have sustainability not only in our schools but in our teacher training colleges.

Nursery Education: Class Sizes

Mr Speaker: I call Patsy McGlone.

Mr McGlone: Ceist uimhir a seacht, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member translate?

Mr McGlone: Sorry, Mr Speaker. You have not taken the Irish lessons yet. Question 7, a Cheann Comhairle — Mr Speaker.

7. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Education, in relation to 'Learning to Learn — A Framework for Early Years', whether the proposal to introduce flexibility in overall enrolment for nursery schools and nursery units up to a maximum class size of 30 will be matched with an increased resource allocation. (AQO 3244/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. I thank the Member for his question. I launched 'Learning to Learn — A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning' in December 2012. The proposed actions are the subject of focused consultation that concludes on 31 January 2013. I will consider the comments received during the consultation and their impact on the current proposals before finalising the way forward.

The framework proposes revising the preschool education programme to ensure that all target-age children benefit from an equitable preschool experience, including the introduction of flexibility in overall enrolment for nursery schools and nursery units in certain circumstances. It is proposed that nursery schools or nursery units in primary schools that are oversubscribed with target-age children will be able to apply for a temporary increase in their enrolment, if the additional children are all target age and the board of governors is satisfied that the premises and staffing structure can support the increase. Those who have approval to temporarily increase their enrolment will be allocated the relevant funding per pupil via the common funding formula under the local management of schools (LMS) arrangements.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Thanks very much, Mr Speaker. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire chomh maith as ucht an fhreagra, agus b'fhéidir le tuilleadh eile eolais a chur leis. I want to ask for a wee bit more detail. I heard some of what the Minister said, so is he suggesting that it would be a better option to open additional units rather than to have additional places at existing hard-pressed facilities to make preschool education that bit easier for every child to access?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. I thank the Member for the question. No, I am not suggesting that; I am saying that the general rule is that the money follows the pupil. So, if four additional preschool children are going into a unit, the funding will follow them. It is up to the school's board of governors to decide whether that is the best option. For example, do they have the staffing complement? Do they have the facilities for four more children? So, it is a decision for them. It is an option.

The other option exists in areas where there is a shortage of preschool places to bring forward a development proposal for a full unit of 26. However, if we are dealing with numbers in and around four, you are not going to get approval for an additional unit of 26, so there have to be economies of scale. I am putting that forward as an option. If schools want to take it up, I will facilitate them to do so if the consultation responses do not highlight something that we have not already thought about during the process.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister give his assessment of how successful or maybe unsuccessful he has been in closing the gap in funding between statutory nursery provision and those in the voluntary and community and private sectors?

Mr O'Dowd: If you want my assessment, I think that I have been very good at it. However, it is really up to others to make that assessment, including the Education Committee. We are beginning to narrow the gap in the funding that is available. Over the past number of years, we have increased funding to the voluntary and community sector to assist it in closing that gap. However, part of the new strategy also looks at the capacity and training available to community and voluntary settings and private settings to ensure that staff there can provide the most up-to-date curriculum, which is available to those in statutory settings. So, things are beginning to improve. I am sure that whether people are satisfied or not will depend on who you speak to.

3.30 pm

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Murder of Detective Garda Donohoe

Mr Speaker: Mr Conall McDevitt has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister of Justice. I remind Members that if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually — and I emphasise the word “continually” — in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be automatically called to ask a supplementary. I will then call other Members who are on their feet to ask a supplementary, taking into account the same issues as I do during Question Time. I also remind Members that, as there may be cross-border issues, they should be very careful not to say anything that might impact on any case that may come before the courts.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is not directly relevant to the question for urgent oral answer. When the junior Minister for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister was answering questions, she intimated that she was going to group questions 3 and 11. It transpires that the person who was due to ask question 11 was not in their place. Is it in order for questions to be answered when a person is not in their place?

Mr Speaker: It is really an issue for the Minister. When questions are grouped, I expect Members to be in the House. On this occasion, that did not happen. There is sometimes a feeling that when a Member's question is down at number 10, 11 or 12 on the Order Paper, there is no need for them to come to the House because the Minister will probably not get to number 10, 11 or 12 anyway. That is totally and absolutely wrong and is certainly the wrong way to read the situation, because Members need to be aware that their question could be grouped a lot earlier. I remind the House that I expect Members whose questions might eventually be grouped to be in the House. We will move on.

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Justice what co-operation is taking place between criminal justice agencies North and South in response to the murder of Detective Garda Donohoe.

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): First and foremost, I am sure that every Member of this House will wish to join me in utterly condemning the senseless and callous murder of Detective Garda Adrian Donohoe. My thoughts are with his wife and family and with all his colleagues in an Garda Síochána. I spoke with my ministerial colleague Alan Shatter TD on Saturday to offer my condolences, and I was in touch with him again this morning. We are committed to working together against the criminal gangs and to protecting all our communities, North and South.

The police investigation is an operational matter. However, I know that the Chief Constable has spoken to the Garda Commissioner, Martin Callinan, and offered the assistance and full support of the PSNI for the investigation. Members will be aware that it is now an active and ongoing investigation in both jurisdictions.

Mr McDevitt: I join the Minister of Justice in condemning Garda Donohoe's murder. I ask the Minister to join me in calling on everyone in this part of Ireland who might be able to assist in and support the investigation to do the right thing and make sure that information is passed on either to the PSNI or to the Garda Síochána. I also ask him to join me in expressing solidarity with the members of an Garda Síochána — not least Garda Donohoe's widow, a serving officer, and his brothers, who are also serving officers — and members of the PSNI, especially the constable who, only this weekend, had to face up to a potential threat on his life.

Mr Ford: I have absolutely no difficulty in concurring with Mr McDevitt's sentiments. Any person in either jurisdiction on this island who has any information whatsoever that might help to catch perpetrators of this or any other serious crime has a duty to inform the PSNI, the Garda Síochána or an organisation such as Crimestoppers. As members of the PSNI are showing their solidarity with their colleagues in an Garda Síochána, I certainly wish to show my solidarity. Mr McDevitt correctly highlighted the fact that that was very much a family issue for the Donohoe family, and they will be suffering all the more because of that. On a number of occasions in my time as Minister, including in recent weeks, I have had to express solidarity to members of the PSNI because of what they have suffered from threats to their lives and from violence on the streets from different quarters. That solidarity is being shown between the PSNI and an Garda Síochána today, and I readily join myself and my Department in that expression of solidarity. The fight against terrorism and organised crime is a fight in which we are all united. That is clearly seen in the response of the PSNI to an Garda Síochána today, and the response that has come from an Garda Síochána to the PSNI in the past.

Mr Givan: I join in the condemnation of this brutal act. I particularly think of the wife and the two young children who have been left without a father, something that many people in Northern Ireland, sadly, experienced throughout the darkest days of the Troubles. Given the reports that these serious organised crime gangs are moving from Dublin in particular and that some are residing in places such as Newry and Warrenpoint, what assurances can the Minister give to the House and to the public at large that Northern Ireland is not seen as a safe place for these individuals to reside and that every effort will be made to track them down?

Mr Ford: I echo the sentiments of my Committee Chair regarding our sympathy for the family of Garda Donohoe. He spoke specifically about crime gangs. At the meeting last week of the Organised Crime Task Force (OCTF) stakeholder group, there was a report of significant efforts being taken by the PSNI in conjunction with colleagues in an Garda Síochána and a number of other criminal justice agencies to disrupt, deter and dismember organised crime gangs. Sadly, the reality is that some of these crime gangs spread across every part of Europe, if not wider, but I have no doubt that we are seeing extremely good co-operation across the border and within the United Kingdom generally, which is assisting the PSNI in its role of dealing with these crime gangs, wherever they originate from.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht na bhfreagraí sin. I join colleagues in their words of condemnation, and,

indeed, I offer condolences to the Donohoe family and his colleagues in an Garda Síochána. Does the Minister agree that this points up both the need and the value of co-operation across the island in dealing with serious crime?

Mr Ford: I echo the comments of the Committee Deputy Chair. Clearly, there is a significant need to co-operate across all the jurisdictions in these islands and beyond in the fight against serious organised crime. There is a particular and severe cross-border issue that directly affects us by the very fact that a land border makes it easier for people to operate than the water that separates us from other people. From the reports that I get through OCTF and the work that I see when I meet Alan Shatter through the intergovernmental agreement, there is no doubt that there is a lot of cross-border work going on. It is absolutely clear that that requires the support of each and every one of us.

Mr Elliott: I add my sympathies to the family and colleagues of late Garda Donohoe. Given the need for good co-operation between criminal agencies in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, which the Minister has outlined, is it not vital that a criminal agency in Northern Ireland continues? Especially given that the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) is soon to disappear, will the UK National Crime Agency (NCA) operate in Northern Ireland?

Mr Ford: First, we should take account of the words of sympathy that Mr Elliott has expressed, because that should surely be the focus of our discussions in answer to this question. I highlighted and will continue to highlight the good examples of co-operation on a North/South basis. There is also the need that we co-operate more widely. The current position is that agreement has not been reached about the full operation of the UK National Crime Agency that is due to be set up according to the Crime and Courts Bill and which will replace the Serious Organised Crime Agency in the devolved sphere. It will, of course, have powers to operate in the non-devolved sphere. What I am keen to see is that we should have such a body operating in a way that is fully accountable, in line with the policing architecture which exists in Northern Ireland and contributing to the fight against organised crime and such heinous crimes as human trafficking and child exploitation online.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Indeed, like others, I also join in the words of condolence to Garda Donohoe's family for this appalling act of criminality.

Reference has already been made to the National Crime Agency. Does the Minister agree with me that it is important that Northern Ireland sees a seamless transition from SOCA to that body in order to allow the full fight of crime to be delivered in Northern Ireland by the PSNI, by their colleagues in the rest of the United Kingdom and on a cross-border basis?

Mr Ford: Again, I note the references that my colleague makes to the appalling crime that we are discussing. It is vital that we join up law enforcement in the best possible way in each of the jurisdictions of these islands. In Northern Ireland, we have close cross-border and cross-channel interests. That is why I have regular meetings with the Home Office and the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Justice alongside the Minister for Justice and Equality in

Dublin. All of that is necessary, and I believe that it is vital that Northern Ireland should be joined to the appropriate UK agencies in the right way, just as we need to maintain the structures that we have for North/South co-operation.

Mr Allister: I join in condemning this foul murder and I welcome the fact that there is, in law enforcement, a better standard of co-operation between North and South, certainly than existed for decades when the IRA was murdering RUC officers in Northern Ireland and getting open-house treatment in the Republic. On the issue of the NCA, the Minister indicates disappointment at steps towards its introduction in Northern Ireland. Will he be clear? Who has vetoed the proposition for a legislative consent motion to enable the NCA to operate across the United Kingdom and within Northern Ireland? Is that in line with the maturity that we were promised with the devolution of policing and justice?

Mr Ford: I have already, to some extent, answered the points made by Mr Allister. I am not sure that even Mr Allister would expect me to reveal the confidences of an Executive meeting in this Chamber, although other people seem to have little difficulty in ensuring that leaks happen in other places.

I will restate my position. I put a paper to the Executive some months ago. Prior to that, I had considerable detailed discussions with the Home Secretary in which I sought to ensure that appropriate arrangements were made that would enable the NCA to operate in Northern Ireland, taking account of our policing architecture, respecting the primacy of the PSNI and ensuring that there was a role for the Police Ombudsman and others. Following discussions with other colleagues, I put further recommendations to the Home Secretary before Christmas, as to amendments that might be made to her proposals. I regret to say that there were requests for other proposals that I did not feel that I could put to the Home Secretary because I did not believe that they would have left the NCA as a viable operation to support the work of the PSNI in the way that I believe is absolutely vital.

Mr Speaker: The House may take its ease as we move into the next piece of business.

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

Private Members' Business

Local Government: Review of Public Administration

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 a further 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected, and it has been published on the Marshalled List. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose his amendment and a further five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

3.45 pm

Mrs D Kelly: I beg to move

That this Assembly acknowledges the significant workload and substantial costs involved in the delivery of the Executive's local government reform transition as proposed under the review of public administration; believes that the Executive should provide financial support for the reform process, including for future rates convergence; and calls on the Executive to provide financial support to councils to cover the upfront costs of RPA, which yield no short-term savings, and to ensure that these costs do not result in rate increases.

I propose the motion on behalf of the SDLP. On the day that is in it, and knowing that the Minister is just back from Ballymena, where he joined in the celebrations of awarding the freedom of the city to Liam Neeson, I suggest that he might use these words to his Executive colleagues:

"I don't have any money. But what I do have are a very particular set of skills; skills I have acquired over a very long career. Skills that make me a nightmare for people like you."

I know that the Minister has, over a number of months, indeed, over the past two years, tabled papers to the Executive and attempted to table them a number of times, much to the dismay of some of his ministerial colleagues. He eventually got them tabled last week, and they call for money for the reform of local government. As Members will know, the SDLP is the only party that did not support a four-year Budget that did not allow for any funding for the review of public administration (RPA). Therefore, it is very cynical and hypocritical of many parties at local council level, particularly those who are double-jobbers, to commiserate with their local council colleagues about the burden that will be put on local ratepayers because the Executive have failed thus far to make any promises on funding.

I believe that, when the Executive got over their hiccups around the Boundary Commission report, they finally agreed in November 2011 that the 11-council model would be going full steam ahead. When that agreement came, it was a surprise, because it was primarily an agreement between Sinn Féin and the DUP that there would be an 11-council model. The funding guidelines agreed by the Executive at that time were, first, that the implementation costs associated with reform would not be met by central government. Consequently, local government will be

required to bear those costs. Secondly, functions that are to transfer from central government to local government should be fit for purpose, sufficiently funded and cost-neutral to the ratepayer at the point of transfer. This would require the transfer of resources from central to local government when the functions transfer. I do not believe that any of us could fault that principle. However, we in the SDLP and, I believe, others, at least a local council level, have trouble accepting the first one.

I know that, in the past number of monitoring rounds, the Minister has bid, with no success unfortunately, for some of the transition costs to be met. Those transition costs are estimated to be in the region of £38 million. I understand that those costs will have no benefit to the local council. Others will remember the PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) report that talked about upfront costs of £118 million over a five-year period but over £240-odd million savings over a 25-year period. Some of us could agree and accept that some of the savings that could be realised at local council level over the longer term could be funded, whether through local government funding or a loan from central government in the short term. However, many Members will not accept at local council level that the £38 million costs should be borne entirely by the local ratepayer.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member has, at various levels, expressed scepticism at the figures produced in the PwC report. I point out that, to be fair to PwC, the reference was £420 million, not £240 million. The Member seemed to get the figures the wrong way round.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you for that. There are too many figures in the RPA debate, perhaps.

Some Members at Committee level and others attempt to suggest that the whole process has been slowed down. Anyone looking objectively at the work that needs to be done to make RPA happen will acknowledge the fact that there is a substantial amount of work to be done. Indeed, the regional transition committees are meeting, and I understand that they have drawn up an implementation plan of some 140 recommendations that have yet to be realised. So, it is a huge amount of work. Of course, the Secretary of State also has a role in so far as she has to appoint a commissioner for the district electoral wards. That is supposed to be completed by the end of this year. There is a huge amount of work to be done, but the cost to the ratepayer is something that we are very concerned about. That concern is one that our colleagues at local councils share.

I will highlight some of the costs. There are costs around ICT, for example, and the design of websites, and of having systems in place that will meet the needs of new services being devolved, as well as the standardisation of services across local councils. There are also the costs of a change manager and of transition. Of course, there are savings to be made over the longer term, with fewer staff at the top, fewer directors and fewer chief executives. There are also the severance costs for local councils.

On behalf of the SDLP, I put on record our support for and acknowledgement of the many people in all the parties throughout the North who, over some very difficult times, stood up to those who were opposed to democracy. Many of them made the ultimate sacrifice; they lost their life.

There are also costs that have to be considered in relation to the establishment of new headquarters and where they

are going to be. There are also associated costs with looking at the procedures, policies and harmonisation of some of the backroom services around finance, HR and payroll. There is also a lot of work to be done around the community-planning initiative and capacity building for staff and officers. The Committee for the Environment recently found, and has been looking at, the training budgets that are in existence across the district councils, so that they can be used now rather than a cost being put on central government in that preparation. Even at that, those budgets would not meet the requirements of the work that is needed for the capacity building that will allow the reform to take place over the longer term.

There are also some assurances. Hopefully, the Minister will restate his commitment to ensuring that the safeguards and protections in equality rights across all local councils are resolved and are put in place long before the new councils are formed. We also want to look at the principle of the shadow councils and the preparation that has to be done for those elections. That will demand considerable thought, particularly in relation to some of the functions that will be given to those shadow councils and the decisions that they can make.

There is, of course, a lot of concern across the business sector about rates convergence and the debates to be had and the decisions to be made around assets and liabilities. The DUP amendment acknowledges some of the sentiment of the motion, but, unfortunately, it does not ask the Executive to meet any of the upfront costs. I do not believe that that is something that we can accept. We are very clear —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I will, but I have very little time.

Mr Allister: The Member makes a strong argument for the provision of funding. Can she help me, however? If the DUP/Sinn Féin block holds its line on this and the funding is not forthcoming, should RPA reform go ahead? Or, is she saying that, without the funding, it cannot, and should not, go ahead?

Mrs D Kelly: I do not think that there is any choice in the matter, as Sinn Féin and the DUP have made it very clear that RPA will go ahead. A substantial amount of work has been done already, and that is something that I was trying to outline in my opening remarks.

There is an expectation that RPA will go ahead. I understood that the rationale was to have better service delivery and more effective local reform.

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

Mrs D Kelly: The SDLP will not shy away from that. We urge that, whatever work and savings can be accrued under the ICE scheme, it should be full steam ahead with that regardless of the time frame.

Mr Hamilton: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "administration;" and insert

"recognises that local government will be the beneficiary of the savings that result from reform; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to engage with the Minister of Finance and Personnel on financing reform and, in particular, on the issue of rates

convergence with the aim of developing a solution that does not result in rate increases.”

I listened to Minister Ford's response to a question from Mr Allister, when he said that he would not reveal Executive confidences. I felt that Mrs Kelly skirted very close to revealing Executive deliberations, although, of course, she is not a member of the Executive — at least, not yet, anyway. *[Laughter.]* There is, potentially, still time.

I would never seek to speak for everybody in the House. However, at least we have, by and large, moved forward in our debates on the review of public administration from discussions about whether it should or will happen to discussions about how it should be funded because it is happening. That is, at least, a crumb of comfort —

Mr McCarthy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: I have hardly even started to make an argument. I will give way.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful to my colleague from Strangford for giving way. A question that I asked the Finance Minister last week comes to mind. He quite clearly said that Mr Attwood was asking for far too much and that savings from the reform of public administration would cover everything; there would be no expense to the ratepayer. That is our concern.

Mr Hamilton: I thought for a second that the Member was making my argument for me and would save the House eight minutes. Let me come to that point in time. I will build up to that and address the Member's point in due course.

For me, the review of public administration was not just about savings, monetary benefits or better service provision in the longer term. First, it was about having powers at the appropriate local level. Who is better placed to take decisions on planning, regeneration and local economic and tourism development than councillors? I agree with Mrs Kelly's comments. I have heard the Minister talk about how, in the past, it was a bulwark for democracy when there was a democratic deficit in Northern Ireland and commend the sterling work of councillors down through the years. There is no better place for that. It is the appropriate place for power to be on issues that affect local communities.

Secondly, it was always about local government's potential to deliver more, maybe not at the outset but over time. It has a unique capacity. On the mainland, councils can borrow because they are not in central government. They can borrow in a way that does not score against the public sector balance sheet and deliver on some of those issues, particularly regeneration. In city and county councils throughout England, Scotland and Wales, local authorities are making huge investments because of the way in which they are structured and can be financed. There is huge potential to do that in Northern Ireland with bigger, more ambitious councils, bigger rate bases and a greater ability to pay for those sorts of schemes. It is about power at the appropriate level and local government's longer-term potential.

Obviously, it is also about benefits and savings. Undoubtedly, there are costs, which we acknowledge. A tremendous amount of work is being done, as we speak, to make RPA happen. It is now some 800 to 900 days until it happens, so you would expect work to be ongoing.

The work that is going on will be partly on the transitional issues that Mrs Kelly mentioned and partly on building towards the savings and monetary benefits that are undoubtedly there, which are the bedrock and foundation of why we are going forward with RPA. It is worth making the point, as the amendment does, that those savings will be reaped at local government rather than central government level. Forgive me for using, as I will probably continue to do, the phrases “local government” and “central government”. That, understandably, raises division and a them-and-us type of mentality. It is not intentional, just a reflection of reality and useful terminology for the debate. The savings will be reaped at local rather than central level. I will correct Mrs Kelly and my colleague Mr Weir: the PwC report stated that, for £118 million investment, a benefit of £428 million would be reaped over a 25-year period. We can debate whether that figure is right and extrapolate from when the report was done to now, but it is clear that there is a significant magnitude of savings to be had if the RPA is done right. If there is collaboration on ICT, procurement, shared services, waste management, finance and property services, there is huge potential for savings, not on a one-off but on an ongoing basis moving forward.

4.00 pm

Mrs Kelly mentioned two key principles that I agree with, and I jotted those down in my notes. The first is that, when functions and responsibilities are transferred from central government, they are properly resourced. I think that everybody in the House agrees with that, and that should be done. Some of the costs that she talked about may be better funded on or before transfer, but that is getting down to the nitty-gritty of how you would fund it. The second key principle, which was adopted by the Executive last year, is that they would not pay the upfront costs. It would be a matter for local government to pay on the basis that it would be the beneficiary of the savings in the longer term. If there are to be upwards of £400-odd million of savings over a longer period and into the future, the argument that local government should pay the costs is reasonable. We can argue about what happens in the final analysis. That is obviously what the debate is about, but that is a reasonable position for the Executive to adopt. Why should central government pay for something that local government will benefit from? I say that knowing full well that, even though we talk about central government and local government, we are still talking about the same ratepayers. A different pound of the same ratepayer's money will pay for the reform, whether central government ponies up the money or local government pays for it. It is the same public money. It may come from two different pots in terms of how we define it within the totality of government, but the same ratepayer's pound will pay for it; it will just come out of different pockets. It is reasonable that those who benefit from it should pay for it or at least pay for most of it. Now we are in a position in which, because of the campaign, an expectation has developed that central government will pay for some of it. That has led to a delay on the part of some councils in moving forward on some of their work. It is being embraced by some in local government — I do not necessarily mean elected Members — as a reason to put up against —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: I will give way very briefly.

Mrs D Kelly: I will be brief. Does the Member not accept that, in GB and the South of Ireland, central government put up money for the reform of local government? Why should we be different?

Mr Hamilton: I will move on to my final points, which deal with that.

Our amendment encourages dialogue between the Minister and his colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel. He smirks at me across the Chamber — I will not reveal any confidences. Dialogue, if you can call it that, has already commenced. Even today, there have, I understand, been attempts to organise further dialogue. Who could disagree with the two relevant Ministers having dialogue with colleagues around the Executive table? I do not think that anybody could disagree with that. In that dialogue, they should seek solutions and not solely solutions based on shovelling money from central government into local government. We need to look at borrowing, the use of reserves and whether there are other, better ways than a simple transfer of funds from central government to local government.

We need to build from the basis of an accurate assessment of costs. It is no secret that the two Ministers disagree on the Minister of the Environment's assessment of the costs of transition. Both Ministers have commented on that publicly. So we need an accurate assessment of the costs and some agreement on that assessment. The Ministers then need to look at what the appropriate solutions are. They could include some financial support, money from central government, borrowing, the use of reserves or some other means. When agreed, those solutions should be implemented. That is a reasonable way forward. The encouragement of dialogue to find an accurate assessment and appropriate solutions to the problem is eminently sensible, instead of us getting up as legislators in the House and acceding to the principle that we will just provide all the money, even though there may be better ways. Moving forward, that is a sensible and sound policy. So let us get an accurate assessment of the costs, determine the best way of funding them and move forward on the basis of sensible, sound solutions that are affordable and appropriate. I do not think that anybody in the House would disagree — I hope that that is the case — with the need for dialogue between the Ministers to hollow out this situation and, to use one of the Minister's favourite words, interrogate the costs that he himself has put forward. I think that that is sensible, right and appropriate.

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

Mr Hamilton: I encourage the House to embrace and support the amendment.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt ar son an mholta seo.

I support the motion. I just want to say a few words on the amendment. I agree with some aspects of the Member's argument, such as encouraging the Ministers to come forward. However, until now it has, unfortunately, been a case of "Yes", "No", "I don't want to" and "You're not getting anything". We had that in Committee after we asked for information a number of times. I had hoped that the Member would expand more on the amendment. The amendment refers only to the rates issue, but a lot of others need to be addressed.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Boylan: Yes.

Mr Hamilton: I did not have enough time, so I will try to steal a bit from you. You are right: the amendment talks about:

"financing reform and, in particular, ... the issue of rates convergence"

I think that there will be agreement right across the House that there is the potential to change some council areas, that the amalgamation of councils will be an issue and that there is a need to find solutions that do not penalise the ratepayer. The totality of that is financing reform and, in particular and as I will stress, rates convergence.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member for putting across his point of view. The amendment could be read in a way that means that it refers to the rates issue alone. It could be interpreted in that way.

I want to get down to the reality of the situation. We have been talking about this for a long time. We now have a situation where a lot of councils, councillors and council officials do not know exactly what is happening. The time frame that had been set has moved on. I would like the Minister to touch on where we are with the time frame and on what we as a Committee and the Assembly can do to bring this forward.

I want to pick up on a few points about the costs. Three or four years ago, PwC brought forward a report in which it said that the upfront costs would be £118 million. I do not know whether any more work has been done on the actual costs, so perhaps the Minister could indicate what they will be.

There was talk in the Committee about whether the initial business case and the request for moneys stacked up and were robust. The Minister now has a chance on the Floor of the House to bring forward his plans. In Committee, as a member of Sinn Féin, I have supported central government coming forward with at least some of the costs. I support the case for that for the likes of the transition management teams, capacity building, staff redundancy packages, related ICT systems and convergence — any of the things that do not generate any savings or efficiencies. I know that the Member who moved the amendment said that local authorities would benefit from some of those things and that a lot of savings could be generated from them. However, that is not the case for the issues that I highlighted, as they are starting costs. I would certainly support the Minister if he brought that forward as part of his business case.

I want to talk about two other issues related to what local councils have done. I know that NILGA has been very forthright in its views to the Committee. I have to say that councillors and local authorities can bring forward a proper package of reform, because they deal with this issue on the ground. I know that some MLAs are still councillors and are still dealing with that. I have left my council now, and I have not seen exactly how it is operating as much as I did when I was a councillor. However, NILGA in particular makes a good argument for costs, and I would like to see that argument supported.

I want to talk about one other issue. There seems to be a lot of steer on what the ICE programme can generate. Can the Minister talk about how that programme will bring

rewards? I recognise that they will be more mid- to long-term rewards, not now generated up front. I support the motion.

Mr Elliott: I welcome the debate. Over the past year, I have had several discussions with the Minister about these very issues, not only about RPA in general but the associated costs. I put those costs into three main areas. One is the upfront transition costs for RPA. Secondly, there are the rates convergence costs, which are more significant to some councils than others. There are some groupings for which those costs will not be as significant, but there are others where they will have a huge impact on ratepayers. The third area is the cost of the transfer of functions. I know that the Minister has said that the cost of transferring functions will be cost-neutral at the point of transfer. To me, that does not go far enough. I will deal with that point first. When the functions are transferred, a proper mechanism needs to be put in place to ensure that they will be cost-neutral for the foreseeable future to the area's ratepayers. That will mean some sort of organisational decision taken between local councils and whatever Department that function is being transferred from — be it Planning Service in DOE or wherever — on how much it costs at the moment. There needs to be a rebalancing of the local rate and the regional rate to reflect that and to ensure that those functions will not be an additional burden on the ratepayer for some time to come.

Coming from Fermanagh, I can say that rates convergence is a massive issue. You will hear later from my colleague Ross Hussey about the Omagh council area, but there is a massive difference between the current rates there and the current debt. Those are not the only areas where there will be significant problems. I return to the old difficulty: why are we putting some areas together when they do not want to go together and would be much better suited to some grouping other than the one that they are being put into? I cannot understand why Dundonald will be with the Lisburn/Castlereagh grouping rather than with Belfast.

Like Mr Hamilton and others, I am not on the Executive and so am not privy to the details, but I hear rumours, some of which suggest that rates convergence costs could be up to £30 million in one-off costs. I am happy for the Minister to confirm, deny or make no comment, but I am only reflecting some of what I am hearing.

We had the PwC report on the overall transition costs. From my knowledge, that is the only report that gives a reasonable indication of what the upfront costs will be. It stated £118 million, but the report has been questioned, as has the point in it that states that there will be £428 million of savings over 25 years. That figure has been questioned very strongly. I am disappointed that there has not been an update at this stage. We have been told for some time that there was to be an update to the PwC report. I ask the Minister to let us know in more detail what the more up-to-date proposals, suggestions or considerations are, because we need to know. I understand that there is some sort of template for councils to populate so that they can get some idea of how accurate that £118 million figure for costs is.

The DUP amendment mentions ongoing dialogue between the Minister of the Environment and the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I would appreciate it if I heard from the Minister what ongoing dialogue there has been, how useful it was and whether there have been positive outcomes. I

am well aware of the huge costs. Mrs Kelly talked about the cost of information technology —

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

Mr Elliott: — but there is also redundancy for senior officers, the amalgamation of councils, the winding up of old councils and the ongoing upkeep of ICT.

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

Mr Elliott: There are huge costs, and I would like to hear from the Minister some of the exact details.

4.15 pm

Ms Lo: As an Alliance MLA, I support the motion, although not without reservations. I welcome the DUP amendment as I believe it is not the responsibility of the Environment Minister alone to implement local government reform. Other Ministers need to work with him to come up with a way forward, taking into account realistic costings and a time frame.

I had a recent meeting with NILGA members who expressed grave concerns about the lack of progress on finance, transfer of functions, delivery of legislation, a severance scheme for councillors and redundancy payments for senior council staff. There is a great urgency to clarify those issues, particularly on financing the reform, to avoid inertia in local government. We heard of a request for £39.5 million being submitted to the Executive by the Environment Minister and saw monitoring round bids rejected on several occasions. It is about time that Ministers sat round a table to sort out the process.

There is serious uncertainty among councillors across Northern Ireland — in all parties, I believe — about whether the reform is now viable. That this concern exists so late in the process is surely due to overcomplexity and programme slippage. For example, we have a political reference group, transitional committees taking various forms and shadow councils — all while the current councils continue to exist. Any member of the public listening to this will view that as unnecessarily wasteful and complicated.

The timescale set by the Department is already being missed in a number of areas, not least the timetabling of the local government reorganisation Bill itself. It is astonishing that we do not yet have even a commissioner to draw the district electoral area boundaries, just two months before they are due to be drawn. With slippage now likely, what happens if there is a judicial review of boundaries that have already been drawn late? Of significant concern to me is the confusion that that causes to staff, the most obvious victims of this very complex process. People have a right to know what changes they will face in their duties, their location of work, their pay and their colleagues. What guidance are they being given? Why does it seem to vary from council to council? What on earth is all this uncertainty doing to morale?

Ultimately, the Executive need to answer this simple question: if there are so many substantial costs associated with local government reform, why are we proceeding with it? To be clear, the ratepayer will end up paying the costs regardless of whether they are met by the Executive or councils. Until the end of 2012, we were promised a reform that would be cost-efficient, and, on that basis, my party backed it. Why then, at the start of 2013, are there

now substantial costs and no hint of concrete savings, even in the long term? If there is a case for meeting the costs for long-term gain it needs to be made, and quickly. Otherwise, this will rapidly descend into another example of the Executive failing to deliver on their pledges. I share NILGA's determination to avoid assigning blame, but the process has become entangled in bureaucracy, harmed by miscommunication and seemingly far more expensive than initially envisaged.

I wish to raise a final point beyond finances, on which my party's enthusiasm for the process may depend.

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

Ms Lo: Good relations need to be central to the reform. Councils should have CSI schemes, with models set out by the Department, including some of the complex issues around symbols, shared space and so on.

Lord Morrow: I listened intently to Dolores Kelly — I see she has gone. She started off her remarks by again attacking her leader on the double-jobbing issue. I would have thought that the SDLP would discuss that at its party meetings and try to sort those things out there, rather than bringing it to the Floor of the Assembly. Anyway, that is the way that she decides to do things.

Local government reform has been on the agenda for longer than some of us may care to remember. We should keep it in our minds, as we go through this process, that this is not the first time. Maybe we can learn something from how it was done in the past. This is not the first time that we have had to go through local government reform. Some of us have been about long enough to remember when local government was reformed before, under the Macrory report back in 1973. Quite frankly, I do not think that it stood half the debate, discussion, manoeuvring, manipulation, diving and ducking that we are seeing around this whole issue of local government.

It strikes me that there are those who are involved in local government reform — allegedly — who are not that enthusiastic about the whole process and would prefer it if something else was happening. That seems to influence what they are going to do or, more importantly, what they are not going to do. One thing needs to be spelt out loud and clear. The Minister has an opportunity to do that today, but I suspect that he will not take that opportunity. Why? Because I have listened to him so many times in the past, and he is ambiguous on these issues. The model of reforming local government that is before the House and local government is not the one that he wants. Therefore, if it has to go, it will go at a snail's pace, and I suspect that it will be dragged out across the time. Others have intimated that there is a strong possibility that local government reform will not happen during this term of the Assembly. I happen to be in that camp. The Minister has the opportunity today to dispel all of that and to say that, come fair or foul wind or weather, local government reform will go ahead.

I heard Tom Elliott. He is going back to a day in the past when he says that this is not the way to go. We can decide that this is the way to go and the decisions have been made and the battles fought and lost or won. We need to start to take local government reform forward.

I was a bit disappointed in Anna Lo, who said that she was going to support the motion. I direct her attention to the amendment, which seeks to go to the very heart and kernel of the matter: rates convergence. Some might say that it is easy for me to talk. I should maybe declare that I am a member of a local council. The local council I am a member of will be joining with Cookstown and Magherafelt. Those councils have a lot of things in common, not least the rates base that they are all going to come from. That is because, as everybody should know, Dungannon council is the only council in Northern Ireland that has not increased its rates over the past three years. I will not try to guess what it will do next year, because that would be unfair. I just say, "Keep watching this space". You will find that it will do the responsible thing again as far as its ratepayers are concerned — oh, that others would take stock. However, I am glad to see that Belfast City Council has now cottoned on to what Dungannon is doing, and they think it is a good idea. I see that they have made certain proposals that would not be out of keeping with what Dungannon is doing.

Let us hear from the Minister today a clear, unambiguous statement that local government reform will go ahead and that he is determined to take it forward. To date, he has not shown that determination, and that is one of the issues that are holding back this whole process. I would like to hear the Minister also tell us that the transition committees —

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

Lord Morrow: — are going to be statutory. For too long, they have not been in that position. I hope that the Minister will change that by his statement today.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. It is important that RPA goes ahead this time. The RPA issue has been running for some years. It started off under direct rule and has been a real gravy train since. The first few people involved in it basically toured the world looking for alternatives and did not find them. They came back, and we are still in the same situation.

Savings have been talked about today — including the amendment — particularly and mainly savings to local government. First, there is nothing to say that there will be any savings at all. Secondly, if there are any savings, there is nothing to say that they will be only to local government. At the end of the day, local and regional rates come from the same ratepayers.

It is important that we analyse the alleged savings. The PWC report was disputed, questioned and dismissed by most people at that time. We then had ICE, which came particularly from people who could not get their own transition committees together — in Fermanagh, Omagh and such places, where we had difficulty getting them to put together proposals just for transition. Yet, they had a proposal for how everybody else right across the 26 councils could make savings. So we need to ask whether, even under ICE, there will be any real savings at the end of the day. Councils will also be taking up new roles. We cannot just stand still. If we are going to give local government more powers, we need to give it the flexibility to develop and grow to take on new roles and to finance those new roles. It is important that the Executive or central government finance RPA at this early

stage because we do not know what savings may or may not occur. That process should be funded directly from the block grant and not by local ratepayers, who do not at present see any benefits from paying for this at local government level.

We have to question whether local government will even benefit. Hopefully, a number of different powers will be transferred to local government, but there is no guarantee that the resources will follow those new powers. So, it is important to recognise the new roles that local government will be taking on and to clearly indicate to everyone what they will be, who will pay for them and where we go from there.

Of course dialogue should happen. I thought that it already was happening in the Executive, which is where two Ministers should be sitting down and having discussions. That is part of their roles, but it takes two to tango in that situation. I do not know who is not participating, but whoever it is needs to get into it and get this sorted out. In any other circumstances, if we want to sort out a budget, we go and ask and we get it sorted.

There is talk about this not bringing about rate increases. I was going to give the example that Lord Morrow gave of my former council, Dungannon — I am no longer a member of it — as one of the councils that have held their rate at a 0% increase for the past three years. That is because we are moving into transition across Cookstown and Magherafelt. We also worked in the transition committees to get the other two councils to work along the same lines. All three councils have taken down their rates increases. I believe —

4.30 pm

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that, under the process, there are more issues than just the rates issue?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Molloy: I do agree. The rates increases and convergence is one issue. I believe that if the councils that are amalgamating had been working together for the past number of years in transition committees, a lot of the problems could have been sorted out. A lot of the convergence could have been balanced out. In our situation, we could look at how we could work across the three councils so we could reduce costs and charges and, in that way, start to create convergence across the three areas. If you just sit and wait until the last minute and hope that somebody will pay for it all at the finish, it will not happen.

The big thing is that RPA has been going on for so many years that we need to give certainty to council staff, councillors and everyone in the area about what is going to happen in the future. Is it going to happen or is it not? We need to send out a very clear message: it is going to happen. As to whether or not we need transition through shadow councils, I do not know whether that serves any real purpose or just becomes another delaying tactic. It will create confusion, costs and charges. Who is going to pay for that? As I said, we need to give certainty to council staff and councillors. Many of those people have put their life on hold for the past 15 years, waiting to see what would actually happen. They did not know whether the councils were going to be wound up in one particular year, whether they were going to get a severance package or what was

going to happen in the future. It is very important that we give certainty.

I do not believe that the amendment is necessary. What the amendment says is what should be happening anyway. We need a strong voice, coming from across all parties in the Assembly, to say that we need to get this sorted out and need to give support to it. It is not just a rates issue. It is right across the board, covering the various aspects of charging and costs within councils. Let us work towards the savings that may actually happen —

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

Mr Molloy: I do not believe that the savings are there, at this point.

Mr Wells: I rise as someone who has had perhaps a unique experience of local government in Northern Ireland, in that I am the only person ever to have sat on three different district councils. I was first elected to Lisburn Borough Council in 1981, for Moira. Moira was moved out of South Down, so I moved to Banbridge. Banbridge was moved out of South Down, so then I moved to Ballynahinch. Guess what? Ballynahinch was moved out of South Down. I think that they were trying to move me, rather than the district council. That is the reason for my somewhat nomadic existence as a district councillor, which goes back over 30 years. I retired from Down District Council at the last local government elections.

Serving on three very different types of council — one a large, almost metropolitan council; one a very quiet, peaceful, rural town; one a much more divided council, in the form of Down council — has given me an insight into the workings of local authorities in the Province. I have to be honest: if you were to ask the vast majority of district councillors in Northern Ireland, you would find that there is not a great deal of enthusiasm for RPA. I have to be absolutely honest and say that. Indeed, there is an argument that many councils have, over the past 40 years, formed an identity for themselves, worked together and generally served their communities very well. I suggest that most councillors, and, indeed, a lot of the public, are not that enthusiastic about the whole process. If you were to ask the average man on the street what he feels his most important priorities are, you would be very lucky if RPA appeared in the top 50. However, we have to accept that we are where we are and a decision has been made, but if that decision does not lead to greater efficiency and cost savings, it really is a bit of a nonsense. Therefore, I was quite shocked to hear Mr Molloy say that he believes there is the potential for no savings to be made. If there are no savings to be made, frankly, why are we going down this route? The councils must be more efficient, or else RPA will have been an utterly fruitless exercise.

One thing I think that we are all agreed on is that there has been a huge element of doubt hanging over our 26 local councils for the best part of a decade. We must have clarity from the Minister today. Recently, I was at a meeting of district councillors in Antrim, and there was a perception that RPA may not go ahead at all. It will all go live in only 14 months' time, yet I get no sense whatsoever from the Minister or from those in the local government division of DOE that there is any urgency that reform is coming very quickly. There are lots of i's to be dotted and t's to be stroked, and we are not seeing it happen.

If the Minister has doubts about the process and wishes to put it off, he needs to tell the Assembly. People need to know what they are doing because many councillors are hanging on. Some wish to retire, and some need to retire. Others are keen to come into the new authorities and are holding on, expecting to take on new roles; yet for many of them, there is still confusion about where they stand, particularly when it is proposed to hand planning over to the new authorities.

I have to be honest, from my experience of three councils over a 31-year period, I do not believe that the present cohort of councillors or prospective new councillors are adequately equipped to take on planning. For years, they could call for the sun, the moon and the stars and, if they did not get it, they could blame the local Planning Service officer. Councillors have got themselves into a mentality of backing every application, whether or not it has any merit, knowing full well that they do not have responsibility for taking a decision and that if a decision goes against them, they can castigate a local planning officer to the high heavens in their local newspaper when, privately, they will often have told the Planning Service officer that they really agree with what he or she is doing but that they cannot do so publicly. I do not see those district councils having the wherewithal to take on the responsibility. They will have to exercise discretion. They are going to have to say no to every application for apartments and to a large number of applications for single dwellings in the countryside. That requires a maturity that, at the moment, they have not been trained for and have no experience of, yet we still see that level of doubt.

I hope that, at the end of the debate, we will have achieved one thing. We may not have more money for local government to fund this massive change, but at least everyone who leaves the Chamber and the 500-odd councillors in Northern Ireland will know where they stand.

Mr Hussey: I was disappointed that I did not follow Mr Molloy because he supported the 15-council model, and he supported it very well. I also supported the 15-council model. Lord Morrow referred to ducking and diving. I still believe that we should have followed the 15-council model. I took some notes during the debate, and the words "accurate costs" were mentioned several times. No one seems to know how much RPA is going to cost local government or central government. Will central government give any money at all? We have potential Ministers Mrs Kelly and Mr Hamilton advising us that they will be Ministers in the near future and may be able to change it all about. Maybe, Mrs Kelly, when this is over, you will be able to tell us what is actually happening.

Some comments have totally baffled me. We will have a situation in which local councils will be allowed to borrow. I do not know much, but I know that if you borrow money, you are expected to pay it back at a rate of interest. Who is going to pay that rate of interest, or does it just disappear? There will clearly be a charge on ratepayers, wherever they are.

My colleague Tom Elliott referred to the Omagh/Fermanagh scenario. That scenario was obviously designed by Baldrick and Captain Blackadder because nobody gave any thought to it, and it clearly will not work. They are not happy about it in the Tyrone and Fermanagh areas, yet they are being forced together: come in, Dungannon, we know your knock but we are not going

to increase your rates. The suggestion, therefore, is that Dungannon is more than capable of doing its job so we should leave it alone. Dungannon, Cookstown, Magherafelt and other councils are doing wonderful jobs. I had the honour of being a member of Omagh District Council for six years, and I thoroughly enjoyed my time there.

Mr Wells referred to the powers that will be devolved to the new councils. Will councillors be able to accept the responsibilities that will be devolved to them? We do not know because they do not yet have those responsibilities. We do not know the job descriptions for new councillors. We do not know the rate of pay. We do not know anything.

This plan is like going to bake a cake without having eggs or sugar. When you buy a car, you know how much it will cost and whether you can afford it. In this scenario, we are being asked to buy a car without knowing whether it has four tyres, windscreen wipers or lights, but this has to go ahead. Why?

Mr Weir: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Hussey: I beg your pardon?

RPA was a nonsense. This will not work. Local government? There is nothing local about this. This is a dirty deal between you and Sinn Féin, and you are trying to force this through. You even admit that other councillors do not want it. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Hussey: Councillors from all parties do not want this deal. So why are we going ahead with it? Are there to be no costs? Well, perhaps we can hide them somewhere and get them out of the rates. It is a nonsense to suggest that it is the same money. It is not the same money. If you increase the rates in Omagh or Fermanagh, it is the ratepayers there who will have to pay them. There is no less money coming in here. That is a nonsense. You have not persuaded me at all.

Mr Hamilton: Who is paying it?

Mr Hussey: I beg your pardon? If you want to interrupt and ask me a question, I will happily give way to you.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. Who, ultimately, is paying for it? That is the point. If the money is coming from taxpayers, those are the same people who pay rates.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Hussey: It is the same money as has always come here from central government. It comes from the British Government. The rates will go to councils, and the rates will be paid by the ratepayer. That is the way it will be.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hussey: No, not just yet. The ratepayer will pay. Do not believe any of this nonsense that the ratepayer is not going to pay. The ratepayer is paying for RPA, and that is what will be proposed.

Mrs D Kelly: The ratepayers in Craigavon will not be paying the same amount for expenditure and excess as is paid by ratepayers in the Belfast City Council area, for example.

Mr Hussey: Belfast City Council is a prime example of gerrymandering, if I were ever to use such a word. I will not

do that in case I offend somebody. We know where we are, and we know that this will not work. It is a nonsense from the start.

I will support the SDLP motion, but I do not know where you lot in the DUP are coming from.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. If I may pick up on Mr Hussey's driving analogy, we are probably due for an MOT.

I support the motion proposed by my party colleagues. We have been told about the potential long-term savings that may flow from the reorganisation of local government. Whether that happens remains to be seen, but with the transfer of powers for the various services involved, it will be the responsibility of the new councils to deliver those savings while maintaining and improving on current levels of service.

The powers that are currently — I emphasise the word "currently" — being proposed for transfer include planning from the Department of the Environment (DOE); urban regeneration from the Department for Social Development (DSD); local economic development and tourism from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI); part of the responsibility for roads from the Department for Regional Development (DRD); local sports facilities from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL); and rural development from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). It is also proposed that councils have a new statutory duty of community planning and a new power of promoting well-being.

Equality must be the cornerstone of any reform of local government, even one as delayed as this. Mr Hussey referred to gerrymandering.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: Yes, I will.

Mrs D Kelly: I just want to support the Member's point on equality. He will recall well that my former colleague the late Sean McKavanagh had to take a case against Craigavon Borough Council in relation to the provision of services to the GAA.

Mr McGlone: I remember it well. The late Mr McKavanagh was a highly esteemed member of our party and well respected in the local community. He took that case on the principle of equality for all because of the discrimination taking place in Craigavon Borough Council at that time.

Equality must be the cornerstone of any reform of local government, even one as delayed as this. In the transfer of the various proposed powers to the new councils, equality of treatment must be enshrined in the legislation put before the Assembly.

Lord Morrow: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: I cannot give way at the moment, Lord Morrow, I have more to say.

Be it gerrymandering or whatever, it is too important an issue to be left to the interpretation of any council's "new ethical standards regime".

4.45 pm

I will give you two recent headline reasons and figures for why that is the case. The names "Red Sky" and

"Girdwood" spring out at us as examples of where political interference, rather than the paramountcy of good practice and equality, became the issue. We have to have that paramountcy, particularly in planning. Planning is one of the key issues and cornerstones of equality for all of us. That is before we even move into the area of housing, where we know that there have been attempts at interference. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask Members not to speak from a sedentary position. You may continue.

Lord Morrow: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: I have more to say, so I will continue.

Even before we see the legislation, we can see that equality of treatment in the new councils is being put at risk. The SDLP's Minister has repeatedly put forward proposals for the Executive to provide local government with financial assistance for the reform process. Other Executive parties have repeatedly refused his requests. The most recent refusal came during the January monitoring round. That bid covered a major part of the Budget period up to 2015 and comprised tens of millions of pounds.

The Minister has made it clear that upfront money and soft loans later, as well as help with rates convergence from 2015, are justified and necessary to protect ratepayers. By refusing to provide the necessary financial support for the reform process, the Executive are effectively leaving those councils hamstrung before they have even come into existence. Without the Executive's support, it is our constituents who will bear the impact of the upfront cost of reform. Mr Hussey referred to that. Whether through rates increases or cuts in services, they will pay the price for the Executive's failure. By short-changing the new councils now, the Executive are pressurising them into taking shortcuts with their delivery in the future. It is the most disadvantaged in our society —

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

Mr McGlone: No; I thought that I had another minute.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Unfortunately, we have a limit, and we must go to the Minister. The Clerk was with you to indicate that we were running short on time. I will give you a few more seconds to close.

Mr McGlone: Thank you. By short-changing the new councils now, the Executive are pressurising them into taking shortcuts with their delivery in the future. Equality will be a forgotten aspiration. The cohesion, sharing and integration strategy, if it ever appears, will be dead in the water.

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

Mr McGlone: It is in the interest of the Executive and the parties, as well as in the self-interest of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, to prevent that from happening.

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): Before starting, may we just reflect on the fact that there was a further fatality on the roads in the past short while? It was a 19-year-old man, and we extend condolences to his family.

I say to Lord Morrow, and to anyone who has any doubts, that I am very much an advocate for reform. I believe that this part of the world needs a new phase of deep reform.

I also believe that reforms over the past 40 years have served our part of Ireland well across the range of areas of the public sector that demanded them, even though some people have resisted them. I think that we live with the benefits of all that. I believe in council reform, because, although I do not agree with the Executive's decision on 11 councils, I accept that it is the Executive's decision.

I challenge anybody to credibly and in any material way demonstrate that, since that decision was taken, I have in any way tried to proceed at "a snail's pace", as Lord Morrow and others suggested. If you went to any NILGA or NIC conference or to any meeting of any voluntary transition committee or the regional transition committees — I can tell you that there have been an awful lot of those meetings — you would know that I have told people repeatedly that the point of no return passed long ago and that we are going to get this reform done, and, crucially, touching on a theme a lot of Members raised, to get it done right.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will certainly give way to everybody. I do not have a problem giving way. We need to get it done right. That is what the debate is about; to help to get it done right. I will give way to Mr Wells first.

Mr Wells: The Minister said he is going to get it done right, but is he going to get it done on time? He did not mention any chronology.

Mr Attwood: Let me confirm, then; to get it done on time and to get it done right. That is how I will judge myself. No message has come from me at any of those gatherings over the past period to suggest to anybody anything other than, whatever my reservations about elements of reform, I do not dispute reform and I will manage 15 councils and try to get the reform done as best as I possibly can, on time and done right.

Mr Agnew: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will in a second.

That is why at all those gatherings, I give the councils a countdown. At the most recent gathering in Dungannon, and Lord Morrow, you should check this with your colleagues, I again sent out the message that I just outlined. I confirmed that we have 800 days, to go back to Mr Wells' point, to get this done and to get this done right.

Lord Morrow: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way to Mr Agnew first.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for giving way. Does he agree that we would be much further along the road had it not been for former Minister Poots protecting his own little patch?

Mr Attwood: If there is doubt among some of those in councils at this time, they will have doubt because they will have seen the delay and doubt that heretofore informed this particular reform process. However, there has been no doubt from the approach that I am taking.

When it comes to the issue of funding, which is what this debate is primarily about, although I will touch upon a lot of other issues, I have not been saying to any council at any time or in any way that all the costs would fall to councils.

That may have been the Executive decision, and I am trying to rework that Executive decision in the terms that some people have outlined. Reformed funding will come from a family of measures. What are those measures? I keep challenging councils to accelerate their work on ICE sharing and collaboration, where there are some moderate and good examples of how councils, whether it is in stationery, the provision of vehicles, the purchase of items, and even in electricity tender, buy into a framework established by Newry and Mourne District Council. I have said that ICE needs to be accelerated to see in the next 800 days what sharing and collaboration can produce in respect of funds in order to contribute to the family of funding of local council reform.

I have said to them that if there are margins, and reserves, and I think there will be, let us use them for the family of funding of RPA reform. I have said that there will be some sympathy, if not support, around the Executive table when it comes to soft loans. On the transitional and transformative costs that will fall to councils, some of which will be substantial, the Executive may eventually be minded to support soft loans whereby they might pay the interest on those loans. I have said to councils that there is even greater support around the Executive table for the principle of rates convergence. I have not denied any of that in my conversations with councils, and I have challenged them to look into their own structures to identify where they can contribute.

However, I have also said to them, as I have said to my Executive colleagues since last June, that in a number of bids that have been referred to during the course of this debate and in the paper that I circulated last autumn, which was tabled at the Executive meeting last Thursday, the burden of the cost of reform, in my view, has to be shared by the Executive. The way I have tried to work that, mindful of the previous Executive decision that there would be no Executive funding, is to say that there are streams of funding that are not cash-releasing in the future and, therefore, do not bring particular benefit from cash savings to the council on the far side of 2015. I have said I believe that there are five or six elements of reform that can be supported in that way.

What are those costs? Mr Hamilton said that the figures need to be interrogated and that there should be an accurate assessment of the truth of it. I am surprised that Mr Hamilton made that argument given that he is the purported next Minister of Finance and Personnel, and given, no doubt, his close working relationship with the current Minister of Finance and Personnel. In fact, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Wilson, came to this Chamber last week — he has yet to come back to it to correct the record — and said that my estimate as part of my bid to the Executive for a funding package for severance costs meant that every councillor would take severance. I have not said this publicly, but Mrs Kelly says that figure is around £38.5 million. Mr Hamilton says that there has to be an accurate assessment of those costs. He should have a conversation with his ministerial colleague who said that every councillor will take severance under my bid. How ludicrous a claim is that?

The figures have been interrogated, and my bid says that only 266 councillors are entitled to severance under the scheme that I am proposing. Why? Because those who have served up to 12 years are not entitled to severance

at all and, consequently, the majority of councillors are disqualified from severance. Furthermore, our estimate is that, of the 266 councillors who might be entitled to severance, 75% might take it. That is the accurate assessment, and those are the true figures. That is why, Mr Boylan, what I have put forward to the Executive and to the Finance Minister is robust, unlike the analysis and the claims of others that those figures are not robust.

When it comes to severance, I am saying that we in this Chamber and the Executive should respect all those who served this part of the world well, particularly during the years of terror and state violence. We have an ethical commitment and a political obligation to show generosity, as far as we can without creating public disquiet, and to say to those people that we recognise their public service within the principles of democracy, their stand against terror and state violence and their leading of the council chambers and that we, in this Chamber, will fully back the severance scheme of £3.5 million.

I will not go through all the other elements of my bid, but I will take up the point made by Mr Wells, who speaks with great authority on planning matters. He said that — these are his words; I do not choose them — councillors were not adequately equipped or trained for the planning function and have not got the maturity for it. In my bid to the Executive, I have asked for substantial moneys. Why? To build up the training and capacity needs of councillors and senior managers in the period until transition, particularly in respect of the planning function.

If you speak to the Minister with responsibility for planning in Scotland, John Swinney, who I always say is the best Minister in these islands because he knows best the difference between being in government and being in power, he will tell you that, in the transfer of planning function to the councils in Scotland, some measured up to the responsibility of being the planning authority and others did not. When Belfast City Council went on a training seminar to Scotland in December, it went to Dundee. Why? Because Dundee and Fife are two councils that have measured up best to the requirements and challenges of being a planning authority. If we are to get RPA right, we have to get the transfer of planning right. In getting the transfer of planning right, we not only have, to go back to Mr Elliott's point, to ensure that it is funded such that it is fully fit for purpose and that the architecture of planning is fully fit for purpose — that is why I was here last week to debate the Planning Bill — but we have to ensure that those who will fulfil the planning function, be it on applications, on local development plans or on community planning, are fit for purpose.

Mr Wells may have made a good point that there are risks with governance, accountability and in ensuring that ethics and equality prevail in council functions in the future, not least in planning. That point was touched on by Mr McGlone. There is a risk, and to mitigate that risk you train and build capacity; to train and build capacity, you need to fund; and to fund, the Executive have to revisit their principle of not funding RPA and fund those streams of funding that I spoke about.

One of the most muddled speeches came from Ms Lo. Ms Lo said that we were overcomplicating the process of reform, yet in the very next sentence she said that the process was "very complex". You cannot have it both ways. Given that it is a complex process, you need to buy

in the ownership of councillors and senior managers to that process. That is why we have the structures that I am talking about. It was also muddled because —

5.00 pm

Ms Lo: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a second. It was also muddled because she claimed that a commissioner had not been appointed to take forward the decision of the Chamber last summer on boundaries. Responsibility for that passed from me and from the Executive to the Secretary of State and the London Government last July. If you have a problem with the fact that someone was not appointed, take it up with the Secretary of State. She will tell you that, late though it may be in my view, she did appoint someone. Clearly, Ms Lo has forgotten that.

Ms Lo: Will the Minister agree that there has been a series of slippages in the programme? That is what is causing the frustration and uncertainty in all the local councils.

Mr Attwood: There are many councils in the North that have applied themselves diligently to the task of RPA since the council decision was made. Do not portray all councils in the way that you choose to. Yes, some are not running at the speed of others, but there are examples of those that are pushing on with reform, even though they may have some resistance to some of the details of it. If we get the funding right when we bring the functions paper through the Executive in the next week or two and if we get the reorganisation Bill to the Chamber in February, as I have ambitions to do, and so on and so forth, even those who hide behind such excuses will not be able to do so.

Finally, last week in the Chamber, the Minister of Finance and Personnel confirmed that no funding was given for a decay and dereliction bid from me and the councils. A week after he announced that to the Executive, he changed his mind. I hope that, next week, he will change his mind on my Executive bid for RPA transitional costs.

Mr Weir: I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council. I hasten to add that North Down Borough Council is the only council that I have been on. I am not like the nomad to my right: the Lawrence of Arabia of the Assembly, Mr Wells. It seems the boundaries are changed every time you try to exclude him. I hope that he is not getting a particular message out of that.

That is the significance. In this debate, I am representing the ratepayer and the taxpayer. It may come as a surprise to some, but they are one and the same person. We have to get away from the fictional economics that writing out a cheque on behalf of the Executive to local government is, in some way, a cost-free option. Mr Hussey referred to the ratepayers of Fermanagh and Omagh. If, for example, as part of this, the Executive were to write a cheque for £40 million, that is £40 million that is effectively coming out of the block grant. It is not additional money; it is money that then cannot be spent on other services such as education and a range of other things.

Mr Hussey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: No, I do not —

Mr Hussey: I did not think that you would.

Mr Weir: With respect, I have only five minutes to wind up on the entire debate. Perhaps it might be better if you read my remarks later. You might learn something.

The Member seems to want RPA scuppered entirely, that there is not a call for this and that we should remain with a hermetically sealed 26 councils. I remind the Member that the initiative for this came from an Ulster Unionist Minister, Mr Sam Foster, who announced it not in this Chamber but at an Ulster Unionist conference. His proposals did not include the retention of 26 councils. So perhaps he needs to take that up with his Fermanagh colleague. I also indicate, in relation to that, that the proposals at that stage contained options for seven, 11 or 15 councils.

We got from Patsy McGlone a lecture such as we often get from the lectern. I do not know whether it will be him or Mrs Kelly who will replace Minister Attwood, on the grounds of equality. He mentioned Red Sky; I am not sure what that has to do with local government. He mentioned Girdwood, and the local SDLP representative had no problem having his photograph taken at the time. Strangely, when talking about equality — equality is at the heart of RPA — there was no mention of McCreesh Park and the role of the SDLP and its members on the ground in supporting the naming of that park. So I have to say that, if we are to get lectures on equality, perhaps the physician could heal himself before he lectures the Chamber.

I have to say that Mr Boylan's speech did not entirely convince me. He mentioned his concern that we are only concentrating on rates convergence. However, it is clear that the motion talks about financing reform and, in particular, rates convergence. So therefore rates convergence is only a subset. I think that there is widespread agreement around the Chamber that rates convergence needs to be dealt with.

I commend Mr Elliott, who made reference to another issue. There has been so much focus on the short-term cost side of this that there is a danger that we take our eye off the ball with respect to the longer-term financing. Getting that rebalancing right between local government and regional rates is something that needs to be tackled. Mention was made of meeting upfront costs through soft loans. That is something that, I think, all of us can embrace, something that there would not be a problem with. Once you take into account and accept that there is a need for convergence, it comes down to the issue of hollowing out which upfront costs cannot be met immediately — or at all — by local government, some of them with relation to savings.

There are flawed assumptions in what the Minister has said. For example, he mentioned an assumption that 75% of eligible councillors will take a redundancy package. I believe that that is a gross exaggeration. Similarly, as I understand it, the funding package has made an assumption that new people on shadow councils will represent about 75% of the total. Again, I think that that is fundamentally wrong. There is a disingenuous quality in the talk about monitoring rounds. Monitoring rounds are meant to be spent in-year but, as we saw presented to the Environment Committee, some of the Minister's bids were for things that clearly went beyond the year in question.

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

Mr Weir: There is a need for sensible discussion and for the Minister of the Environment and the Minister of Finance to have that realistic conversation and to bring this forward as something that does not burden the ratepayer or the taxpayer. We have to realise that they are the same person, and that is the good sense in our amendment.

Mr Eastwood: I was elected to Derry City Council in 2005 and served until just after I was elected to this place in 2011. Being a councillor is not an easy job; sometimes it is a thankless task. However, those years were much easier years to be a councillor in the North of Ireland than the years previously. Many people in the House served through very difficult times and put not only their family life but their life itself on the line. It is important that, when we discuss these things, we remember all the people, those who are with us and those no longer with us, who served with distinction across this part of the world, serving our communities. Whatever we do as a result of RPA, we need to ensure that they are always at the forefront of our minds and are not left behind when it comes to funding severance pay or anything else.

I will go through some of the remarks that were made, and I apologise to anyone whose remarks I do not touch on. Mrs Kelly began by stating the fact that the Minister came to the Executive a number of times, during a number of monitoring rounds, hoping and asking that the Executive would support his bid to ensure that RPA is properly funded. I do not think that he ever once said that the House or the Executive should fund all the costs of RPA. However, I think he said that it was important that we all shared the burden. He made it clear that councils had some of that burden to share themselves. If we are going to ask councils to take part in this huge upheaval and huge reform, it is essential that we help them to get over the line.

Mrs Kelly talked clearly about the real costs involved in the change: the cost of changing the IT systems; the cost of transition; the severance costs; and the potential new headquarters that will be built. She also talked about the potential savings through the ICE scheme and the fact that, when a lot of the councils merge, we will have fewer chief executives and fewer senior executives. Hopefully, that will help to bring about some of the savings that people are looking for.

Mrs Kelly and other Members talked about the need for equality and good relations to be at the core of everything that we do in RPA. I come from Derry, and we know all about the need for equality and good relations when it comes to councils, a place that was left behind and gerrymandered and where discrimination was the order of the day until the civil rights movement made sure that that would no longer happen. One thing is important: when Derry City Council changed and became Derry City Council, people in that council made sure that it would never happen again the other way round. We have a great system of ensuring that there is cross-community allocation of the mayor's position, the chairpersons' positions and every position in Derry City Council. I hope that that is the standard that RPA will meet when we look at all the councils around the North, even, Mr Weir, with regard to issues that happened in Newry and Mourne District Council. If things have happened that should not have happened, we should all accept that. We should accept that right across the councils that we all serve on and ensure that good relations and equality are the

cornerstone and core of everything that we do, no matter who is in charge of the council.

Mr Hamilton said that, when powers are transferred, councils will need to be properly resourced. I agree with him on that, and most people in the House would agree with him. The fact is that we need to play our part in ensuring that that is the case, and I hope that we can.

Mr Boylan agreed that there was a need for a package. He also talked about the need for the continued involvement of local councils in working all those issues out, and I do not think that there is any argument there. Mr Elliott talked about the need for the transfer of functions to be cost-neutral.

Ms Lo said a number of things, but I am not sure what they all meant. She talked about the need for staff morale to be boosted and the fact that council staff in certain parts — I think that she said everywhere — were having real difficulty with morale. I have to be honest: that is not my experience. In any council experience that I have had, the staff were very good. They are top-class. They work right across the board to ensure a proper and quality service for the people of our community. I do not think that it is fair or sensible or very mature to say that staff morale is very low. I do not think that that is the case, and, if we can work together —

Ms Lo: I thank the Member for giving way. I did not say that there is low morale. I asked how it was going to impact on people's morale. I am not saying that there is poor morale.

Mr Eastwood: OK. I must have misheard the Committee Chair.

The best thing to do to ensure that staff morale is high is to get the issue sorted out and get it sorted out quickly. The Minister has come forward with bids. Most Members in the House support our motion. Let us get it sorted out. Let the Finance Minister and the whole Executive support the need for support for local councils in RPA.

Lord Morrow talked about RPA moving at a snail's pace. I have to be honest: a sort of amnesia creeps into this place. Does Lord Morrow not remember the previous Ministers who were in charge of this process, or has RPA just happened all of a sudden? I do not remember when RPA was first mooted, but it was not in the past 18 months. There has been more —

Lord Morrow: Will the Member give way?

Mr Eastwood: Gladly.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for giving way. That is a bit rich coming from an individual who claims to be a member of the Environment Committee that debates these issues. Maybe he would like to tell the Assembly today how many of those meetings he turned up for.

5.15 pm

Mr Eastwood: Mr Deputy Speaker, as an Assembly Private Secretary to the Minister, I will not —

Lord Morrow: Tell us.

Mr Eastwood: Let me speak, Lord Morrow. Thank you very much. I am not the type of Member who will allow any conflict of interest in anything I do in the House. It is very

rich to hear him, a member of three Chambers, coming here and talking about — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Eastwood: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have been thrown off my remarks.

Mr Molloy said that it would have been better had a lot of the councils been working together before now and that, if they had, we would not have some of the problems that we have. I agree with him, but there are many good examples of councils working together to deliver on RPA. That is the essence of it. This is not something that needs to be handed down from the Executive or the House; this needs to happen, and everybody has to put their shoulder to the wheel to ensure that RPA is delivered.

Mr Wells talked about the fact that he has been a member of three councils. He has been transitioned from one council to the next. Maybe, if we get our way, we will be able to transition him somewhere else after this. He talked about the need for urgency and for clarification from the Minister. I do not know how many times Members need to hear it: we did not support the particular model put forward by the Executive, but the Minister has said a number of times — countless times, and I have been sitting beside him when he has said it — that he is committed to delivering on the RPA project and to delivering it in the time that is set out. That is why he brought forward a Planning Bill only last week, and that is why he is ensuring that the planning changes will be implemented before the transfer of functions. I think that he said it again today. I do not know why Members need to keep asking the question and muddying the waters. The Minister is committed to delivering on this project. He has said that countless times, and he said it again today. Hopefully, that will suffice for Mr Wells.

I will end with that. This is one of the biggest reforms that we face. The Minister is a reforming Minister. Whatever about the sniggers from other Benches, it would have been far better if the previous Ministers had shown the same commitment to delivering RPA, even if they did not agree with it, in time for 2015. The fact is that we are where we are; this will be delivered. If Members on the other Benches would encourage their Ministers to come to the table to ensure that we can deliver on RPA and that we can actually afford it, that would —

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

Mr Eastwood: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 36; Noes 52.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Dickson, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Hilditch and Mr G Robinson

NOES

*Mr Allister, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady,
Mr Byrne, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Mrs Dobson,
Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Ms Fearon,
Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hussey, Mrs D Kelly,
Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer,
Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann,
Mr McCartney, Mr McClarty, Ms McCorley, Mr B McCreagh,
Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan,
Mr McGimpsey, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness,
Mrs McKeivitt, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan,
Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Molloy, Mr Nesbitt,
Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend,
Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan,
Mr Swann.*

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Byrne and Mrs McKeivitt

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly acknowledges the significant workload and substantial costs involved in the delivery of the Executive's local government reform transition as proposed under the review of public administration; believes that the Executive should provide financial support for the reform process, including for future rates convergence; and calls on the Executive to provide financial support to councils to cover the upfront costs of RPA, which yield no short-term savings, and to ensure that these costs do not result in rate increases.

Adjourned at 5.32 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 29 January 2013

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Business Improvement Districts Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister for Social Development to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Business Improvement Districts Bill.

Moved. — [Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development).]

Mr Speaker: As no amendments have been tabled, there is no opportunity to discuss the Business Improvement Districts Bill at this stage. Further Consideration Stage of the Bill is, therefore, concluded.

Committee Business

Welfare Reform Bill: Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 15 minutes in which to propose the motion and 15 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes. I remind Members that cross-community support will be required when we come to the vote.

Mr Lunn (The Chairperson of the Ad Hoc Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements, Welfare Reform Bill): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report (NIA 92/11-15) of the Ad Hoc Committee set up to consider whether the provisions of the Welfare Reform Bill are in conformity with the requirements for equality and observance of human rights; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to consider its recommendations.

The Ad Hoc Committee was set up under Standing Order 35 on 20 November 2012 to consider whether the provisions of the Welfare Reform Bill are in conformity with the requirements for equality and observance of human rights. Members are, obviously, aware that this is the first time that such a Committee has been established in the Assembly and that its task would not be an easy one, particularly in view of the timescale of 30 working days. I thank all the members of the Committee and, particularly, the staff for the way in which they approached the matter. We managed to complete our work within that timescale.

Initially, the Committee was able to use information and evidence provided by the Social Development Committee to familiarise itself with the issues emerging from the Welfare Reform Bill. We then moved on to gather our own evidence on the specific areas of the human rights and equality implications of the legislation.

The Committee is indebted to the stakeholders and departmental officials who prepared written submissions and provided oral evidence at very short notice indeed. I thank them for their hard work. I would also like to refer to the Committee's request to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) for a briefing from its equality unit. That request met with absolutely no response. I find it strange that, when conducting an

exercise that majored on equality and human rights, we could not obtain input from OFMDFM's equality unit.

The Deputy Chairperson and I also travelled to Westminster to meet the Chair of the Joint Committee on Human Rights there. That was a very useful meeting, and it provided us with an insight not only into that Committee's views on its Welfare Reform Bill but into the way in which it carried out its scrutiny. If time permits, I might return to that later.

One of the most significant aspects of the Committee's deliberation was its consideration of the way in which the Department for Social Development (DSD) has discharged its duty under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to carry out an equality impact assessment (EQIA) on the potential impacts of the Welfare Reform Bill. The Department launched a public consultation on its draft EQIA in September 2011 and published the final version in May 2012. Although many of the respondents to the consultation indicated that they were unhappy with the assessment and the data on which it was based, the final EQIA remained largely unaltered from the original version. The Department for Social Development has acknowledged what it describes as data deficits and proposes that the EQIA be a living document. The Committee would encourage the Department to identify areas where more up-to-date information or relevant data have now become available and to use the data to update its EQIA. The Committee also agreed that the Equality Commission should closely monitor the EQIA as it develops as a living document, so that the Department can immediately identify and address any potential adverse impacts.

The Committee recognised that the Welfare Reform Bill, like so much social security legislation, is essentially enabling legislation and that any real impact on human or equality rights will, more than likely, result from the application of the regulations that flow from the Bill. Because of the importance of maintaining the Assembly's control over those regulations, the Committee considered that any subordinate legislation relating to a policy change should be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure, as it is the strongest form of control available to the Assembly and offers Members the most effective scrutiny of the equality and human rights implications.

The Committee was also made very aware of the human rights implications of the more severe sanctions proposed under the Welfare Reform Bill. Members were very concerned that sanctions should not be overly punitive or disproportionate, as that could result in extreme hardship or even destitution for some vulnerable claimants. Accordingly, the Committee recommended that the Department for Social Development ensure that any sanctions that are imposed are mitigated to avoid the potential for extreme hardship or destitution for children, lone parents or those with mental health issues. Similarly, the Committee recommended that the Department should make the payment of benefits to the partner who has care of dependent children its default position, in order to minimise any potential adverse impacts on women and children. That arose from the Committee's concern that those who are in a violent or abusive relationship, as well as their children, should not suffer further financially as a result of benefits being paid to the other partner as a nominated claimant.

Although the Committee is fully supportive of the promotion of individual responsibility and the

encouragement of people into work, it expressed reservations about certain aspects of universal credit, the new benefit that will replace existing working-age benefits and tax credits. A number of anomalies in the administration of that benefit were highlighted to the Committee. For example, the situation where a claimant who works no more than a few hours a week — in fact, I believe, no more than one hour a week — will lose 100% of their help with mortgage interest. This appears to act as a disincentive to work and runs contrary to the rationale of the Bill, which is surely to encourage people to come off benefits and seek work.

The situation of migrant workers also concerned some members of the Committee, as the Bill may adversely impact on claimants by reason of their ethnicity and may infringe European law. However, the Committee agreed that the Department for Social Development should closely monitor the outcome of current legal proceedings instituted under EU law and that any resulting adverse impacts in relation to race should be mitigated.

The proposed payment intervals of universal credit — monthly rather than fortnightly, as at present — also concerned members. The Committee expressed reservations that the option for fortnightly payment was to be exercised by the Department, rather than the claimant, and that this may impact adversely on women and children.

Again, the possible impact on women and children of lone parent conditionality rules greatly concerned the Committee, in view of the lack of accessible and affordable childcare currently available in this country. In England and Wales, there is a statutory obligation for local authorities to provide childcare facilities, but, as yet, there is neither corresponding legislation nor an established childcare strategy in Northern Ireland. Although the Committee noted assurances from the Department for Social Development that claimants will not be sanctioned for lack of childcare, it nonetheless recommends that procedures should be put in place to monitor this and to identify and remedy any adverse impacts on women and children that result from lone parent conditionality.

The Bill also introduces a new benefit cap that will limit the total amount of benefits payable to a household. Although the Committee was largely in favour of a cap set at the level currently proposed, it agreed that the number of households affected should be quantified and assessed in line with section 75 groupings to ensure that no equality implications are identified.

The possible impact on disabled persons of the new provisions of the Welfare Reform Bill and the introduction of personal independence payments have given rise to a range of equality implications and suggested possible breaches of human rights. The Committee was greatly concerned to ensure that the assessment process to be used for personal independence payments, which are designed to support people with disabilities into leading a full and independent life, should accurately reflect their capabilities. Particular issues were identified in relation to those with fluctuating conditions or mental health problems, and the Committee believed that a more accurate representation would be obtained by the use of medical evidence in the first instance rather than at the appeal stage. In addition, there appears to be a degree of uncertainty regarding the position of private contractors engaged by the Department to carry out assessments. The

Committee has recommended that legal clarity should be provided in the Bill that such contractors are also subject to the Human Rights Act 1998.

One of the most far-reaching changes to be introduced by the Welfare Reform Bill relates to so-called underoccupancy penalties for housing benefit claimants who live in social housing. The changes will put tenants in social housing onto the same basis as those in the private rented sector, where entitlement to benefits is calculated according to the size of the dwelling required. The proposed changes will, however, pose particular difficulties in Northern Ireland, where the Housing Executive has stated that it would be completely unable to provide alternative accommodation for those who have been identified as underoccupying a dwelling. The Committee agreed that, to minimise any human rights implications, the Department should not apply sanctions to claimants who are unable to locate reasonable alternative accommodation. The Committee also recommended that, in its calculation of housing benefit, the Department should take into account the exceptional needs of some specific groups, such as disabled children and foster carers.

10.45 am

These issues and many more raised by stakeholders were considered by the Committee during its existence. It is fair to say that members found themselves on a steep learning curve in familiarising themselves not only with the provisions of the Welfare Reform Bill but with the complex, wide-ranging and sometimes conflicting requirements of human rights and equality laws. After intensive scrutiny, the Committee concluded that it could not identify any specific breaches of equality or human rights considerations in the provisions of the Welfare Reform Bill. However, all the areas that I have already outlined raised issues of concern, and it is for that reason that the Committee today calls on the Minister for Social Development to consider the recommendations that it has made.

I would like to make a few comments, in the time I have left, as the ex-Chairman of the Committee, which is now defunct. First, the time-limited nature of the Committee mandate meant that we were not able to receive all the groups that would have liked to present to us. For instance, I am sure that the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People would like to have given a proper presentation, but there just was not time. We valued the written submissions from groups like that, but, with a 30-working day period that included Christmas, it was not easy.

Mr Swann and I visited Westminster and had an interesting discussion with Dr Hywel Francis, who chairs the Joint Committee on Human Rights at Westminster, which is a Standing Committee. He recommended to us that the Assembly could look at setting up a Standing Committee to look at these issues on an ongoing basis. I am not advocating for or against that. I am just relaying it and putting it on record that the Westminster Committee thinks that it would be a useful thing to have over here and in the other devolved Assemblies. I know that that would find favour with some bodies, such as the Human Rights Commission, which would strongly advocate that such a body should exist.

One of the major concerns among Committee members was that, although we could not find anything specific in the Bill that we could say was a breach or potential breach of human rights, it was fairly obvious that it is more to do with the regulations coming down the line. Those regulations, if they are policy matters, will be considered by affirmative resolution, and, if they are not, they will be considered by confirmatory resolution, which would mean a six-month gap, during which problems could arise. There is also no Standing Committee to look at those regulations when they are first proposed. I simply make the case that that is worth thinking about.

Beyond that, I am satisfied with the work that the Committee did and with the report. I hope that the House will perhaps agree with me. I have some doubts about that, but we will see what way the debate goes. I commend the motion to the House and look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about our comments.

Ms P Bradley: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the findings of the Ad Hoc Committee.

The demographics of our society have changed significantly, as has the number of people needing to access public help in financially providing for themselves and their families. Welfare reform is necessary to ensure that we can continue to support the most vulnerable in our society. The same is true of our dealings as public bodies, and I want to go on record to say that the issues that were highlighted and addressed through the Ad Hoc Committee had been rigorously dealt with at Social Development Committee level, with much the same recommendations.

The report has comprehensively examined the equality and human rights implications of the Welfare Reform Bill that we are in the process of passing. I, for one, want to see a system that is accessible to all in a manner that is easily understood and quick to complete. I want a system that people are not stigmatised for needing to access and that people realise is a safety net and not, as I stated in a debate yesterday, a viable career option. I also believe that, through the recommendations of the Committee, we have ensured that the most vulnerable in our society — for example, the ill, carers, children and women — will not be unduly disadvantaged because of circumstances that are beyond their control. For example, single parents should not be discriminated against because they do not have access to affordable childcare. A recent report by Employers for Childcare found the average cost of a full-time place in Northern Ireland to be £156 per week, and there was a substantial gap in supply and demand, with one place for every 7.4 children. That is why, in our recommendations, we ask that lone parents are not sanctioned because of a lack of childcare that is not only affordable but accessible.

The fact is that not everyone will be happy with the outcomes of welfare reform, but we are striving to ensure that no group in our society is disadvantaged. Through the course of the scrutiny of the Ad Hoc Committee and for me as a member of the Social Development Committee, there were recurrent concerns from almost all respondents: the impact on the disabled, women and children. With that in mind, the recommendations agreed in Committee should go some way towards alleviating many of those concerns and protecting those most vulnerable groups.

Austere times are here; that is a fact. No one wants to feel that they are being unfairly targeted or are the only ones who are affected. That said, if we do nothing, the outcome will be a lot worse as the welfare system will, eventually, collapse.

I believe that we have shown that the issues around equality and human rights have been robustly addressed and debated by the Ad Hoc Committee, with a majority of its members in agreement that the Bill does not breach equality and human rights requirements.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin sought the establishment of an Ad Hoc Committee because we believed that the Bill had human rights and equality implications. The evidence brought to the Committee has borne that out.

The Human Rights Commission, the Equality Commission, the Law Society, Cara-Friend, NICEM and others brought a litany of concerns before the Committee. Many of those concerns reiterated issues that we had raised in a reasoned amendment at Second Reading. The Human Rights Commission said:

“The Commission notes that the Department has not carried out a full equality impact assessment with respect to the categories of race, religion and sexual orientation.”

The Equality Commission criticised almost every aspect of the Department’s EQIA. It highlighted the lack of up-to-date and relevant data, the failure to identify adverse impacts, the lack of mitigation to address obligations under section 75 and the Department’s decision not to undertake impact assessments in relation to religion or belief, sexual orientation or race. The Council for Ethnic Minorities was concerned that aspects of the Bill breached European law. Disability Action and Mencap were concerned that the Bill did not meet obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Cara-Friend, representing the gay community, said:

“Not only has the DSD so far failed to have its revised equality scheme approved by the ECNI; nor has it had its audit of inequalities and action plan approved.”

The only people who tell us that the Bill is compliant are the Minister, his Department and political representatives of unionism. When the Minister and his Department were asked to substantiate their claims, attempts were made to hide behind legal privilege and confidentiality. When the Department’s EQIA was exposed as less thorough and in part reliant on opinion rather than evidence, it introduced the notion of a living document, as if, like fine wine, the EQIA would improve miraculously with age. Indeed, we have a letter from the permanent secretary, Mr Will Haire, to the Equality Commission, which says:

“There is not, as yet, any suitable data sources to enable us to assess the impact accurately on the basis of religion or belief; sexual orientation or race.”

In other words, we have no data, we have no EQIA — damning words. If I were the Minister for Social Development I would be very worried by the permanent secretary’s statement in writing.

Níl sé sin ceart. This is not good enough. We believe that the Minister and his Department have been too quick to

accept the operation of parity as no more than an exercise in rubber-stamping Westminster legislation and an excuse for the vulnerable in our society to be impacted. Let us hear the experts on so-called parity. Hewitt says that parity:

“in practice seems to have developed into a system of bargaining where the Treasury and the Westminster government were anxious to accommodate any reasonable demands”.

Bradshaw says:

“parity has never been a fixed notion and has been subject to interpretation over time in both theory and practice”.

Section 87 of the NI Act 1998 states that the Secretary of State and the NI Minister responsible for social security shall:

“from time to time consult one another with a view to securing that, to the extent agreed between them”.

I was in the Scottish Parliament last week and saw the Scottish Minister taking a much more robust line than our Minister. That is unfortunate, although it is good to see the Scottish standing up for their citizens. The Department for Social Development has a duty to identify and demonstrate our specific circumstances and, where appropriate, seek mitigation for people here. So far, it has utterly failed to do so.

In light of all this, it is unfortunate that Committee members from the unionist community have decided to declare the Bill compliant. It is obvious that their starting point was “This Bill is compliant. We are not going to listen to the Human Rights Commission, the Equality Commission or NICEM. This is a compliant Bill, and we are going to support it”. Sinn Féin MLAs were elected to protect our constituents from abuses of human rights and equality rights. In times of austerity, there is more of an onus on every Member in the House to do so. We will do it. We will stand up for our constituents and, indeed, the constituents who, so far, have not been represented by the Members on the unionist Benches. Sinn Féin will vote against the motion. Ní bheidh Sinn Féin ag tabhairt tacaíochta don rún seo.

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

Ms Ruane: I just want to let the House know that I have to go to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee now.

Mr Elliott: This is a very important aspect of the scrutiny of the Bill. I would like to place on record my thanks and those of the Ulster Unionist Party to the Committee staff, who did a very thorough job under extreme time pressure.

Irrespective of what the last Member said, we in the Ulster Unionist Party came at this from a very objective position. We looked at it in great detail. I am sure that all members of the Committee would accept that. We tried our best to establish the facts around equality and human rights, because that is what the Ad Hoc Committee was about. It was looking at the equality and human rights aspects of the Bill; it was not about any other aspects. We obviously strayed into other aspects at times, but what we had to do was look at the human rights and equality aspects.

I have to say that I sometimes felt sorry for the Chairman, because it was quite a difficult Committee to chair.

However, he got through it in a very positive manner and tried to reflect as well as possible the views of all those on the Committee. There were very different views, but he took all of those on board.

In the very limited time available to me, I will deal with some of the specific issues, one of which is the benefit cap. I know that there are concerns that a small number of households may be affected by the benefit cap, but look at the proposals. The estimated benefit cap of £26,000 per annum is equivalent to £35,000 before tax, which is actually higher than the current Northern Ireland gross median wage of £450 a week. It is very difficult to argue that there are equality or human rights issues there. Some people will say that it affects a small number of households, but I am sure that an average wage of £450 a week affects quite a number of households as well. I cannot see how there is a massive issue there.

Housing benefit is another issue that was discussed quite a lot. Changes will be introduced to the calculation of housing benefit to replicate in social housing the size-related criteria that already apply to the private rented sector. A claimant's eligible rent will be restricted by a stipulated percentage if their dwelling has more bedrooms than they are deemed to require. What is important there is that the change will apply only to working-age claimants. That could be a huge concern for pensioners, and hopefully it will not have that impact.

The most significant issue that has arisen in respect of the provision is the context of the current housing stock in Northern Ireland.

The Equality Commission believes that there may be impacts on tenants' ability to move due to the segregation of social housing. We accept that, and those concerns exist.

11.00 am

Ms Ruane highlighted a number of organisations and groups that have concerns. We have concerns, which are well reflected in the report and stated in several places. However, when I asked the groups that came before the Committee, particularly the most vociferous group, whether they could point us to anything specific in the Bill that breached human rights or equality, they could not do so. Concerns have been raised and highlighted by witnesses and by the Committee, but when you ask them about the specifics, they could not tell you.

Although the Committee was a one-off, I imagine that when the regulations start to come forward, there will be other Ad Hoc Committees on the equality and human rights impacts of the regulations. There will be intense scrutiny of those issues because every group and organisation that gave evidence, and even those on the Committee, highlighted the regulations as being a key aspect that will follow on from the Bill. A lot of detail will come in the regulations, which will require as much scrutiny as the Bill.

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

Mr Elliott: The Ulster Unionist Party supports the report.

Mr Eastwood: I also put on record my thanks to the Chair, Trevor Lunn, and to the Committee Clerk and the staff. It was not the easiest Committee to administer or chair, and nor was it the easiest Committee to sit on. I have a new-found appreciation for members of the Social Development

Committee. Some of us were learning a bit more than others, and it was not an easy task.

Welfare reform is a very complicated issue. It is clear to all of us that the reforms will be a massive change for the most vulnerable people in our society. It is coming down the tracks, but a lot of people do not realise what is coming down the tracks. The more detail you get into, the more worrying the real impacts of welfare reform become. Yesterday we debated tackling social disadvantage, and we already have immense problems with social disadvantage and poverty. I fear that the impact of so-called welfare reform will only exacerbate the difficulties around that.

It is fair to say that there was quite a bit of agreement in the Committee, but on the fundamental issues of whether the Bill had a human rights and equality impact, the Committee was divided. We clearly see the impacts on many groups. I thank the groups that came to the Committee and those that provided written evidence. It is unfortunate that the one organ of the Executive that is supposed to look after equality issues — OFMDFM's equality unit — did not see fit to respond adequately to the Ad Hoc Committee. In fact, the unit's only response was a letter to say that it would not be responding. That is not good enough. We all have a duty to look after equality and human rights, especially the equality unit of OFMDFM. The unit will have to answer that question in the time coming.

It is clear that we have a specific set of circumstances in Northern Ireland. We have a real issue with housing. That concerns not only the lack of housing stock — in Derry, 2,000 people are on the housing waiting list — but segregation. If you live in certain parts of Northern Ireland, it is almost impossible to take up the opportunity of a new house when there is a peace wall between that house and your existing home. As a result of the conflict, a great many people are dealing with disability issues. Many of the impacts of the Welfare Reform Bill will have a severe impact on those people in particular.

It is difficult to address the issues in five minutes, but it is obvious that the EQIA was not adequate. It was not up to scratch. There is a data deficit, and that has been admitted all round. A number of the section 75 groups were not included in the EQIA, and that has to be rectified. I proposed an amendment for an updated EQIA that would be done properly and consider everybody. Unfortunately, that was not accepted by the Committee. Thankfully, the Committee accepted a sort of scrutiny role for the Equality Commission going forward. Hopefully, that will bear some fruit.

We were told by a number of groups who came to the Committee that the devil was in the detail and in the regulations. I hope that our proposal to ensure that the regulations are properly looked at will get agreement from the Department. It was suggested by some officials from the Department that that would be a waste of the Assembly's time. I do not think that it would be a waste of the Assembly's time at all. We need to ensure that all the impacts of the Bill are properly looked at. That is our job, and that is what we should be about.

I will touch briefly on universal credit. We are told that the whole focus of welfare reform is to ensure that work pays and that being on benefits does not pay. The loss of mortgage interest payment for people who work for one or

two hours a week goes completely and utterly against the assertion that work should pay. I do not understand it, and I hope that the —

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

Mr Eastwood: OK. I will leave the rest to my colleague Mr Durkan, who can fill in the blanks.

Lord Morrow: I pay tribute to the Committee staff, who had a very difficult task in dealing with this issue, and I pay my regards to the Chairman, who did a superb job under very difficult circumstances and in a very short time. He had to deal with an intensive situation that was very much thrown at the Committee.

Incidentally, it was a situation that was, to all intents and purposes — I do not like using the phrase — a waste of time. There is no other way to say it. That was not the fault of the Chairman, the Deputy Chairman or the staff, but the fault of those who insisted on having the Committee because what we did was a repetition of what the Committee for Social Development had done. There is not a doubt that the Committee for Social Development could and should have been allowed to get on with its job, and I saw our role, to some degree, as meddling and interfering in the tasks consigned to that Committee.

Maybe it is a learning curve for the future because those who sat on the Committee discovered very quickly that there was, in some cases, a political agenda at work. There were members who felt that they have all the concerns about those who live at the margins. I suspect that there is not an MLA in the Chamber today who does not work daily with those who live on the margins. We try to assist to the best of our ability and help those people to get their entitlements through social security benefit. However, one big point that was missed — I think that it was deliberately missed — at the start of the debate was that social security is not a devolved matter. It is a parity issue. Some do not have a full appreciation of that, and getting that message over to some Members of the House is very difficult.

If you break parity on this issue, you will be forced to break parity on a lot of issues. I suspect that the London Government would be quite happy for that to happen because they will point to one instance and say, "You did it there and you can do it again". I ask those who have a genuine concern about welfare and people on benefit to keep in mind that they are not doing their constituents any favours at all by trying to meddle in things that the Assembly has no real powers over. When devolution came about, this was one of the issues that I earnestly believed that the Assembly should not deal with, and it has been demonstrated quite clearly that there are those who do not have the maturity to deal with social security issues. They need to remember that it is, in fact, a parity issue. That is the way it is, and that is the way it should be. I suspect that, if you were to drill down very deeply into this, you would find that all of us around this House would not want it any other way. If we do make it different, the people we claim we are trying to help will be disadvantaged very severely. I want to get that point on the record and ask the people who say that they are concerned to bear that in mind.

The Committee was tasked with submitting a report to the House by 22 January. We missed that by a short time. Although that is not a big issue, it is worth saying that, had it not been for the persistence of some on the Committee,

we would not be debating the issue even today, because it appears that there is an agenda at work to drag this issue out, cause embarrassment and recklessly break parity. Anyone who sets themselves down that track will find out, to their cost, that they will have a lot of explaining to do to their constituents and to the people who are entitled to benefit. Some of us do not claim to have the monopoly on this, but others do. Members on this side of the House will be supporting the findings of this Ad Hoc Committee. I believe that it has not come up with anything that is very sensational —

Mr Speaker: Time is almost gone.

Lord Morrow: — and I believe that the House clearly understands that we should not be wasting time on irrelevancies and trying to take the Assembly down roads that it has no power over.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Committee staff and, indeed, the Chairperson, who prevailed under very difficult circumstances.

It is regrettable that Lord Morrow said that the human rights and equality rights issues are a waste of time; they are very important and fundamental issues to be dealt with and not an absolute waste of time. Welfare reform is a devolved matter, but he is confusing the difference between money and administration. Maybe we could talk about that some time. He needs to get that into his head, because, obviously, he is confused about that.

There has been much talk about the EQIA, and any of the stakeholders who we spoke to had serious reservations about it. My colleague Cairtriona Ruane said that they possibly thought that the EQIA was like a good wine, but maybe it is a good wine that needs to breathe at room temperature for quite a long time. Possibly, the Minister needs to breathe into it occasionally and bring it up to scratch, and that appears not to have happened.

We have a number of specific concerns about the Bill, many of which, regardless of the vote today, are shared by most Members of the Ad Hoc Committee and the majority of MLAs. We have concerns about the adverse impact on women and children of the single household payment. The Committee recommends directing payment to the main carer as a matter of course.

Lord Morrow talked about people trying to embarrass other people. The only people who should be embarrassed are advocates of welfare reform as it stands. On frequency of payment, the Committee recommends that fortnightly payments should be a matter of claimant choice rather than being at the discretion of the Department. There was also talk about the discredited reassessment test for employment and support allowance, and the Committee recommended reform so that a much better regime be put in place for the transfer from disability living allowance (DLA) to personal independence payments (PIP).

The Committee also shared concerns about the proposed sanction regime and the likely adverse impact on lone parents, children and people with mental illness. The Committee is calling for hardship to be minimised and rejects destitution as an unacceptable outcome for anyone.

On the imposition of the underoccupancy rule, the Committee recommends no penalty where no reasonable alternative accommodation is available. The Housing Executive has stated very clearly, certainly

to the Committee for Social Development that, if the underoccupancy rule were introduced in the morning, it simply could not cope with it because it does not have the resources. Obviously, the Committee took that on board. The Committee also agrees that, as an enabling Bill, more regulation should be subject to affirmative resolution to allow proper scrutiny of the detail.

11.15 am

There has been a lot of talk about the devil in the detail in the regulations. This is an enabling Bill. If it is flawed then, by definition, the regulations will be flawed. So, it is important to get the Bill right. People need to be aware of that, and they should not dismiss it by saying, "It will all come right in the end, because the regulations will sort it out." The regulations need to be done by affirmative resolution procedure, and the Committee recommended that.

We, in Sinn Féin, have worked hard to identify difficulties and seek solutions by working within the Executive, the scrutiny Committee and the Ad Hoc Committee. Mr Elliott referred to the cap. Here again, I would say that there is this myth abroad that people on benefits are well-off and that benefits are wonderful things. I have been dealing with benefits, and people on benefits, for nearly 40 years and no one has ever said to me that they are happy on benefits. The problem that we have here is that we have a low-wage economy, and I think we need to get that into our heads. That is very important.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree with me that Lord Morrow's assertion that the Committee's work was not done in time is absolutely wrong? The report was laid where it should have been laid on the morning of 22 January.

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

Mr Brady: I thank the Member for his contribution. The Committee —

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for giving way. In relation to the point that Mr Eastwood raised, it says here very clearly:

"and to report to the Assembly by 22 January."

Mr Brady: I think that Mr Eastwood may have been referring to the fact that the Committee did its work within the stipulated time. It did a very difficult job in very difficult circumstances.

I reiterate that Sinn Féin has worked hard to identify difficulties and seek solutions by working within the Executive, the scrutiny Committee, the Ad Hoc Committee and the Assembly. Obviously, the Bill will now return to the Social Development Committee, where we will continue to act as advocates not for the Bill but for the people we represent. We urge everyone to assist in this task.

Let me make this point in fairness to the Committee: Paula Bradley and I, as members of the Social Development Committee, had an advantage because it is a very complex area. In the circumstances, I found it educational. I just hope that the other members of the Committee did. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Weir: I join with others in thanking both the Chair and the Committee staff for their hard work during this process. I find myself today following directly after Mickey Brady. It

is a very familiar experience that I have had over the last two months; albeit, I suspect that, as in the Committee, my remarks may diverge somewhat from what Mr Brady was saying.

In looking at this report, one finds that there is a lot of detail in it and I hope to cover some of that in my remarks. However, we have to look at the central recommendation. Having weighed up the evidence, and having listened to a number of groups, we find that a number of groups had concerns, and indeed a lot of Committee members had concerns. However, the central point is that the Committee, on examination, came to the conclusion that there was no discernible breach of human rights or equality in the Bill. That is not to say that there are not concerns, and we need to be careful of regulations.

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I will give way briefly.

Mr Agnew: I appreciate the Member's giving way. It is unlikely that I will get another opportunity to speak in the debate. I was not a member of the Committee. Surely the situation in which separated parents are being charged extra for a second room when they need access to their children is a breach of the right to a family life?

Mr Weir: With respect, had the Member taken care to read the report he would have seen that that is one of the recommendations that we have put in place.

It is clear that that is not a breach of human rights. Indeed, the Human Rights Commission itself did not identify a specific breach in the Bill. We have to make sure that we do not invent evidence that is not there. We also have to realise that, with respect to welfare reform, with the best will in the world, we are not some sort of hermetically sealed region. We have to take parity into account and, indeed, from a financial point of view, we cannot be "ourselves alone". We cannot go a solo route, because the ultimate end of that, were we to be given full financial responsibility over social security, is something that would be very damaging.

The first Member to speak for Sinn Féin, Ms Ruane, praised the robust response of Scotland. Of course, Scotland's position is that it has absolutely no influence or control whatsoever over social security. It was simply decided at Westminster and imposed. So, it is very easy, and, I would say, that all of us in this House could well take that view — had we no role at all in social security — of being the armchair critics of the Scottish Government. That Government can complain without having to live, in any way, with the consequences. That is the fundamental difference between us and Scotland. I believe that parity is an important principle. However, where we can make a beneficial difference, we should, and that is reflected in the report. A number of concerns that have been raised in the report are things that the Minister for Social Development, through his work, has been able to address.

The Committee was united on the issue of bimonthly payments and on the opportunity for split payments. With regard to operational matters, those issues have been successfully negotiated by the Minister. The Committee was also united on other issues; for example, we welcomed the assurances given by the Department on sanctions. We highlighted concerns about the impact of sanctions on women and children, and on foster carers. I

believe that those matters will be taken into account by the Minister.

Two key areas were raised on wider issues that go to the heart of welfare reform and, beyond that, within government. Those things need to be addressed and are being addressed. First, a number of Members, quite rightly, highlighted the different problems that we have with our housing market in Northern Ireland. There is no doubt that more can be done on how we look at tenancies, but the reality is that there will be a major barrier to fully implementing that, given the current housing market. That is why, in a different context, it is absolutely correct that the Minister addresses the problems of the Housing Executive. We have housing stock that is not fit for purpose and does not fit the needs of our people. That is not only due to a shortage of housing but having the wrong type of housing, and that is an important issue to cover.

The other important issue for the Executive to deal with is the fact that we are behind the ball on childcare in Northern Ireland, and lag behind in other areas, and it is right that we highlight that there should not be any sanction on that basis. That is a very significant problem and it needs to be addressed on an Executive-wide basis. We had the opportunity to address it as part of the recommendations on welfare reform, but it will need to be embraced in a much more significant way than heretofore.

Concerns have been raised about policy changes. The regulations will be the crucial point. Therefore, we must ensure that anything that involves a policy change, as opposed to a mere technical change, is done by way of affirmative process. That must be embraced.

Members can reject the report — they can defeat it on a cross-community vote — but it does not stop the reality that there is no breach of human rights or equality regulations in the Bill. There are things that people are genuinely concerned about, and we need to take care with those, but let us not pretend that something is there that is not. I support the report.

Mr Durkan: It is with regret that the SDLP is unable to approve the report. I find it lamentable that, having opposed the establishment of the Ad Hoc Committee since it was first mooted by the SDLP, some parties appear to have entered that Committee with closed ears and closed minds in order to arrive at a predetermined outcome. That approach flies in the face of the issues that MLAs are hearing about on the ground and raising in Committee.

I acknowledge and welcome the limited recommendations in the report, particularly around the mitigation of the impact of sanctions on mental ill health sufferers and children. I also welcome the recommendation that the nominated claimant for universal credit be changed to the default position of the parent with caring responsibilities. It is vital that all flexibilities are explored and exploited to protect the vulnerable.

I agree that fortnightly or twice-monthly payments of universal credit will reduce the potential for further hardship. Although I acknowledge the Committee's recommendation that medical evidence should be given primacy in PIP assessments, I am disappointed that further protections have not been sought for victims of the Troubles, severely disabled people and those with learning difficulties.

It is right that any calculation for housing benefit should permit exceptions — I am talking about underoccupancy — and those exceptions should exist for parents with joint custody, foster parents and those with a disability. I also agree strongly that sanctions should not apply where no reasonable alternative accommodation is available.

There are huge areas of concern around the report, however. Alarmingly, despite the majority of members accepting the Equality Commission's assertion that the EQIA had not considered relevant data or complied with the Department's statutory obligation, as no account was taken of four out of the nine section 75 groups — those concerning religious belief, political opinion, racial background and sexual orientation — it was still not accepted that the EQIA was inadequate.

The concern that the impact on those with disabilities has not been fully assessed has also been raised today. The view that the EQIA is a living document is remarkable. The Assembly will be asked to pass massively important legislation, without even having quantified its adverse impact on our citizens. The lack of a full EQIA, relevant data and analysis of the impact on this region means that the Assembly will effectively walk into welfare reform with its eyes shut.

There should be an obligation on the Department to provide that data and to be aware of its real impact in order to mitigate it, before we have to backtrack, as Westminster is now doing since it steamrolled through welfare reform. This was an opportunity for us to improve the Welfare Reform Bill, to get a better deal for our constituents and to ensure protections for the most vulnerable among them. That opportunity has, regrettably, been squandered, it seems. It will be up to the MLAs from those parties who have basically obstructed the process to explain to the public how they deem these welfare cuts to be fair.

Lord Morrow: Will the Member give way?

Mr Durkan: No, thanks. I do not have much time left. We have had senior party members peddling one message, and Back-Benchers peddling another. Does that sound familiar? Lord Morrow claimed that some MLAs were doing their constituents no favours, but today has provided further evidence to me, as if it were needed after the past couple of months, of a huge disconnect between unionist MLAs and socially disadvantaged communities and people.

While we welcome and support the recommendations within the report, it omits more than it contains. Therefore it fails to address the concerns of many and will do little to change the Welfare Reform Bill. It is for that reason that we will vote against it, and we will continue, in the absence of substantial and fair changes, to oppose the Bill.

Mr Ross: Today's debate has given those who were not on the Committee a flavour of the sort of debate that we have had over the past number of weeks. It has highlighted the hugely different interpretation that Members have put on the same evidence: from Ms Ruane's opening statement of an absolute vindication of the position of Sinn Féin, to those on this side of the House who agree with the conclusions of the report that not one specific area where the Bill has been in breach was found and agreed by the Committee.

As Members have said, it has, at times, been a rather painful experience. Perhaps some of that vintage wine that

Ms Ruane was talking about could have helped us in the process. Like others, I pay tribute to Mr Lunn for the way in which he handled the chairing of the Committee, which, at times, was very difficult, and to the staff who, at times, had to try to find a way of wording the discussions that we had.

As Lord Morrow said, at times the Ad Hoc Committee strayed into the territory of the Committee for Social Development. Even a cursory glance over the recommendations that our report includes shows that the vast majority, if not all, of those recommendations are issues that have been raised by the Social Development Committee. They have been discussed, debated or decided on by that Committee, and, indeed, now that the Bill will go back to the Committee for Social Development for scrutiny, that Committee can continue discussing some of the issues. I think that is why Lord Morrow said that perhaps the Ad Hoc Committee was not required. The issues that we were discussing in our Committee should have been discussed in the Committee for Social Development and, indeed, that would have given it more time. I think that is an important point.

11.30 am

Concerns have been raised about the Bill, not just by Members from the nationalist community but from right across the Chamber, at various stages in its process. However, the bulk of concerns that we have heard, both in the Committee from the vast range of written and oral evidence that we received and, indeed, from Members on the opposite Benches, have been about the policy behind the Bill as opposed to any equality or human rights impact. Of course, they are entitled to different views on policy, but, again, the place for that discussion was not in an Ad Hoc Committee.

Out of all the recommendations, a few issues have been highlighted during the debate that, perhaps, need further attention. Nationalists particularly were exercised about the EQIA. We have, indeed, mentioned that in recommendations 1 and 2. I have heard numerous Members refer to the fact that not all section 75 categories were addressed, but there is a very logical reason for that: what relevance at all do religious belief, political opinion, sexual orientation or race have on whether an individual has an entitlement to claim welfare benefits? That, of course, is why those areas —

Mr Brady: I thank the Member for giving way. In an analysis done by the Equality Commission, those four groups were highlighted as being most vulnerable and most likely to be impacted on by the draconian measures of welfare reform.

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

Mr Ross: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I stick to the point that I fail to see how those four areas of section 75 prevent anyone getting welfare payments in any way.

Regulations are addressed in recommendation 3 of the report. The crux of the issue — I know that Mr Brady had a particular interest in this, and Mr Weir referred to the fact in his comments — is that the Bill, in itself, is effectively enabling legislation. That means that many of the concerns that have been raised will arise with the regulations that follow it. The Bill itself has no specific equality or human

rights impact. It is important that that point is made. We had quite a bit of discussion on that in Committee.

Other points that were raised during the debate and in the course of the Ad Hoc Committee included concerns about the nominated claimant. At Second Stage, I spoke about some of the concerns that were raised at that time. The Minister must be given credit for his discussions and the flexibilities that he has already secured. We know that he has secured split payments, for example. If Members feel that the Minister should have further discussions on certain areas, that can be discussed when the Bill goes back to the Committee for Social Development, which is the appropriate place for that to happen.

With regard to recommendations 6 and 7 on universal credit, concern was raised by Members and the Human Rights Commission, for example, about the monthly payments. At Second Stage, I said that I understood the rationale behind it: we want to promote individual responsibility, and we want to ease the transition from receiving welfare to getting into paid work. Therefore, when you get monthly payments, you must learn how to budget. However, I also recognise that specific concerns have been raised. Again, it is important that the House recognises the work that the Minister has already done to secure the flexibility to have fortnightly payments. Members should be grateful for the position that he has taken.

I am comfortable with the report's findings. I, along with others on this side of the House, have sympathy with the argument that, perhaps, the Ad Hoc Committee was not the best way in which to deal with the issues. I must say in closing that I am disappointed with the conduct of one Member in particular, who tried to divide on absolutely everything, even after we had agreed the report line by line, and did not have faith in the officials' accurately reflecting that. That is disappointing. I hope that the House will show pragmatism and support the report.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is gone.

Mr Ross: The report is a factual reflection of the discussions that we had in Committee.

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I am grateful for the opportunity to address the Assembly on the report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the conformity of the Welfare Reform Bill with human rights and equality obligations.

The Bill was referred for scrutiny to the Ad Hoc Committee in respect of human rights and equality issues following concerns raised by various stakeholders at the Committee for Social Development. I am pleased to see that the Ad Hoc Committee has reported within the timescale and has concluded that the Bill is, indeed, compatible with our equality obligations. Hopefully, Members will have had a chance to consider the report and its recommendations.

I take this opportunity to thank the Ad Hoc Committee for its work. When the Committee was being established, I registered my concerns over the potential for delay in our legislative process and any resulting financial consequence. Although I do not wish to underplay the significance of those concerns, the level of interest shown in these matters, I believe, demonstrate the strength of feeling around the Westminster reform agenda, Members' concerns for vulnerable individuals in our society and our

desire to get welfare reform right for Northern Ireland. Against that backdrop, I welcome the Ad Hoc Committee's report, in particular its conclusion that the Bill's provisions conform with our obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights and our equality duties. I will consider the recommendations in detail as we move forward now, as I believe we must, to implement reform.

Before the establishment of the Ad Hoc Committee, the Social Development Committee had done some good work in scrutinising the Bill to ensure clarity of understanding and to put together some suggestions that Members considered might be desirable to protect certain interests or to facilitate claimants as reforms were introduced. When I spoke to yesterday's motion to extend Committee scrutiny to 19 February, I urged the Committee to complete its scrutiny as quickly as possible to ensure that Northern Ireland does not suffer a financial penalty as a result of breaching parity with the rest of the United Kingdom. To facilitate that process, I am due to meet the Social Development Committee this Thursday to go through the issues that have been raised and to set out my position as Minister, taking account of the financial and logistical challenges that the reform agenda poses. I am well aware of the challenges that we all face, but I assure the Assembly that I will continue to work with my ministerial counterparts in Westminster, my departmental Committee and all stakeholders to ensure that Northern Ireland's circumstances are taken into account, that, when we need operational flexibilities, we are afforded those and that, where there are potential financial consequences, we secure the best possible deal for Northern Ireland.

I turn now to the report's recommendations, and I am conscious that Members have had only a short time to consider them. I do not intend to cover each recommendation, but I want to highlight a few issues that I consider Members need to be aware of.

A number of recommendations are made on perceived data deficits, which relate to the equality impact assessment carried out on the Bill. In response to various Assembly questions and debates, I have repeatedly outlined the work that I have commissioned and which the Department for Social Development is undertaking to ensure that the data to which we look to inform decisions around reforms is the most robust possible. I reiterate that sentiment today and advise that work is progressing well on the policy simulation model. We hope to be in a position soon to update the tables in the published EQIA with data drawn from the most recently available family resources survey — 2011 — and the latest module of the PSM.

The Committee recommends that the Assembly adopt the affirmative resolution procedure for regulations where policy is changing, as opposed to the confirmatory process that we would ordinarily use. Although I recognise the sentiment that has given rise to the recommendation, I will have to consider how that would work in practice, particularly when time-critical regulations are being made that could in turn give rise to additional IT and operational costs, as well as having the potential to disadvantage claimants in Northern Ireland — for example, when uprating claims, which occurs at least on an annual basis.

Moving on through the report, I note that the Committee makes recommendations around payments — for example, who gets paid and when. Those issues are not new. I have previously advised the Assembly of discussions that I have

had with Lord Freud and others around the operational flexibilities that will be available for claimants in Northern Ireland. We must now consider how we apply those flexibilities, as that will have a direct impact on things such as IT costs. I will discuss that in more detail with the Social Development Committee when we meet on Thursday.

The Committee has also raised issues about the arrangements for the personal independence payment that is due to replace DLA. I am happy to note those as the process evolves, in particular, how the assessment process works in practice. Let me assure Members that I will charge my officials to provide me with assurances that the process is operating as intended and is fit for purpose.

On housing, members of the Committee have raised issues about certain individuals and groups who, they consider, may need added protection to ensure that their rights are not threatened. As Minister with responsibility for social housing and social security, I am well aware of the issues that may arise in that arena. Members will be acquainted with some of the work that I have commissioned to better inform the position on these matters, and I advise that that work will continue in order to achieve the best outcome possible. However, I caution that there are no easy solutions to any of the difficulties that we face. Extremely difficult choices will have to be made by me as Social Development Minister and by Executive colleagues in the wider context of welfare reform.

In my remaining time today, I want to turn to some specific points raised by a number of Members. A point was raised about the EQIA's data deficit and the issue of collating and analysing additional data. I have previously acknowledged the EQIA's data limitations. However, we continue to work on that. We are also developing the household income administrative database, which links individual benefit scans and tax credit data with HMRC earnings and savings data. I believe that that will be a major benefit to informing future EQIAs in the area of welfare.

When we published the equality impact assessment for the Welfare Reform Bill in May 2012, we made it clear at that stage that we could publish only on the basis of the material available and that further work was needed. That further work continues, and we are updating as additional information becomes available. That is the context in which people speak about a living document. Some folk seem to have difficulty understanding that concept, but that is its meaning and its significance. I hope that folk find that explanation helps their understanding. The information in the published EQIA was based on outputs from the PSM, which used information from the 2008-09 family resources survey and, therefore, has coverage of the same section 75 groupings as the main survey. Further to a point made by my colleague Alastair Ross, I should explain that benefits are awarded on an entitlement basis, not by section 75 group. Therefore, there are instances in which information may not be immediately available.

Paula Bradley made the important point that much of the ground covered by this Committee had been covered by the Social Development Committee, and it was natural that that was going to be the case. Therefore, Mickey Brady and Paula Bradley were at an obvious advantage in that they had already been through the process with the Social Development Committee. I think that the members of that Committee are truly immersed in the process. I take on board Paula's points.

I will just pick up on what Caitríona Ruane said. I must say that she certainly excelled herself today — she was big on rhetoric and low on content. I see that she has disappeared again. What she said sounded to me like an extract from some revolutionary Marxist magazine. It was Caitríona Ruane in best form, but I have difficulty taking what she said seriously. I was disappointed that she went down the road of “Oh, those awful people on the other side of the Chamber, those awful unionists”, as though the people on her side of the Chamber were the only people with compassion in their heart. That is really what she was saying. I think that the divisive sectarianising of the issue that Ms Ruane indulged in —

Mr Brady: Will the Minister give way?

11.45 am

Mr McCausland: No, I am running out of time, and I have a lot of points still to cover. I found that approach distinctly unhelpful.

Tom Elliott made an important statement about the benefit cap of £26,000. If you scale that up for tax, it is £35,000 in real terms. That is an important point. He also raised the issue of the housing stock. The issue there is not segregation, as is sometimes suggested; the issue is that smaller-scale accommodation is needed in unionist and nationalist areas, but the Housing Executive failed over the years to provide the sort of accommodation that was needed. That is the point. It is needed in unionist areas; it is needed in nationalist areas. It is nothing to do with segregation; it is simply that the social housing development programme was wrongly constructed. That point has been made in the past. Again, this year, the point has been made: people have come forward with social housing development programmes that do not take account of welfare reform. There is a need in unionist areas and nationalist areas for the appropriate size of accommodation. That is not an equality issue; it is simply a failure and shortcoming of the past. I am glad that, as a result of an intervention that I made with the Housing Executive and housing associations, we are now putting a focus on producing in the housing development programme the right size of accommodation. Colum Eastwood dealt with that point as well, and I responded to it.

I want to pick up on the term “concerns and fears”. People talk about so-and-so or this group or that group coming forward with concerns and fears. The fact is that fears can be well founded or unfounded. Mark Durkan referred to the victims of the Troubles. That is why I met Kathryn Stone, the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors, and why I met victims she brought to state their case. One was a victim of the Abercorn bombing in the early days of the Troubles and the other a victim of a more recent terrorist attack. I wrote to her in December and received a very good letter in response. That meeting was not just with me; it happened on a day when Lord Freud was over. We were both able to reassure the commissioner and the two victims, who were visibly distressed. It turned out that the things that were causing them distress were fears that were unfounded. We all need to keep it in mind that fears can be well founded or unfounded. I was glad that we were able to reassure those victims and the commissioner in regard to the concerns they had. A word of caution needs to be given there: people should not raise unfounded fears.

Mickey Brady made the point that it is important to get the Bill right. I agree with him entirely. The point was made well by Peter Weir that we are not in some way hermetically sealed. I will go back to a point that was made about Scotland. In Scotland, it is not a devolved matter; here, it is. We are able to make changes. The changes and flexibilities that I have secured are flexibilities that other parts of the United Kingdom wish they had. That has been said clearly on a number of occasions. That is why I found Caitríona Ruane’s comments particularly disappointing and reprehensible. It is widely acknowledged that we have secured flexibilities in Northern Ireland that no other part of the United Kingdom has. People can talk about these things and dismiss them. The fact is we are not hermetically sealed, as Peter Weir said. We are part of the United Kingdom —

Mr Speaker: The Minister’s time is almost gone.

Mr McCausland: — and we are entitled to the same benefits and conditions as elsewhere.

I conclude by thanking the Committee for its work on the Bill and note my assurances.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for his response. It was clear from the debate that the Welfare Reform Bill is one of the most important Bills to come through the Assembly. Therefore, it is vital, in our role as Members of the Assembly, to ensure that it is properly constructed. I thank the Minister for acknowledging that the Committee and its staff completed their work on time. As we heard, the Ad Hoc Committee was established after the Social Development Committee and very well-respected stakeholders brought forward genuine concerns that areas of the legislation may not conform with equality requirements and observance of human rights.

Like other Members, I want to give special commendation to the staff of the Ad Hoc Committee. As the Chairman said, this is the first time that we have had an Ad Hoc Committee. It was a very difficult situation for the staff, and they handled that very well. I am sure that Members heard the different opinions expressed in the debate in the House today, and that is a reflection of what happened in the Committee itself. I commend the staff for being able to pull together the report within a specific time frame.

In his opening remarks, the Chairperson of the Committee, Mr Lunn, outlined the background to the report and explained the reasoning behind and structure of the Ad Hoc Committee’s consideration of the issues. Although I do not intend to revisit all those issues, I feel that it is important to emphasise that the Ad Hoc Committee highlighted, questioned and considered the issues that raised concerns about the Bill’s non-conformity and, I believe, reached a fair and conclusive outcome.

I fail to see how any Member sitting in the Chamber today would encourage infringement of or seek to infringe in any way a person’s human rights or rights to equal treatment. What the Committee heard during its evidence gathering was that some provisions of the Welfare Reform Bill “may infringe” or “could possibly impact”.

As has been discussed here today, the regulations, which are not yet in place, were a particular concern. Where concerns were raised, the Committee put forward recommendations that it felt would address those concerns, should they prove accurate, and I thank the

Minister for reflecting on the recommendations. It is the regulations that the majority of Committee members and Members in the House are concerned about — that argument has been well put forward here today.

Before moving on to the contributions from Members and the Minister, I want to draw Members' attention to paragraph 5 of the executive summary, which I feel sums up the majority of the Committee's decisions. It states:

"The Committee believed that its scrutiny had revealed a number of areas of concern and accordingly it made recommendations which it considers will promote the continued monitoring of equality and human rights considerations in the on-going introduction of Welfare Reform. The Committee, however, concluded that it cannot identify any specific breaches of equality or human rights aspects of the Welfare Reform Bill."

As was the case for most of our discussions, that decision was reached by majority vote.

At times, the Committee was lively, interesting, dreary and time-consuming — a fact that has been reflected here today. You could use any adjective you can think of to describe different aspects of the Committee. I commend the members, because I found the Committee to be one of the most robust in debating a very important subject that I have either sat on or witnessed in the House. It was unfortunate that, on the final day of deliberations, we had to divide on so many issues. As Members have indicated, there was consensus and agreement in the Committee on a number of very serious and major issues, and members around the table were prepared to debate the issues as mature MLAs. The Committee was in closed session for the majority of the time, because what we were doing was quite sensitive either to members or their parties or to the groups that presented evidence to us, which we dissected and discussed. Some of the evidence was hard-hitting, and it was hard to comprehend how this would be brought forward and affect our constituents.

I will move on, if I may, to some of the Minister's comments. As he covered and reflected on Members' comments, I will not go over those as well.

At the outset, the Minister commended the Committee, although I know that his party was not in favour of setting it up. The Ulster Unionist Party was in favour — I say that as an Ulster Unionist member of the Committee — even though I know it has been said that we often went over the same ground twice. However, given the situation with welfare reform and the issues that we are dealing with, we thought that taking 30 days out of the timescale to make sure that we examined those issues in detail was not a big ask of the Committee or the House.

The Minister noted with concern the delay that that could cause to the Welfare Reform Bill. I think that everybody on the Committee took that into consideration and was prepared to put in two days a week or even more if necessary. The Chairman and I put in extra time to meet other groups, as well as travelling to Westminster with the Committee Clerk to meet Hywel Francis to make sure that we were getting the full evidence available. I am glad that the Minister is to meet the Committee for Social Development on Thursday to discuss the Ad Hoc Committee's recommendations. That shows that the work that we did was not in vain but was the start of a continuing

process to highlight the concerns raised by the Committee for Social Development and the Ad Hoc Committee, as well as by every MLA, given the number of questions raised with the Minister about the EQIA, housing stock provision or any other aspect of welfare reform. Do not be under any illusions: as MLAs, we are the ones who will see how the legislation affects members of our society.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He mentioned housing stock. Does he agree that the Minister was rather dismissive of the progress made by the Housing Executive, which has served Northern Ireland for over 40 years, when he said — I forget his words — that it was not providing the right accommodation to the right people at the right time? I assure the Minister that, when I required accommodation, I was privileged to accept a three-bedroom house for my family. That is not going to happen —

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us not stray from the debate.

Mr Swann: I take the Member's concerns on board. I must say that housing was one of the most emotive subjects that the Committee dealt with. There was a recognition of that by the Minister, who has acknowledged that the right housing is not in place for when the bedroom tax comes in. The implication is there.

The matter of housing also proved to be one of those numerous instances when the Committee found consensus. We agreed to include foster carers in the recommendations because of evidence that we had taken. The Minister addressed many of the concerns that Members raised, but I will cover them briefly.

Paula Bradley said that the most vulnerable — children, the elderly and women — will not be disadvantaged and that the report's recommendations will help to ensure that. When the recommendations are taken in their entirety, I think that I can say that we did the job of work that we were asked to do by MLAs and the Assembly to make sure that concerns were addressed. The Minister talked about fears, but unfortunately that is what we deal with as constituency MLAs — the fears and concerns of our constituents. That is what we were reflecting on in our work in Committee. Hopefully, the regulations will take the recommendations into consideration, whereas the Bill itself may not. That is the work that needs to be done now.

Caitriona Ruane said that the assessment under section 75 was not fully carried out, as the Department left out four categories. I think that the Minister has addressed that. It is an argument that Caitriona made well on numerous occasions in Committee in the time that she was there.

DSD's failings in its responsibility to look into other actions, such as the policy and the outworkings of the social model, were explained to the Committee as well, but we need to see the outworkings of that. That is why we state at paragraph 13:

"The Committee recommends that the Department for Social Development should continue its efforts to address the data deficits".

It is not only about addressing those data deficits but about making sure that they do not have adverse effects on any section 75 group, whether covered in the original EQIA or not.

Tom Elliott explained our party position going into this. We went in with an open mind to make sure that we were

doing our best. That is why we as a party supported the establishment of the Ad Hoc Committee. I tried to establish the facts around human rights and equality provisions in the Bill.

The concerns about the benefit cap were well rehearsed in Committee. Mickey Brady made a valiant argument for there being no necessity for a benefits cap. That was a point that Mickey raised in Committee and again today. However, when put into perspective, the figure of £26,000 — £35,000 before tax or £450 a week — may affect only a small number of families, but we need to make sure that they are not adversely affected.

12.00 noon

Colum Eastwood raised the point that this was a massive change for the most vulnerable in our society. As I have often said in here, we are here to give the voice to those who do not have the voice. I take exception to the Members who said that this was a unionist push-through because the unionist MLAs are not connected to their working class or the socially vulnerable. I will be quite honest with you: if any Members from other parts of the House want to come down and spend a day in my office in Harryville because they think that we are disconnected, you are more than welcome to come down with me, folks. I assure you that I could share the workload.

Lord Morrow's contribution to today's debate here in regard to the Ad Hoc Committee and how he viewed its usefulness and purpose was well rehearsed in the Chamber today. He paid tribute to the Chair, Trevor Lunn, for how he handled the Committee. It was not easy at times, because it was such an emotive issue. I am glad that Lord Morrow paid tribute to the Chairman, because it was him who caused most of it at times. *[Laughter.]* And Caitríona, but in her absence I was not going to mention her.

Lord Morrow: Unfair.

Mr Swann: I will think about retracting it.

The Minister referred to the additional input that can come because we had members of the Social Development Committee on the Committee as well. There was additional input that was either beneficial or a hindrance at times. I assure you that having a barrister on the Committee when we were talking about the Human Rights Commission and other European legislation was not helpful at all, Peter.

Mr Weir: It was obviously above your head, Robin.

Mr Swann: No.

Mark Durkan had concerns. Although he was critical of the report, he welcomed the recommendations that the Committee put forward. All that I can say to Mr Durkan is that I take on board the concerns that you are raising, but make sure that your Social Development Committee rep carries those concerns forward. That is where the job of work has to be done next: on the Social Development Committee.

In conclusion, for the reasons that I have outlined today, I call on the Assembly to support the motion and call on the Minister for Social Development to take forward all the recommendations in their entirety as stipulated in the report.

Mr Speaker: I remind the House again that the motion requires a cross-community vote under Standing Order 60.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 53; Noes 38.

AYES

Unionist:

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Other:

Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dickson, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy.

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

NOES

Nationalist:

Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McDevitt, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Molloy, Mr Ó hOisín, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Other:

Mr Agnew.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Brady and Mr Eastwood.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>91</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>53</i>	<i>[58.2%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>[0.0%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>45</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>45</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>[88.9%]</i>

Question accordingly negated (cross-community vote).

Private Members' Business

Rose Energy

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

Mr Clarke: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the importance of the poultry sector to the Northern Ireland economy; further notes with regret the decision by the Minister of the Environment to refuse planning permission for the Rose Energy incinerator project; and calls on the Ministers to outline the action being taken to find an alternative viable solution for disposing of poultry litter.

It is interesting that others have chosen to propose an amendment to remove the words "with regret". However, it is with regret that we must have this motion about Rose Energy. We have had discussions in the Chamber previously, and we are all very aware of the importance of the poultry sector here in Northern Ireland, where there is a reliance on over 7,000 jobs in the sector. Shame on the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development for not moving more quickly to produce something for the industry that would enable it to move forward in Northern Ireland.

Another thing that makes me regretful is that only one large producer here in Northern Ireland is now responsible for all of the poultry industry. What scares me — I am sure that it scares many who have invested hugely in their farms and livelihood — is that Moy Park will be saying today that Northern Ireland is not serious about the poultry industry, and so it will look elsewhere. We cannot forget that Moy Park is owned by a Brazilian company, which, I am sure, does not take kindly to the fact that we have continually stalled on delivering for the poultry sector in Northern Ireland.

I am fearful that Moy Park, or whoever else may come in the future, will look at other regions for investment and remove their money from Northern Ireland. Shame on the Agriculture Minister and the Environment Minister because there was a proposal on the table for the industry. Given the reliance on jobs in the sector, the Department should have led on that. Unfortunately, however, the industry had to find a solution itself and spent many hundreds of thousands of pounds putting that project together and taking it through the planning stages.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. I find it surprising that he and his colleagues have not taken the opportunity to welcome the good work done by his Minister, Arlene Foster, along with the Agriculture Minister, in putting forward proposals under the small business research initiative (SBRI) to find a local solution to a Northern Ireland problem.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Member for his intervention. I do welcome the work that the Minister from our party is doing, but I still say that it is a shame on Agriculture Ministers, past and present, and the Department itself, that they

have not delivered for the sector. This is nothing new for Northern Ireland. We have known for some time that it was coming and have failed to deliver on a project.

I am not looking forward to listening to some Members today because I will hear of all their aspirations for other technologies, which the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's science division has disproved. In the Committee a few months ago, its representatives were asked a straight question about the science. They said that they believed, at that stage, that this project was the only show in town. So, today we are going to hear what other Members think we can do, but let us look at what the scientists say. This was the only show in town; this was the only application that was put forward by the industry, for the industry, and it has been turned down by the Department of the Environment, which is regrettable.

We have to remember that many young farmers in Northern Ireland have made decisions about whether to stay in farming. Thankfully, many have chosen a career in farming and to keep that legacy. Some of them have borrowed hundreds of thousands of pounds to put up new poultry houses, but with an industry that is looking uncertain because of the Environment Minister's recent decision to refuse this application, their investment could be lost.

If that happens in the months to come, it will be interesting to note what the other parties will say and whether they will call on the Executive to take responsibility for helping those farmers. The Executive should have taken responsibility for that application now to deliver on the proposal that was put forward.

Let us wind the clock back to last year to the talks about the Presbyterian Mutual Society. No one saw the disaster coming for that organisation. However, the difference between that situation and farming is that, at least, the Presbyterian Mutual Society found a way out because the Executive, rightly, helped its investors. Unfortunately for the agricultural sector, what is going to happen to all those people who invested hundreds of thousands of pounds in poultry houses?

The Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development regularly disagree about farm diversification. We cannot get a joined-up approach from either of those Departments on alternative uses of farms. What will those poultry houses be used for in the future?

Mr Bell: I thank Mr Clarke for giving way and for securing the debate on such an important subject. Is it not the case that Moy Park is now Northern Ireland's largest employer, with over 10,500 employees and that this House's priority should be jobs and growth? The motion should be our priority because it will lead to jobs and growth.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Member for his intervention. That is the reason for having this debate. I fear for those who have invested. We have turned our backs on that investment in growth and on the only producer that we have in Northern Ireland. As I said in my opening remarks, I am concerned that, in the future, those people will say that Northern Ireland has not been serious.

The First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment are continually going further afield to bring investment to

Northern Ireland. Here we have investment in Northern Ireland, but two of the parties in the Executive have refused to do something to deliver for those who are currently investing here, to secure 10,000 jobs for the future of Northern Ireland and to protect the livelihood of the farmers whose legacy has been handed down over generations. That is a worrying development.

In tabling its amendment, I wonder how Sinn Féin will square the circle of removing the words "with regret" from the original motion. How can it say today that it has no regret that we have not delivered something for the agricultural sector in Northern Ireland? What is it going to say that is positive for those who have invested much of their livelihoods in farming and who have signed their farms over to the banks in order to secure the money that they have had to borrow to continue to invest in Northern Ireland?

Let us be honest with people here today: the farmers have done their bit to invest in Northern Ireland for the future, but some Ministers in the Executive, and their Departments, have failed to assist them in that.

It is interesting that we had an intervention earlier from the Green Party. The application for the Rose Energy plant was for a renewable energy project that could have delivered power and removed the need for the land spread, which, again, I would have thought would have fed into the aspirations of many of those who say that they have green credentials.

Some said that they were fearful of the pollution that the plant might cause in Lough Neagh. What about the pollution that continues daily because of the land spread that is making its way to the watercourse as it stands today? The most that this project was doing was removing water from Lough Neagh to cool the plant. No sediments were ever going to make their way to the watercourse. Let us also bear in mind that that watercourse at Lough Neagh is also used for the water system in the greater Belfast area. So, those who have refused to help deliver this project must recognise that the pollution of Lough Neagh will continue because they refused to accept the project as it stood.

Finding a viable solution is referred to in our motion, but I fear that this has been a foot-dragging exercise by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. It has looked at possible solutions over the past number of years. Although, we are calling on the Department today to come up with solutions, I still think that there is an opportunity for us to revisit the proposed solution that was on the table.

It is interesting that some Members were whipped up by a small number of people who live in the vicinity of the proposed project. I suppose that, if it were built beside me, I would probably not be particularly happy either. However, we have to look at the greater good of Northern Ireland. We have to look at the investment that I referred to earlier. Thousands of people may have signed petitions, but there was a very well-organised group that went out and lobbied across Northern Ireland to try to block this project. We could be looking at another project in a more heavily populated area. What would we do then? Would we turn it down too?

I call on the Minister to be honest with the Chamber today and say what consultation her Department has had with the Department of the Environment in relation to this

project. Last week, I listened to Anna Lo talk about the complexities of the Planning Bill and the Minister of the Environment say that he was proud of his interference in this project. That is part of the problem. Science has been put forward in relation to this project, but there has been too much interference from politicians without any knowledge of the harm that they are doing by stalling it further. Maybe the Minister will tell us today what representations she or her Department made to the Planning Service and whether the Planning Service is content to support the project or is part of the problem.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately on the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time. The next Member to speak in this debate will be Mitchel McLaughlin, who will propose the amendment.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.27 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Employment and Learning

ApprenticeshipsNI

1. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline how he assesses the target levels of the different skills areas set for the 11,000-plus apprenticeships in the ApprenticeshipsNI programme. (AQO 3253/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning):

I thank Mr McNarry for his question. ApprenticeshipsNI is a demand-led programme, and, hence, employers in Northern Ireland create apprenticeship places on the basis of their business need. Each apprentice follows an industry-recognised framework, which is agreed with the relevant sector skills council or industry-led representative body. Those bodies represent the employers in the sectors and determine the skills, knowledge and relevant standards that are required. There are almost 11,000 apprentices on the programme. That number is a testimony to the value that employers place on the programme. Apprentices have employment in a range of sectors, including engineering, electrical, motor vehicle, care and retailing.

The apprenticeship training package on offer to employers is attractive, in that my Department meets direct training costs. This can range from £1,300 to £10,800, depending on the age of the apprentice and the level and occupational area of study. On successful completion of the training, an incentive bonus of up to £1,500 is also paid to the employer. I think that that represents a fair balance of employer and departmental investment. Funding for apprenticeship training for those who are over 25 years old focuses on the priority skill sectors that will contribute most to the rebalancing of the economy.

I plan to make a statement in the Assembly in February on a fundamental review of the future of apprenticeships and youth training provision.

Mr McNarry: I look forward to the Minister's forthcoming statement. His reply has been very helpful. However, polls suggest that only 10% of the public believe that ICT and engineering are important career paths. Does the Minister agree that improving public perceptions is very important and more is required to promote skills shortages in ICT and engineering?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr McNarry for his supplementary. First of all, the two specific sectors that he mentions, ICT and engineering, are areas where Northern Ireland has considerable strengths and, moreover, considerable potential for growth. So, it is important that we invest in the skills for those areas. Recently, I formed an ICT working group, which produced an action plan for the sector last June. I am also chairing an engineering and advanced manufacturing skills working group that will hopefully report in the very near future.

It is important that we invest in proper careers advice to indicate to young people where the potential for jobs and the future of our economy lie. Often, those jobs are some of the better paid ones. More generally, it is important that we talk about how apprenticeships are relevant to the modern, 21st-century economy. They are not simply about the old notion of metal bashing; they can be applied to a range of activities.

For a number of reasons, I have decided to undertake a review of apprenticeships in Northern Ireland. One of the outcomes that I would like to see is a much better understanding of the potential for apprenticeships and consideration of the development of higher-level apprenticeships beyond the pilots that, coincidentally, we have in both ICT and engineering. I would also like to see alternative pathways to higher-level skills emerging.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers so far. I agree that apprenticeships are as important today as they have ever been. In the present economic climate, they are probably more important. Will he explain to us what procedures are in place to ensure that apprentices go into full-time employment after they come out of their apprenticeship training?

Dr Farry: I agree with Mr McCann about the importance of apprenticeships. Indeed, there is real potential and a real opportunity in Northern Ireland to have a new beginning in this area. The beauty of apprenticeships is that they are on-the-job training. An employer will have taken a decision to create an apprenticeship opportunity, and that employer will have a real sense that what is best for their company or organisation is to have someone trained on the job so that they become skilled and can play a role in their workforce. The whole purpose of an employer training apprenticeship is to have that apprentice working with the company beyond the end of the apprenticeship. Moreover, an apprenticeship gives the person in question the ability to obtain proper, accredited qualifications that, in turn, will be transferable.

Mr Cree: The Minister previously announced a substantial cut in adult apprenticeships aside from the main economically important sectors. Can he outline how many apprenticeships have been created in those specific sectors and the nature of those apprenticeships?

Dr Farry: I am happy to clarify the situation on adult apprenticeships and to provide all the relevant figures to Mr Cree in writing. It is worth stressing that, when I assumed office as Minister for Employment and Learning, zero budget was available for adult apprenticeships. The decision had been taken, on the basis of budget assumptions, that we would eliminate that provision entirely. Of course, that decision was taken by my predecessors, and I shall not say which party they came from. However, we have restored 50% of the funding but redirected it to the priority growth sectors for our economy. It was also clear that there was some overprovision in the amount of money that was being paid out. Adults, given their existing education and some of their skills and employability skills, were often able to complete their apprenticeships much more quickly than young people. There was a real risk to public money through overpayments, and hopefully we have rectified that with the new scheme for adult apprenticeships. In Northern

Ireland, unlike in some other parts of the UK, we continue to have adult apprenticeships for those over 25.

NEETs Strategy

2. Ms Fearon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action his Department is taking to ensure that no one is left behind in the roll-out of the strategy for young people not in education, employment or training. (AQO 3254/11-15)

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her question. Pathways to Success is the Executive's strategy for young people not in education, employment or training, otherwise known as NEET. When I assumed office in May 2011, there was no ring-fenced or clearly defined budget to target the growing number of NEETs in Northern Ireland. Following a period of intense work to develop the Pathways to Success strategy, I was able to secure a substantial budget of over £25 million over the 2012-15 period that will make a significant difference to the lives and prospects of our young people. That includes £10 million to fund the NEETs strategy generally; an additional £5 million to fund projects under the collaboration and innovation fund, which is an overall commitment of £9 million; an additional £4 million to extend the family support programme to 500 families; and over £6 million to extend existing European social fund projects and to fund 16 new projects.

I want to focus on the collaboration and innovation fund that recently commenced and will explore new approaches to address the specific and general barriers faced by those in the NEET category. Eighteen organisations across Northern Ireland, drawn from the community, voluntary and educational sectors, will provide much-needed support to over 5,500 disadvantaged young people who are NEET over the next two years. Working in partnership to ensure that the voice of the voluntary and community sector was heard, my Department established the NEETs strategy forum. The voluntary and community sector is best placed to engage with NEETs, and that is now a formal part of the organisational arrangements for taking forward the strategy. Those initiatives will ensure much better targeting of activities to prevent young people across Northern Ireland becoming NEET and to address the needs of those already in that position.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer so far, but can he give assurances that young people living in deprived rural communities, in particular, will not be bypassed by the NEETs strategy?

Dr Farry: I concur with the comments made by the Member. Indeed, a question from Mr McCallister later will address that particular aspect. We are talking about rolling out the community family support pilot not just in west and east Belfast and Newtownabbey but in Strabane and Cookstown. Also, a number of the projects that were successful under the collaboration and innovation fund are based in rural areas and have rural catchment areas. It is important to stress to the House that enormous strides have been made by the Executive and my Department in that area, and we are rolling out a wide range of new programmes. I expect that that will be an ongoing commitment from the Executive over coming mandates, and we will certainly seek to expand and build on good practice from the initial interventions.

Mr Eastwood: The Minister will be aware that one of the key elements of the Committee's report and inquiry on this area was that all Departments and all Ministers should work together. Is the Minister confident in and content with the response that he is getting from all Departments?

Dr Farry: Yes, very much. The NEETs strategy is a real success story of collaboration in the Executive, and we now have to move on to ensure that we deliver on that in the coming years. The Member rightly referred to the report that was produced by the previous Employment and Learning Committee, and, in the strategy, we have reflected how we have taken on board all the recommendations that that Committee made. There is buy-in from all Departments of the Executive, and we are working together on this. Of course, the NEETs strategy forms part of the wider Delivering Social Change narrative that the Executive are taking forward. Indeed, we have secured additional resources from that project fund for some NEETs projects.

Mrs Overend: The youth employment scheme has an important role to play in reaching the young people who are most in need of employment, education and training. Can the Minister outline whether the scheme is on target for placements, employer subsidies and training places?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her question. She is probably stealing the thunder of other Members who will have questions on that specific programme later on. We have targets through to March, and we are making considerable progress towards meeting those. It is important to stress that we have a full spectrum of interventions for young people. The NEETs strategy addresses the people who face the biggest barriers to participation in the labour market, and we want to see progression of those young people from very direct NEETs schemes into other programmes, such as the youth employment scheme, and, obviously, into proper full-time education and, indeed, full-time employment. The youth employment scheme is geared towards people who, if it were not for the current economic situation, we would expect to be in work today but are in real danger of losing their employability skills or losing opportunities to get on the first rung of the ladder of employment. It is important that the state intervenes to assist those young people.

Northern Regional College

3. Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the Northern Regional College outline business case on its analysis of estate needs including for Ballymoney and Ballymena. (AQO 3255/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Northern Regional College has produced a high-level strategic overview for its future estate needs. It was approved by my Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel in April 2011. It is the curriculum plan that will determine the actual type of accommodation and the locations required by the college in the future. The college is close to finalising its curriculum plan for the future delivery of further and higher education to support the needs of the people and the economy in the northern area. The plan will enable the college to explore the various options required to deliver the necessary infrastructure in more detail in an outline business case. The value-for-money options for Ballymoney and

Ballymena will be considered as part of that process. Overall, the options include refurbishment of all sites; a single newbuild to replace the Ballymena campuses; and a single newbuild to replace facilities at Ballymoney and Coleraine. Assessment and approval of the outline business case is expected by the end of this academic year.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his answer and for his interest in the issue and the discussions and correspondence that we have had. He links the issue of the curriculum plan to the capital build. Can he tell the House, to bring to an end the uncertainty, particularly for the young students at the Ballymoney campus, and because of the deficits in capital and structural provision in Ballymena and Ballymoney, the timescale for a real proposal to be put on the table that is in line with the area plan, the entitlement framework and the area learning communities? To date, those three links have not really been made.

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Storey for his supplementary, and I recognise that he has been particularly dogged in speaking up for the Northern Regional College and particularly the case for Ballymoney. To sum it up, it is clear that form must follow function. We have to get the functions right and clear and understand what we need to provide for the community in the northern part of Northern Ireland. On timescales, we want the college to be proactive in producing the outline business case. It is its responsibility to produce that, although my Department and officials are happy to assist.

I appreciate that there has been relative underinvestment in the Northern Regional College compared with some other parts of Northern Ireland over the past number of years. As we develop a new capital investment programme for the further education sector, that will be very clear in our minds. I expect to make bids for investment in the northern area as part of that. The precise nature of those bids will be determined when we see the full business case.

2.15 pm

Mr Allister: I am glad to hear the Minister acknowledge that there has been underspend in the Northern Regional College. Can he tell us, in terms of future capital build, whether he anticipates that taking place within this budgetary period, or will there be further slippage in that regard? Can he tell us what crossover, if any, there is with the area planning of post-primary education that the Department of Education is conducting?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members, please remember it is one question.

Dr Farry: I will address the points made by Mr Allister. Certainly we recognise that there is a need for capital investment in that area. There is not so much slippage happening during this CSR period, because there are limited budgets available for capital spend. Certainly, if I see the opportunities for making early bids for resources — if resources become available at Executive level — I will not be shy in putting myself forward for resources in that regard. In reality, we are probably talking about the next CSR period, but it will be a priority for the Department, and, of course, it is important that the further education sector is linked with area planning. Further conversations in that regard are required. This is not about one type of institution as against another; it is about the best interests of young people and ensuring that young people, right

across Northern Ireland, have access to the best-rounded education and are able to mix and match the subjects that are best suited to them, their career progression and the future needs of our economy.

Mr Beggs: There has been a scarcity of education outreach courses provided by the Northern Regional College in Larne, Carrickfergus and Moyle district council areas. Will the Minister assure me that new capital investment will not occur at the expense of education outreach courses where there is underprovision?

Dr Farry: I am happy to reflect on the points that the Member makes and to discuss them with the Northern Regional College. However, I do not expect that the two issues will cut across each other: one is a revenue expenditure, the other a capital investment. It is important that we move ahead on a broad front and explore all the options where the further education sector can make a contribution to the community.

Graduate Returners

4. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many graduates who studied in Great Britain have returned home over the last five years. (AQO 3256/11-15)

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. Latest figures show that, in the 2011-12 academic year, approximately one third of Northern Ireland-domiciled full-time first-year undergraduates — around 5,000 people — left the region to study at a higher education institution in Great Britain. Research has indicated that, in the main, those who opt for a university place in Great Britain do so on the basis of choice. The most important reason cited was that the student considered a particular institution as being the best place to undertake their chosen course. Issues of reputation and location were also important to respondents. In that respect, a large number of those students are determined leavers.

Data on those who returned can be sourced from the higher education destination survey. The survey shows that, of those who go away to study, over one third return to Northern Ireland for work. Specifically, over the last five years, between 35% and 39% of Northern Ireland-domiciled full-time leavers from higher education who studied in Great Britain and were in employment six months after graduation returned to Northern Ireland for work.

Mr Ross: I am sure that the Minister agrees that we want our most talented people to come back to Northern Ireland and to contribute to our local economy. Obviously, the best way to do that is to have the graduate opportunities here. I know that he and other Executive Ministers are working hard to ensure that those opportunities exist. Will the Minister outline to the House the type of work that his Department, working perhaps with other agencies, does in going across to universities in Great Britain and participating in job fairs and employment seminars to encourage graduates from Northern Ireland to return home and seek employment back in Northern Ireland?

Dr Farry: Mr Ross has, quite rightly, identified a number of issues that we need to be very mindful of. First, the effect of the Executive's decision to freeze tuition fees in Northern Ireland has been enormously helpful in encouraging our students to stay in Northern Ireland. If

they stay in Northern Ireland, they are more likely to build their career here as well. We have also sought to expand the number of undergraduate places in Northern Ireland — we have, perhaps, had the biggest rise in provision in over a decade — and all of those are in STEM subjects, which are of most relevance to the future needs of our economy.

I certainly take on board the Member's point about the need to encourage companies from Northern Ireland to go to jobs fairs at universities in Great Britain and, in particular, to target those who have a particular interest in Northern Ireland, because it remains their home, and might consider building their career here. Overall, that leads to consolidating what the Executive are doing around the economic strategy and building a prosperous economy here where there are plenty of opportunities for highly skilled graduates to build a career and a life in this society.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is possible, if not probable, that the Minister cannot give me the information on my question today, but perhaps he might come back to me in writing. Will he indicate how the pupils and students who go to Great Britain to take degree courses fare, compared with those who stay at home to do so, both in terms of completing their degrees and passing them?

Dr Farry: I will certainly come back to the Member with the very specific figures. However, it is worth stressing that the universities in Northern Ireland have very high retention rates. Overall, higher education retention in Northern Ireland compares favourably with that elsewhere in the world, for different reasons. For example, the United States has very low graduation rates, because a lot of people tend to drop out, sometimes for economic reasons. The continental European model tends to have a very flexible approach to entry. Large numbers of people will enrol, but a lot of people drop out when they discover that the course is not for them. The approach in these islands is probably the best balance between those extremes. I am more than happy to give the Member the very detailed figures.

Mr A Maginness: The Minister gave a very interesting answer about the impact of freezing fees on student numbers. Will he quantify that impact on students here?

Dr Farry: Again, I am happy to write to the Member to give him the specific figures. Fees for university applications have been frozen for two years, and we are just going through the second year as we speak. The indications are that the number of local students applying to local universities has been protected. That contrasts with a drop in overall applications to universities across the UK as a whole. Clearly, the higher-level fees in the UK as a whole have deterred some students from going to higher education, whereas the protective measures that were taken in Northern Ireland have led us to maintain the number of people who are applying to our local institutions. That can only be good for the future of our economy.

Mr Lyttle: How important is the delivery of a shared society to encouraging talented young graduates to choose Northern Ireland as a place to build a life and career or business?

Dr Farry: The Member puts his finger on a very important theme. We need to recognise that there is a range of reasons why young people will want to stay in Northern Ireland for higher education and to build their career here.

A shared society is very clearly part of that, along with job opportunities and quality of life, and we must be mindful of all those issues. Clearly, what has happened in Northern Ireland over recent months has impacted on people's thinking. It is important that we move rapidly to ensure that what has happened is a blip in the progression of our political and peace process and not a major regression, because the consequences for people's choices and for the future of the Northern Ireland economy could be very dramatic if we get this wrong. For now, however, it is vital that we stress the importance of young people continuing to build their future in Northern Ireland, and it is important that they understand that they can have a good job and a good lifestyle and, indeed, live in a peaceful society.

Youth Employment Scheme

5. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the youth employment scheme. (AQO 3257/11-15)

6. **Ms Brown** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the youth employment scheme. (AQO 3258/11-15)

Dr Farry: Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I will group questions 5 and 6, and I request an additional minute for the answer.

Since I launched the youth employment scheme, our primary focus has been on encouraging employers to agree to offer opportunities to young people. We have had significant success in that regard. As at 25 January, 725 employers had signed agreements to participate in the scheme. To date, 781 opportunities have been secured. I have also engaged with Executive colleagues and public sector organisations, such as district councils, to secure additional opportunities. I have been encouraged by their response so far. This year, my Department has added 50 opportunities, and that will rise to 150 next year and the year after. I am confident that the youth employment scheme will generate over 1,000 opportunities by the end of March.

At the same time, almost 1,600 young people have shown interest in the scheme and have been referred to at least one opportunity. The quality of the work experience for young people is vital to making the scheme work. The key challenge is this: we need to ensure that we match the right young person to the right opportunity as quickly as possible. That is central to achieving our objective of reducing youth unemployment.

My assessment is that we have been successful in developing and implementing the scheme in just seven months. We have also demonstrated that employers are willing to offer opportunities in the numbers required to make a step change in the unemployment rate for 18- to 24-year-olds. Indeed, I have been greatly encouraged by the support of employers and their representative bodies, especially the CBI. On the demand side, therefore, we are delivering what we set out to achieve.

On the supply side, of the 781 opportunities secured, 177 young people have availed themselves of those to date, and 75 of them are in full-time employment. Members should recall that participation in the scheme is entirely voluntary so we will market and promote the scheme very effectively to young people over the next few months. To

further increase the impact of the scheme, we recently commenced the First Start initiative, which will give 500 young people six months' valuable paid work experience this year. Over 150 of those posts have already been filled. On 31 May 2012, I secured Executive endorsement for the Pathways to Success strategy for NEETs and additional funding to deliver the strategy. The Department is working its way through the delivery of the strategy.

I urge all Members to encourage businesses in their area to support the youth employment scheme and all the various NEETs initiatives and to encourage their young unemployed constituents to avail themselves of the opportunities on offer.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his answer. I welcome his Department's good work on the issue and the Minister's enthusiasm for the scheme. Is the Minister satisfied that the resources allocated to the scheme can ensure maximum outreach and impact?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question and his recognition of the Department's good work. I also recognise the strong interest shown by a number of Members. The Executive have invested considerable resources in the scheme. It is worth reminding the House that, although we secured Barnett consequentials for the youth contract across Great Britain, those were unhypothecated allocations; I stress that since the Finance Minister is here. Nonetheless, the overall quantum of funding from the Executive on a pro rata basis turned out to be greater than the amount invested elsewhere in the UK. It is, therefore, clear that the Executive are investing a greater proportion of resources in addressing youth unemployment than are other parts of the country. That is an indication of what we are doing. A lot of that has gone into investing in front line staff who work directly with young people.

Ms Brown: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Will he outline what plans, if any, he has to increase the duration of the work experience element, given that a longer period of work experience may help to cement the vital skills gained while on placement and lead to employment?

2.30 pm

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her question. It is worth stressing that the scheme includes a number of different elements. The first is a two- to eight-week — a sampler, almost — work experience opportunity. We expect a large number of young people to go through that. Also on offer is a longer work experience opportunity focused on the economy's priority skills sectors. Therefore, beyond that, there are opportunities for young people, and a young person can take up any of those options, whichever best suits his or her particular needs.

Again, beyond that, it is worth stressing that a very generous wage subsidy of over £5,000 is available to employers, so an employer who is willing to give a young person a job through the scheme will receive a considerable amount to help with paying that young person's wages. In particular, perhaps, for small businesses that operate on the margins and, in this uncertain economic climate, are not clear whether they can take the risk of employing new members of staff, I hope that the scheme will give them the comfort blanket

of knowing that they can take on young people, see that those young people add to the bottom line of their businesses and, in turn, give them the confidence to give those young people full-time jobs at the end of it all.

Finance and Personnel

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

Land and Property Services

1. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline his Department's plans to ensure that Land and Property Services delivers on its targets for 2012-13. (AQO 3268/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I am sure that the Member will agree that the work of Land and Property Services (LPS) is essential to the delivery of the objectives of the Programme for Government for Northern Ireland. Of course, LPS is tasked with the job of collecting Northern Ireland's rates income, which adds about £1.1 billion to the amount that the Executive have to spend on services and other activities in Northern Ireland. For that reason, it is a priority for my officials to ensure that they meet the set targets. The performance of LPS is scrutinised and monitored regularly through the key targets contained in the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) and LPS scorecards, and my Department reports on those regularly. It should be noted that, despite the tough economic times, between 2008-09 and 2011-12, the amount collected increased by £125 million a year.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive reply. During the next few years, LPS will face additional challenges because of the review of public administration (RPA), non-domestic revaluation and even welfare reform. Is the Minister satisfied that LPS in its present form will be able to cope with that extra workload?

Mr Wilson: Of course, we look continually at the staffing complement required. This year, we have increased the staffing complement to almost the maximum that we are allowed in order to deal with the difficulties caused by, for example, the increased demand for housing benefit claims and the greater difficulties that the recession has presented when it comes to collecting rate debt. There are a lot of challenges ahead. The Member pointed out the changes that will result from welfare reform. We will have to develop a new rates rebate scheme for elderly people, those on low incomes, disabled people, etc. With RPA, of course, there will be work to be done with councils, although, basically, the same rates structure will still be in place regardless of the units on which those rates, especially at district level, are calculated.

Mr Dunne: What actions has LPS taken to address the issue of rates, as he mentioned previously? What proposed actions have been put in place?

Mr Wilson: As far as recovering rates and ensuring that we collect rates are concerned, the first thing to do is to ensure that timely and accurate bills go out to people so that they know exactly what their rate liability is. The vast majority of people now use direct debits or pay upfront. Therefore, by and large, most of the rates are collected without any fuss. Where there is a genuine difficulty, we

will of course seek to help people, but we will go after people who have just decided that they are not going to live up to their obligations. That involves offering opportunities and terms for people who really do find it difficult, so that they can spread their payments over a period of time. The next step is the court process, where we would obtain court decrees and refer debt to the Enforcement of Judgments Office. On rare occasions, we will go for bankruptcy proceedings.

Another thing we need to do is ensure that we have an up to date register for the properties on which rates are payable. That is where we use information from the Land Registry and the likes of Building Control, local councils and other sources.

Mrs D Kelly: Does your Department offer any measures or incentives to help those in rates arrears to pay their arrears?

Mr Wilson: We do offer payment arrangements. Quite often, we seek to be as flexible as we can in stretching those arrangements. If, for example, it was a debt stretching back three years, we would give people three years to pay that debt. That means, of course, that our debt figures, which get quite a lot of scrutiny from the Assembly, will go up. One should consider that 40% of the current debt figure is made up of people who have made arrangements to pay over a period of time. That amounts to about £60 million, by the way. So, you can see that we do make considerable efforts, and quite a lot of money is outstanding as a result of the arrangements we have made. However, I think all Members would agree that, in the current recession, the last thing we would want to do is make things more difficult for those who want to pay but have genuine difficulty in being able to pay.

Peace III: Evaluations

2. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the formal evaluations that have been commissioned on Peace III in relation to lessons learned from previous projects. (AQO 3269/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Six formal evaluations have been commissioned. Sometimes, I think that there are more evaluations on Peace III than there are projects. However, they are necessary; the European Union requires us to carry out those evaluations. The evaluations are as follows: an implementation analysis of the Peace III and INTERREG IVa programmes, which was for July 2009; a review of the implementation of theme 1, building positive relations at local level; a review of implementation of theme 1.2, acknowledging and dealing with the past; the community uptake analysis; the attitudinal survey; and the midterm evaluation, which is due in April 2013. A considerable amount of expenditure goes into those. Some are done in-house, through the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency — I cannot give you a figure for what that costs — and others are done by outside consultants. Four evaluations have been done by outside consultants, and have cost probably about £128,000 altogether; I think that was the figure I was given.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for his detailed reply. Given the Minister's response, one can only understand the concern and frustration at the system. Will the Minister outline what specific measures he could bring forward to

reduce bureaucracy and delay in the processes? Is his Department looking at those measures?

Mr Wilson: As far as the evaluations are concerned, there is probably not a great deal we can do. All those evaluations are required by Europe to show that the money that has been spent has been spent in a way that is acceptable and meets the objectives, etc. Some of those evaluations will then be used to inform decisions on future European moneys. For example, we are going through a consultation at present about what happens beyond the current EU spending period. Will we have a Peace IV programme? What should the next INTERREG programme look like? Some of those evaluations will help to inform that.

I ask the question all the time: do we really need to do those evaluations and do we need yet another set of consultants? The answer that comes back is that the evaluations are done only because we have to be able to provide information to Europe that the money is being spent effectively and meets the objectives. Until Europe reduces some requirements, it will be difficult to remove some of the evaluations.

Mr I McCrea: I am sure that the Minister heard, as I did, complaints in the Protestant community that it does not receive its fair share of Peace funding. Can the Minister give a view on that? Does he have the figures to provide us with the precise percentage of Peace funding that the Protestant community gets for its projects?

Mr Wilson: I should have the figures here. If one looks at the various Peace programmes — Peace I, Peace II and Peace III — the maximum drawn down by groups from the unionist community was 47%. In Peace I, there was a 44% uptake by groups from the Protestant community. In Peace II, it was 47%, and although we are not at the end of Peace III, it stands at 46%. It is something that has concerned me, and I have been saying to the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) that it has to address that situation. I am critical of the SEUPB in many other ways, but there has been a considerable effort to try to get applications from the unionist community and to work with groups in the unionist community where there is very little capacity; groups such as the Orange Order, the various police organisations, etc.

I have to say that it annoys me sometimes when I hear ill-informed comments, such as, "we get nothing", coming from people who seek to agitate. Let us just look at some of the money that has gone in. In east Belfast, where some of this agitation has come from, the Skainos project is a magnificent regeneration project. It has received £6 million as a result of money from Peace III. The Grand Orange Lodge got nearly £1 million for its stepping towards reconciliation and positive engagement. The Grand Orange Lodge got another £3.6 million, and the Apprentice Boys of Londonderry got £2 million. All those things have gone to unionist-orientated groups, and I just wish that some of the people who complain that they get nothing would actually look at the facts.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister have any plans to seek other European funding streams that are not being tapped into currently?

Mr Wilson: The Executive set themselves a target to maximise the amount of money that comes from Europe, and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will be responsible for some of it. We know that there is a vast

amount of money available for research and development, albeit that some of that money has to be awarded on the basis of collaboration between firms and universities here and those in other European countries. There is a vast amount of money to be tapped into there, and I know that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has been looking at how we might draw down some of that. My job is to make sure that we do not lose out on any of the money available under the Peace programme and INTERREG, and all the indications are that we are on target to draw down all the money that will be available during this spending period.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Executive: Revenue

4. **Ms Boyle** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on performance against the Budget review targets for raising additional revenues. (AQO 3271/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Members will recall that in the 2011-15 Budget, the Executive explored a wide range of initiatives that might generate additional revenue, and we identified £900 million of additional revenue-raising measures over the four-year period. Those measures are regularly reviewed by the Budget review group. To update on performance, although we have set no specific targets in relation to future revenue-raising options, we regularly consider what other options might be available and monitor how well we are progressing on the money that we have already built into the Budget for the 2011-15 period.

2.45 pm

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer. Is he confident that the Programme for Government's revenue-raising commitments will be met?

Mr Wilson: If one looks at some of the things that we have built into the programme so far, one will see that, first of all, we had a £142 million target for capital receipts for the current year and that we have raised £170 million. So, we are ahead there.

The target for the first year for the asset management unit was £10 million. At an early stage, we could not really identify sufficient assets, so we reduced that target to £2.5 million, which we met. The target for this year is £22.5 million, because we simply took last year's figure and added it on. We are on target to meet that.

We met the amount of money on the additional rates in line with inflation and the rating of empty homes. Some things we are not on target for. I said at the time that we would not include things that were risky. The House knows that the money that we were expecting to get from the Harbour Commissioners is not likely to be realised. That means that the Department for Regional Development will have to look at how it will deal with that pressure of £40 million.

Mr Ross: Will the Finance Minister agree that, whenever some Members on the opposite Benches talk about revenue-raising powers, they actually mean tax increases for already hard-pressed businesses and households across the Province? Does he also agree that that is not the direction in which the Executive should be going and that many of the areas for revenue raising that Members on the opposite Benches have identified would come at a huge cost to the block grant?

Mr Wilson: I think that I have always made my position clear in the House. That position is that I do not believe that we ought to be taking money from the public if there are ways of making savings in the public sector that we have charge of at the moment. For that reason, we have frozen rates in Northern Ireland in real terms to the end of this Budget period. They were frozen during the last period.

I hear all these things about the Assembly discussed, such as taxes and everything else. We actually have a very good record — it is the best record of anywhere in the United Kingdom — in that, where we have tax-raising powers, we have not exercised them to the detriment of people in the middle of a recession. I think that we ought to be proud of that, and I also think that those who continually complain about the Assembly's performance ought to bear it in mind. We are a low-tax Assembly, and that is the way that I want to keep it.

Rates: Low-income Households

5. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on his plans for future rate support for low-income households. (AQO 3272/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Member will be aware that, under welfare reform, council tax benefit will be localised in Great Britain and expenditure on that will have to be reduced by 10%. In other words, the money that comes from central government has been reduced by 10%

We face the same situation in Northern Ireland, as the rate rebate element of housing benefit being devolved to Northern Ireland means that it will no longer be paid for out of annual managed expenditure, which was just based on the demand for expenditure under the scheme. As a result, we will lose £13 million in the first year. Had we kept the scheme on, the cost would have risen quite dramatically with the increased demand, as well as simply with normal inflationary increases.

The Executive have agreed to cover the shortfall for the first year. I think that all Members should have received a letter about this by now, but we have issued a high-level consultation on the way forward. We have to ask what groups we want to protect, because we cannot keep on doing what we are doing, first, because of the cost, and, secondly, given that, once universal credit comes in, we will not have the systems that we used to in order to identify individuals. So, that high-level consultation will take place for the next 12 weeks. After that, we will have to devise a new scheme on the basis of the outcome of that consultation.

Mr Buchanan: Does the Minister have any plans to introduce an increase for those who are on low benefits and in low-income households?

Mr Wilson: We asked a whole lot of questions in the consultation document to see what the new scheme would look like, such as: who should be protected; should we find new ways of raising money; should we increase rates to raise money to fill the shortfall; and are there priority groups?

One of the priority groups will be those on low income. However, if we decide to protect those on low income and do not put additional money into the scheme, somebody else will not get the same level of cover that they have

currently. If we decide that we want to protect everybody to the same level that we do at the minute, we have to find the money from somewhere. As I say, within two years, that will increase to £40 million, and it will keep increasing year on year. We will have to look at that decision once we have finished the consultation.

Mr Copeland: Will the Minister outline the current situation with respect to the replacement of housing benefit for rates following the implementation of the welfare reform plans?

Mr Wilson: The situation is that we will have less money available. We currently get, I think, £130 million. That is the expenditure for the rate rebate scheme. That, of course, was automatically paid by the Treasury, but as it will now be devolved, it will be cut by 10%. So, immediately, the current scheme, which costs us £130 million, will be £13 million short. The Executive have decided that they will make £13 million available for the next year from general money that is available in Northern Ireland. In other words, we will keep money for that rather than spending it on something else.

That is what the consultation is about — what will we do after that happens? We know that the cost will escalate in, I think, two years' or three years' time to £40 million, and it will keep going up if we do not change the scheme. We have to change the scheme anyway, because we currently work out who is eligible from some of the information that comes from the social security arrangements. When those arrangements go, we will not have the information to work out who is eligible, so the scheme itself will need to be changed. The question is this: will that be changed in a way that means we do not spend additional money, which then means that we will have to exclude some people? That is what the consultation is about — who should be excluded? In other words, who should have the highest priority?

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for his answers. Has the Minister had discussions with Minister of the Environment about the element of the rates for which councils are responsible that keeps rising year on year?

Mr Wilson: The Minister in England said that if councils there want to increase rates above 2%, they should have a referendum and let local ratepayers decide.

I hope that the Environment Minister is emphasising to local councils that if we at Executive level are freezing the regional rate in real terms, they should be doing the same. Freezing the regional rate in real terms means that we have had to forgo some money for additional services and pressures. If that is true for us, councils cannot say, "Ratepayers want us to do this, this and this, so we need to raise rates" and hide behind that. They have to take the same attitude as us. If people are finding it difficult to pay their rates in the current recession, do not spend money on certain things. I hope that the Environment Minister is saying that to councils. Ultimately, he cannot stop them, but I hope that he is trying to give them some guidance and saying, "Try to keep rates down, with no increase in real terms". I believe that that would be a great relief to many domestic and non-domestic ratepayers who are finding life difficult at present.

Construction: Contracts

6. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the anticipated benefits of the new measures in the Construction Contracts Exclusion Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 and the Construction Contracts (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 in providing more safeguards for subcontractors in the construction industry by closing legal loopholes and providing default contractual terms. (AQO 3273/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The new legislation updates measures in the Construction Contracts (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. It does a number of things. It introduces greater transparency in the amounts to be paid and the dates for payment. It removes loopholes that major contractors were using in order not to pay subcontractors. It also means that subcontractors on PFI contracts will no longer be excluded.

The new legislation is important because it will lead to a better allocation of adjudication costs. In the past, many subcontractors were afraid to go to adjudication because they sometimes had in their contract clauses that said that if they go to adjudication, they bear all the costs of that adjudication. That has now been ruled out. The whole idea behind the legislation is to try to create a fairer and more level playing field for those subcontractors who rely on main contractors to pay them when they have done work for which they rightfully should be paid.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for his answer. Perhaps the Minister can elaborate a wee bit on the issue of project bank accounts and the roll-out of those in his Department, with a view to facilitating and helping subcontractors.

Mr Wilson: The Member raised that issue with me some time ago, and I undertook to look at it. I took it to the procurement board and, from the beginning of this year, we have an arrangement in place whereby for any construction contract worth more than £1 million and in which there is a substantial amount of subcontracting, project accounts will be used, provided it is a project that is overseen by the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD), although we are going to encourage other centres of procurement excellence (COPEs) to use project accounts.

The idea is this: money will go into the project account. As a result, within five days of that money being deposited, the various subcontractors should be paid from the account. Therefore, no longer will the money go to main contractors, who might then have decided to hold it back, use it as working capital and pay subcontractors at their leisure. That will be an important development in helping subcontractors. Of course, it applies only to those contracts that CPD puts out. They have to be construction contracts, have a substantial number of subcontractors involved and be for over £1 million.

As far as private contracts are concerned, some of the other legislation that I referred to — on adjudication, and so on — should make it easier for companies that feel that they are being hard done by, even over private sector contracts.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers and for his work on the issue.

In response to a question from the Member for Mid Ulster behind him, the Minister said that he is sick of hearing people crying about getting nothing. However, there are an awful lot of subcontractors who have got nothing. Has the Minister any plans to expand or reduce the amount at which the project bank is initiated, because £1 million contracts are for larger contractors, whereas an awful lot of smaller subcontractors are taking the hit?

Mr Wilson: First, if the contract is worth less than the amount that I stated, it is unlikely that there will be a large number of small contractors involved in it anyway. If it is a very small amount of money, the project will probably be done by one company. That was why the threshold was set.

However, do not forget that we have done other things to try to help subcontractors. In a main contract, it is now the responsibility of the contractors to report to the project manager bills that have been sent in by subcontractors; to indicate whether they are happy that the work has been done for which the bill was allocated; and to explain whether payment has been delayed and, if so, why. Ultimately, if a main contractor has a bad payment record, we can stop that contractor from applying and tendering for public sector contracts for the next year.

On top of the project bank accounts, considerable work has been done to try to ensure that subcontractors are not held to ransom by main contractors who simply try to use them as a bank.

Mr G Robinson: What are the benefits of project bank accounts?

3.00 pm

Mr Wilson: There are a number of benefits of bank accounts. The first thing I would say is that it is fairer. It should ensure that people who do work for main contractors as subcontractors put in a bill when the work has been done and, when the main contractor is satisfied that the work has been done and has then submitted that bill to the Department, are paid. That has a number of benefits. First of all, apart from being fairer, it means that they have a better cash flow. Secondly, it probably means that they will require less working capital. If they have a good cash flow, they do not need to go to the banks for working capital because they have money lying out for a long time. It also reduces the subcontractor's dependency on the main contractor; the main contractor cannot hold them to ransom any more. That is important because, very often, subcontractors were afraid to complain because they thought that, if they complained, the contractor would never employ them again to do another job as a subcontractor. Those are the benefits for subcontractors. I thank the all-party group on construction, which brought this forward to me. I hope that it will at least acknowledge that I have responded to the arguments that it made and that we will now begin to see this all coming to fruition.

Mr McNarry: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In his answer to question 2, the Finance Minister gave the impression that the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland moaned about receiving money. That is not correct; it did not moan about funds —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry, that is not a point of order. I ask the Member to resume his seat.

Private Members' Business

Rose Energy

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the importance of the poultry sector to the Northern Ireland economy; further notes with regret the decision by the Minister of the Environment to refuse planning permission for the Rose Energy incinerator project; and calls on the Minister to outline the action being taken to find an alternative viable solution for disposing of poultry litter.
— [Mr Clarke.]

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out "with regret".

I support the amendment and oppose the motion. Trevor Clarke, in introducing the motion, spoke about the decision to turn down the application as a threat to the industry. He produced no evidence at all to support that assertion. This issue has been in the Planning Service and in the development phase for something like five years. Clearly, over that time, the fears about the future of the industry have not materialised. There is a lot of common cause across the Chamber on, first, the importance of the industry. There should be no gainsaying that. Secondly, there is in the motion — I welcome this — a recognition of the need to produce a viable alternative treatment for the chicken waste. We strongly support that, and I suspect that every party in the Chamber wishes to see a treatment that is environmentally sustainable and friendly and effective in dealing with the issue.

There is an issue that Trevor Clarke brought up. In his typically honest and direct fashion, he told us that he understood why local people had objected and that, had it been in his back yard, he would have objected. That goes to the core of why there was such a significant campaign. Almost 13,000 representations were made on the issue. That is completely unprecedented in any other development proposal. We see that, quite clearly, there were very strong opinions and concerns —

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Sure.

Mr Clarke: The Member refers to the 15,000 representations. Surely he will accept that the people in and around that area number only about 3,000.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: To be honest, I do not know whether he has more detail than would be available to most of us. I really do not know where they all come from. What I do know is that we had a volume of opinion: 13,000, with a majority opposing the application. People who have a genuine interest in the environment, irrespective of whether they live adjacent to the proposition, are certainly entitled to express that view. That was done in a fairly systematic and, generally speaking, calm and reasoned way.

There is another way of looking at whether this represents a threat to the industry, which is that we have no confidence in the genius or ability of our scientific and engineering communities to come up with a viable proposition as an alternative to incineration. I have confidence that alternative propositions are available, but

those have not been properly explored. To that extent, three Ministers have a direct input into this discussion. I think that they have addressed the issue in a way that is environmentally responsible, while being mindful of safeguarding the future of this important industry. We will hear from the Minister eventually.

Trevor Clarke raised an important point about the relatively modest nature of the amendment. It is a modest amendment and deliberately so. In tabling the amendment, we sought to produce a proposition that all the parties in the Assembly could support. My party was directly involved in making representations, as was I as an elected representative, and I accept absolutely that people with a different perspective supported the proposition. However, we should try to find ways to agree in the Assembly.

In truth, the application was always going to fail the planning and environmental tests. Locating a massive £100 million incinerator on the shores of Lough Neagh, an area of outstanding scenic beauty —

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. The application was on a massive scale and would have done great good for the industry. Does he realise that, by refusing the application, we could well have small sites springing up all over the Province? That could lead to more problems and more objections all over the Province.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: As far as anaerobic digestion is concerned, for instance, I strongly support the idea of having clusters. I do not think that there is a commercially available single-site solution, but I do think that there are environmentally friendly solutions, and we should not be afraid to look at those. I do not think that anyone is arguing that every poultry farm should have its own anaerobic digester. However, they may decide that there is an economic argument for that, and that is their business. This proposition would have seen the construction of a monster, which would have very quickly dealt with the chicken waste issue. That brings us to the issue of importing waste product material to feed that monster, which I suspect lay behind the original business plan assessment. A sensible and wise decision was taken to refuse it. A proportionate and properly scaled response is available. All the parties could take a look at the —

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: OK, yes.

Mr Clarke: I accept what the Member has said about a certain size and scale of proposal perhaps coming forward. A total of 6,400 people supported this project, and 6,800 people rejected it. Does the Member not share the industry's frustration? It has waited for the Department for a number of years, but that solution has not come forward.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I referred to the involvement of three Ministers. I want to acknowledge the input of the Minister of the Environment; the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, a colleague of yours in the DUP; and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, who is a colleague of mine. They have co-operated in bringing forward alternative propositions, including, as previously mentioned, the SBRI initiative. That competition provides a platform for those in our region and economy who believe that they can provide an environmentally sound and viable alternative to incineration.

The industry may have constructed all this. For example, I am very interested by the fact that Moy Park claimed ownership of the chicken litter in its contracts with suppliers. Was it building up a stock and creating a problem so that it could justify an argument for an incinerator? We will leave it to Moy Park to answer that, but I have my suspicions.

The use of locally developed solutions was the appropriate way from the very beginning. However, we were not given that opportunity initially. We had a high-powered proposition that was dealt with appropriately. I would have been quite content for it to go to a full public inquiry because we would have benefited from hearing about many issues.

I want to return to the simple proposition in the amendment, and I hope that the Members opposite will reflect on the fact that we can all support the amended motion. Let us recognise the importance of the industry. Let us note the fact that the incinerator has failed the planning application test. Let us then encourage the development of alternative treatment solutions. It is on that basis that we can all support the amendment. Otherwise, another message will go out about an unnecessarily divided Assembly. The competition is proceeding. It is jointly sponsored by a Minister from your party and one from mine. I think that it will produce a solution that, I am confident, will satisfy the requirements of the European nitrates directive. I recommend that the House give careful consideration to a straightforward tactical amendment to make it possible for your party, as well as the rest of those in the House, to support the amendment.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Members for tabling the motion. Initially, I seek clarification of why the Agriculture Minister appears to be going to respond to the debate, as opposed to the Environment Minister. The motion specifically mentions him. I would be grateful for an explanation at some stage of why that is.

It never fails to amaze me how many people from a political perspective reject significant investment that could not only improve the capacity for further investment and economic benefits but assist the environment. Why do people continue to reject those? I am surprised that people have the audacity to stand up here and say that they support the economy and industry and at the same time reject a proposal such as this that would help the economy. There are huge opportunities for investment in the poultry sector and its spin-offs: processing plants in Northern Ireland. I know that those involved in the industry, whether in processing or the front line, are absolutely astounded that they cannot progress it any further in Northern Ireland without the help of the Assembly and the Executive. They continue to ask why it is that we have the opportunity to invest and help the environment.

I hear people saying that this will be negative for the environment, but I understand that it is trying to help the environment. A nitrates directive came in, I think, in 1991. This application has been in place since 2008, and it has taken almost five years to get a decision. The issue went through a number of Ministers without any decision being made, and I have yet to hear anybody tell us what the alternatives are.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Elliott: I listened to Mr McLaughlin say that a properly scaled response is available. What is it? Sorry, I will give way to Mrs Kelly.

Mrs D Kelly: I am sure that the Member shares the concerns that a number of dwellers in the area and I have that the road infrastructure for that site is not suitable.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Elliott: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. If the road infrastructure was the only issue in boosting the economy in Northern Ireland, we would get round that. They are happy, maybe, to improve the infrastructure to build a conflict transformation centre at the Maze. They were happy to improve the road infrastructure around many out-of-town shopping centres. I am sure that they would have improved the road infrastructure for a development such as this.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Elliott: I am happy to give way.

Mr Allister: Does the Member also agree that, under article 40 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, it would have been quite possible to impose an obligation on the developer to improve aspects of the road and that that is a transparent excuse and not a reason for refusal?

3.15 pm

Mr Elliott: The Member makes a valid point. It would not be the first time that a developer has had to improve the road infrastructure at the behest of Roads Service. Most of them are normally quite happy to do that for such an investment.

I have spoken to several poultry farmers over the past number of years, particularly over the past few weeks. Many are willing to invest much more of their own money in increasing their production and in new houses. That would help the processors, who say that they are willing to invest further but cannot because we continue to have a European derogation that allows the storage and disposal of poultry waste. However, I can tell you, folks, that the European derogation will not last for ever. At some point, Europe will clamp down on us, and then, folks, it will be you to blame for turning down the proposal. It will be you to blame for destroying the poultry industry and destroying that economy. The agribusiness sector is the fastest growing and most sustainable sector in the Northern Ireland economy, and what do you want to do? You want to destroy it.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree with me that we have only one more year of certainty with that derogation? Where will that leave us? We are already too late.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for his intervention. My simple answer is that I do not know where it leaves us. It leaves us with a huge problem, and nobody has any answers. There were answers coming forward about a waste-to-energy plant. If you are turning waste or what some people call waste into energy, why do you not accept that doing so will help our environment?

I want to finish by saying that I support the motion. I support the proposals that were on the table from Rose Energy, and I wanted those to be developed. I am hugely

disappointed that, over the past four and a half years, nobody took the decision to help these people.

Mr Byrne: This is a thorny issue that has been around for a long time. It is fair to say that all in the Assembly would be in favour of some way of successfully treating chicken waste. The promoters of the Rose Energy project proposed the construction of a biomass-based incinerator that would have burned meat, bone meal and poultry litter. Currently, there are about 260,000 tons of waste litter every year, which is likely to rise to 400,000 tons in the next five years.

It is true that Moy Park is the biggest poultry producer in these islands. It needs some way of disposing of waste in the future. The question, however, is whether the Rose Energy project was viable and economically and environmentally sustainable. There were open questions about that. The Minister, in the notice of opinion contained in his refusal of the application, stated that he was rejecting the project in the context of fundamental planning issues concerning the scale of the development in the open countryside; sustainability in the context of the aims and objectives of PPS 21; and the associated adverse visual impact and threats to residential amenity.

There is no doubt — Mr Clarke referred to this, as did Mr McLaughlin — that strong opposition to the project was organised and managed. The project's scale and size were causing undue concern, particularly about the environmental aspects. However, the reasons for refusal focus on the characteristics of the site and the surrounding area. Given the proximity of the site to Lough Neagh and the potential danger of damage to the environment, the Minister had to take cognisance of those issues. In addition, the Rose Energy proposal was to co-fire poultry litter with animal by-products, which would mean the end product being subject to further regulation and restriction on its use as fertiliser.

In previous submissions on the Rose Energy proposal, it was noted that the debate on alternative technologies raised an issue of best environmental practice. That is the real issue. It is no good building a waste-to-energy incinerator if we are going to run into environmental problems with the EU in the future. The time has come to reassess the entire waste-to-energy debate in Northern Ireland. We need a waste-to-energy plant that meets technology standards that are sustainable and adheres to environmental standards.

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Byrne: I will.

Mr Clarke: Does the Member accept that, sometimes, when we consider some of these projects, we should look at other regions? It was before the Member's time, but the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development went to Fife in Scotland and to Belgium to look at identical plants, neither of which had a problem. Three thousand residents lived within a 10-mile radius of the Fife plant, yet not one objection or concern was raised when that plant was up and running. What would the Member say about other regions that have had the same facility up and running for a number of years?

Mr Byrne: Yes, I recognise what you are saying, Mr Clarke, but there was such concern in the locality and such a professionally orchestrated and managed campaign.

[Interruption.] The MP for Lagan Valley, as I understand it, also objected to the proposal.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. Remarks are not to be made from a sedentary position.

Mr Byrne: We are where we are. I have contended for a long time that the waste-to-energy business in Northern Ireland is very long-winded. Decisions have been slow in the past. Previous Ministers, as has been mentioned, were reluctant and very slow to make decisions. We had the same thing with refuse waste management in Northern Ireland. We have been waiting for proposals for over 10 years, but they still have not come forward. We have had the cross-border groups, Arc21 and the north-west group. Recently, the Minister has decided in favour of one project, which is welcome.

It is important to note that the small business research initiative, which is a joint project between DARD and the DETI, offers a future pathway towards tackling this issue. Collectively, the House needs to get behind that joint initiative to ensure that we have a viable project or projects going forward to meet the needs of the poultry industry.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. I just want to put it on record that, almost a year and a half ago, when I was Deputy Chairperson of the Agriculture Committee, the Chairperson of that Committee and I met the Minister and her officials to ask for a plan B. We warned her that, in the event that the application was not approved, there was an onus on the industry, the Department and the Minister to have a plan B.

Mr Byrne: Absolutely. There was a general reluctance to face this issue head on, earlier on. Everybody put their eggs in the one basket while they waited for the deliberations over the Rose Energy project. There are question marks over the technology and the sustainability of the project, as well as question marks over the environmental standards.

We have to strike a balance between economic interests, environmental interests and, in particular, the interests of the poultry industry going forward. We support the amendment. We feel that there is a way forward if the House and DARD and DETI collectively, in conjunction with the DOE, can resolve the matter.

Ms Lo: I speak on the motion as an Alliance MLA. We support the amendment.

The proposal to construct a large energy-from-waste facility to incinerate chicken litter in Glenavy has proven contentious. Northern Ireland produces 260,000 tons of poultry litter each year but can only sustainably manage 100,000 tons, mainly through land spreading locally. The poultry industry, on the other hand, plays an important role in our economy. There is a definite need to find alternative sustainable means of disposing of the waste that is produced. However, the Minister of the Environment's decision to refuse planning permission for the Rose Energy incinerator project was the correct one.

I understand that, even if the planning application had been approved, there was a view held by many in the agriculture sector that the proposal would not have helped Northern Ireland to meet the commitments required of it by the EU nitrates directive to prevent water pollution by nitrates from agricultural sources. The proximity of the proposed plant to Lough Neagh caused a great deal of

concern from an environmental point of view. Furthermore, the application could have negatively impacted on the surrounding community in the form of increased heavy traffic on rural roads, as was explained earlier by Mrs Dolores Kelly. The application was also deemed by the Environment Minister to be contrary to rural planning policy given the impacts that it would have on other businesses and industry. Those are valid concerns and should not be dismissed as acts of Nimbyism.

The fact is that we produce more chicken litter than we can dispose of. The result, apart from the build-up of phosphorus in the soil, is that there is not enough capacity for the storage and spreading of the litter under the EU directive. The current position is not sustainable, and a solution needs to be found. I would be extremely reluctant to explore the option of exporting the litter elsewhere, so it appears that technology is the best option. I am interested in hearing from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development about the alternatives that are being explored.

Last week, I got the distinct feeling that the Environment Minister was not overly pleased with my comments regarding the additional clauses in the Planning Bill, specifically the focus on economic development. The planning application by Rose Energy Ltd was designated under article 31 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order in September 2008. In 2010, the then Environment Minister, Edwin Poots, announced his intention to approve the application.

There are two points that I wish to make. First, given the nature of our political system and the turnover of Ministers, it is imperative that legislation is robust enough to ensure that economic arguments are balanced against the protection of the environment. Secondly, I am aware of Minister Attwood's determination to clear the backlog of article 31 applications. However, the Rose Energy application is an example of decisions on such applications taking far too long. Had the application been refused sooner, we might already have an alternative in place that could deal with the issue appropriately.

I wholeheartedly agree that a viable solution for disposing of chicken litter should be found. However, it needs to balance protection of the environment with meeting the needs of the industry in a sustainable manner. I hope that the presence of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development today indicates a cross-departmental commitment to deal with the issue.

Ms Brown: I support the motion. Members will be only too aware of the importance of the agrifood sector to our local economy. It accounts for a huge proportion of our exports. This project, in itself, would have provided many benefits. It would have not only provided jobs but generated electricity and, therefore, contributed to sustainable biomass energy supply for Northern Ireland. Energy output was obviously one of the main purposes and functions behind the application. However, it had another major purpose, namely agricultural.

The project was central to the disposal of chicken waste. The refusal to grant planning permission, therefore, brings into question how chicken waste will be disposed of. Given that the poultry industry is required to comply with the EU nitrates directive, there is a need for the Minister of the

Environment to act and meet the industry immediately to assist it in meeting what is demanded of it by Europe.

A review commissioned by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural and Development and published in January 2012 argued much of this. It pointed out that the level of poultry litter is likely to increase in the years to come due to a decline in the mushroom industry and the expansion of the poultry industry. This raises the question of what we do with poultry litter. How will the House ensure that the industry can meet the demands of the EU nitrates directive?

As a Member for South Antrim and as a representative of the area of Glenavy, I respect and support the views of the residents who live there. I know about the major campaign that was led and developed by the community against the proposal. I shared many of their concerns about the increase in traffic, the use of the roads by heavy transport vehicles and the impact of the development of such a plant on the local environment.

Some 13,000 representations were made to the Northern Ireland Planning Service. Of those, 6,800 were against the application and 6,400 were in support of it. That is believed to be the largest number of representations ever made on a planning application in Northern Ireland.

3.30 pm

The decision to be made was, therefore, not to be taken lightly, as, regardless of the way that it went, it would certainly cause discontent. The decision has been made, and it has ultimately been good for the people of Glenavy who opposed the application. However, there is now a need for the Minister responsible to look at the alternative options that are available to support the poultry industry here in Northern Ireland. Time is of the essence, as the decision is a major concern among those in the poultry industry. It also sends out a negative message about how we in Northern Ireland support local industry.

I trust that the Minister will address the issue as a matter of urgency and will, indeed, find an alternative viable solution to the disposal of poultry litter.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt ar son an leasaithe agus in aghaidh an rúin. I will speak in favour of the amendment and against the motion.

I have some sympathy for the industry and what it has to endure with the directives that Europe has sent down. I listened to some of the comments that have been made. Mr Clarke opened the debate, and he referred to his own motion by using the word "regret". He then used the word "regrettable". He is correct to use the word "regrettable", but it is incredible that, in modern times, we are thinking of incineration as a way to address the issue. In 2012-13, it is incredible that litter waste is carted from all over the country to one spot to incinerate it.

Everybody here knows that there is not much that you can do about the establishment of a business once that has been done, but I have serious doubts about whether the business plan that was put forward in this case would stack up and show that the proposal would make a viable business. I have serious fears that other materials would be brought to the site and that it would be used as a dumping and incineration ground.

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

People talk here about jobs, and I agree that the proposal would create jobs. However, if you looked at the area, you would see that Randox, which is a major world leader in biodiagnostics, is based there. So, are we saying that we are going to create jobs in one industry to displace jobs in another? Is it one versus the other?

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Boylan: Yes, go on ahead.

Mr Clarke: The Member makes a valid point about Randox, which is in South Antrim. We would be very supportive of its leading the way in the market that it is involved in. However, Randox joined the wrong campaign. Given that it is located beside Belfast International Airport, surely to goodness the amount of fuel fumes coming out of the aeroplanes as they take off would have as much, if not more, effect on its operation than the proposed plant ever would have.

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

Mr Boylan: Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Clarke, I will put this question to you, because you are talking about jobs and sustainable jobs. If any jeopardy were put on any company to the extent that it could move out, why would we do that? I will put it to you that way.

I want to talk about incineration and the other technologies. I welcome that other Ministers are getting round the table to send out a message and that they are trying to see whether there are any better technologies. If I talk about anaerobic digestion or gasification, that is not to say that I support them. However, some of these methods that we are talking about have been around for a couple of hundred years, and we still have not improved them. We need a proper system to deal with this. Whenever we talk about incineration, we are going back to the days when people burned coal and slack and threw it out the back on drills and everything else. We are going back by saying, "We will incinerate it and fire the ash back out."

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Boylan: No, I gave you an opportunity. You had your own 10 minutes.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Please make all remarks through the Chair.

Mr Boylan: I will give the man an opportunity, but I just want to pick up on a couple of points.

The interesting thing is that we have this resource, and we should be using it properly. However, we are not. In your proposals, the support was there to just burn it off and throw it out onto the land. There is good potential in that resource, and it would help the economy if we got it.

I want to make a couple of other points. I listened to the Minister for Employment and Learning at Question Time earlier, and a question was asked about technologies. Surely to God, we should be working with universities on engineering to try to come up with a solution? You need not bother saying to me that there are no opportunities for people to come forward, be it private companies or otherwise. That is the way to go. I do not believe that

incineration is the way forward, and we, as a party, do not support it.

I commend the mover of the amendment; it is very hard to follow in his footsteps, given how he delivered that amendment. I congratulate him on that. I also want to talk about small clusters and co-operatives and opportunities to deal with it instead of having a single plant. It is not about having four or five plants across the North but about giving opportunities, and people out there are leading the way on that. I commend the Minister for what she is trying to do with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and DOE to come up with a solution.

Mr Irwin: At the outset, I declare an interest as a farmer who has close ties to the industry.

I know that this issue has been a source of great concern among everyone involved in the poultry sector in Northern Ireland, and it had been on the table for a considerable time prior to the Minister's unfortunate decision. The project was viewed by many in the industry as a realistic way of addressing the EU's nitrates and integrated pollution prevention and control directives and, therefore, providing a very stable footing on which the poultry sector could move forward.

The Minister of the Environment's decision to reject the application was a blow for the poultry sector and a blow for Rose Energy, which has invested significant resources in the research and development of the proposed plant. The fact that we are now no further forward in addressing the issue of poultry litter in an effective and efficient manner is of growing concern among many in the industry. It could lead to EU disallowance, and, if we do not find a solution and restrictions are placed on industry, it could be very negative for the industry.

The poultry sector supports in the region of 7,000 jobs directly and indirectly and continues to be a positive performer in economic terms, as, indeed, are many others in the agriculture sector. However, poultry waste is a subject of intense EU scrutiny, and that by-product must be disposed of in a manner that does not breach the regulations. The Rose Energy proposal represented a high-tech solution to the issue, and I have visited a number of plants in the UK and Holland, all of which have given no problems and are based near large areas of population. I remain of the opinion that the Minister was wrong in his planning judgement and that, as a result of that negative decision, the poultry industry is worse off.

I am interested to know whether DARD made any recommendations to the Planning Service about the proposal. DARD should have used its resources to ensure that the Department of the Environment was fully aware of the importance of such a facility in dealing with the thousands of tons of poultry litter and, most importantly, sustaining the poultry sector into the future. I want the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give assurances that she represented the views of the poultry sector at the highest level on the application. Although the Environment Minister has ultimately taken the decision based on what he believes are environmental impacts, he has not fully taken into account the issues associated with failing to deal with the thousands of tons of poultry litter produced every year. If it is left unresolved, that will have a huge environmental impact and huge impacts on Northern Ireland because of EU regulations.

Mr Attwood is on record as stating that he urges interested parties to work with his Department to find what he describes as "proper solutions" and "more sustainable methods of disposal". Given that he has rejected a proper and sustainable solution, I will be very interested to hear the Minister's comments and his efforts to date to push forward and really put his weight behind finding another solution. Can the Minister assure the House that he will work harder on the very real and important work of ensuring that the public are fully aware of the seriousness of the situation, and the real need to find a solution that will both deal with poultry litter and address renewable energy commitments? We are without a solution to the issue, and it is up to the Minister to lead the charge in finding that solution. I support the motion.

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. The local poultry industry forms an essential element of the Northern Ireland agriculture industry. Its importance for job creation and, indeed, export potential cannot be overstated. This is especially true in my constituency, where Moy Park remains Northern Ireland's largest food-processing company. If we are ever to see green shoots of recovery, the Executive need to respond far quicker to the needs of business. In December, I described the Minister's Rose Energy decision as a "body blow" for the Northern Ireland poultry industry and the wider agrifood sector as a whole. This is a general symptom of what is wrong with the Executive's current attitude towards business in Northern Ireland.

The agriculture industry needed a cross-departmental approach from the Department of the Environment, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to find a suitable alternative site. Instead, the industry was met with indecision and opposition and is now left with an uncertain future, fuelled by the Minister's refusal. Stormont Departments must urgently put their collective shoulders to the wheel to begin to help to solve problems, rather than continue to place obstacles in the way of economic recovery.

Poultry producers are still counting the cost of increasing energy and feed bills. Is it right that they should be further forced to pay to transport their litter to Scotland? The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development appears to have no plan B other than to start an expensive exercise to reinvent the wheel. That exercise will allow it to adopt its time-honoured position of researching an issue to death, without ever doing anything about it — a position that continually exasperates the agricultural community in Northern Ireland, and one that shows very little sign of improving.

The outright rejection of Rose Energy's proposal is a missed opportunity to help to solve a problem.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that the agrifood sector is vital to the economy in Northern Ireland and has been one of the sectors that has helped this economy through the economic downturn, especially considering that its annual output is £1.5 billion? Does the Member also agree that Moy Park is one of the top companies in Northern Ireland and, therefore, is on form for expansion? This decision could mean that expansion will happen elsewhere; not in Northern Ireland.

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

Mrs Dobson: The Member makes very good points. Our agrifood industry is ideally placed to help us to weather the recession, but we need to support the industry to allow for expansion and job creation.

This is a missed opportunity for cross-departmental co-operation and for the Executive to work with business to find a more amicable solution, rather than working against it. Poultry producers are ready and willing to expand their businesses, production and, ultimately, jobs. The Assembly has a duty to make that process easier, not harder.

We all know the significant impact that the 1991 EU nitrates directive, which my colleague Mr Elliott spoke about earlier, has had on our local farmers, not least because our poultry industry produces 485,000 tons of nitrate-rich slurry and bedding every year. This presents a problem that Rose Energy would, in part, have addressed. It is a problem that, at present, necessitates the constant transport of thousands of tons of chicken litter to Scotland. The added costs associated with that transportation act as a straitjacket on the expansion of our local industry.

3.45 pm

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's annual census tracks local poultry numbers, and it shows a year-on-year decline during the years of indecision from 2008, when the initial Rose Energy planning application was submitted. It was welcome to see the numbers rally in 2011, and the preliminary indications for 2012 show a 6% rise in laying hens. That is much to the credit of our farmers, who have had little in the way of help from Stormont Executive Departments. In a press statement in December, the Minister said that he would work with the industry to take forward developments and job prospects. Perhaps he could update the House on the work that has been undertaken since that statement was made to help the industry continue to grow and expand.

Until this Assembly does an about-turn and throws its efforts full-square behind business and the creation of jobs, I fear that we will return to this Chamber to discuss yet more missed opportunities. We need to adopt a can-do, and not a won't-do, approach to economic recovery. With that in mind, the construction and service sectors, alongside the agriculture industry, are most deserving of our support as we continue to build a Northern Ireland that looks to the future with confidence, a Northern Ireland that is open for business.

I support the motion and the future economic success of the agrifood industry.

Mr Allister: The Executive like to congratulate themselves on how intensely interested they are in supporting business and how wholly committed they are to job creation. Yet, here we have an example of an Executive across Departments who have dragged their feet on this issue, to finally repudiate and reject a most worthwhile job-creating prospect. It is such a kick in the teeth for the agriculture industry that I think it is beyond belief. For five years, this application has been vital to the future of the poultry sector because of the imminent problem of phosphate pollution that comes from poultry litter, under the pressure of EU directives. For five years, a solution has been on the table, and the source of the least help

and encouragement for finding such a solution has been the very Department of Agriculture that proclaims itself the champion of farming.

The Department of Agriculture's behaviour in this matter has been beyond contempt. Last year, the Department, with AFBI, said that there were two alternatives. One was export of litter to Scotland — 200 kilotonnes, rising to 400 kilotonnes per annum. When I asked how much that would cost, the Department conceded that it would not in fact be viable, as it would cost £4 million to £6 million. The Department's other big idea was a gasification plant. When asked whether there was any viable working gasification plant on a commercial basis anywhere in the world dealing with poultry litter, the Department had to concede that there was not. However, somewhere in North America, there is a small plant dealing with the litter of 800,000 hens per annum.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Member for the point he makes. I would hate him to stray off one of those alternatives, the first one he referred to, if it had been viable to go to Scotland. Will he remind the House what the plant in Scotland is and what purpose it was to be used for? What is the similarity between that and the proposed application?

Mr Allister: Yes. There are plants, and the Member referred to that earlier. I know that from my previous life. There are two very successful litter incineration plants in mainland Europe and one in Scotland, functioning very adequately and exactly as this one could and would have done. However, the Executive sadly had no interest in the job promotion and the help that it would be to the industry. This industry is on its knees in many respects, and, in its wider roll-out with the poultry sector, the industry commands something like 7,000 jobs. Yet the Department is grossly disinterested in helping that sector, and now begins to scratch its head and say, "Oh, well, what will we do? We will have to come up with something." Does it not know that 2014, when the present exemption runs out, is just next year, or does it not care? It seems to me that the Department, under the Sinn Féin Minister, is so hooked up on the ideology that opposes incineration that it will sacrifice any jobs and do anything to maintain that sacred ideological commitment opposed to incineration. Sadly, in the past, they were not so opposed to incineration at the La Mon Hotel and other such examples. On this occasion, they most certainly are.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. Is there not confusion in the DUP ranks? There were photographs of the MP Jeffrey Donaldson on the steps with CALNI opposing the incinerator.

Mr Allister: That is a fair point, and it is regrettable on two fronts: the DUP, through its MP in Lagan Valley, opposed the application, and its councillors in the main on Lisburn City Council — as far as I understand it — joined in opposition to this; and when the DUP had two, if not three, Environment Ministers in charge in DOE, it passed up on the opportunities and indulged in the feet-dragging that went on over Rose Energy, and the opportunity to promote the application and get it approved was not taken. There are more parties than Sinn Féin and the SDLP at fault in this, and I readily recognise that. However, the people who are suffering the most are, undoubtedly, those in the industry.

Just listen to what Tony O'Neill of Moy Park said a short time ago to 'The Belfast Telegraph':

"We have been in a state of limbo for the last four years ... awaiting a decision ... There is increasing demand for locally grown poultry in our markets but because of the delays ... this growing capacity is being met by our English operations instead of here in Northern Ireland."

That is what this Executive have done to this sector, and that is what this Executive is going to continue to do to this sector, in the case of the Minister, in pursuit of a foolish ideological opposition to incineration.

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Someone asked earlier why I was addressing the motion when it specifically named the Minister of the Environment. As the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, I obviously represent the interests of the poultry sector but also the rights of rural dwellers, who also lobbied me around their concerns. The people of Glenavy also need to have their views represented. Therefore, it is ideal that I address the motion today.

I welcome the fact that there is a debate about finding a solution and that people are engaging in that. As many Members have highlighted, the issue is of supreme importance to our agrifood sector, the economy and the environment. Since 2005, my Department has been involved in numerous research studies on technologies for processing poultry litter, and my Department has been at the forefront of that issue. Many Members highlighted the fact that the broiler/poultry sector is a significant part of the local economy, providing over a quarter of the total jobs in local food processing. It is a key part of our agrifood industry and an important contributor to the local economy. The sector has the potential to expand, but I have been concerned that it has been constrained due to lack of progress in securing a long-term solution to utilise poultry litter.

Traditionally, the local poultry industry has relied on spreading poultry litter on agricultural land as an organic fertilizer as its primary method for management. However, such practices are no longer sustainable at current levels. In short, there is not sufficient land available to use the nutrients in all the poultry litter that is produced here, because poultry litter is high in phosphorus and many soils across the North already have excess levels of phosphorus. That impacts on water quality, as the nutrients can get into the water and cause pollution. There is also the risk of spreading botulism to cattle, and precautions need to be taken. Spreading poultry litter on pasture is not recommended. If it is spread on pasture, animals should not be allowed on that pasture until the following grazing season at least. Again, that is a significant constraint on finding suitable land for spreading poultry litter.

Alternatives to land spreading are needed to ensure that the poultry sector and the wider agrifood industry can develop. However, I have been concerned about the lack of progress with alternatives. As a result of that, coupled with the concerns that the residents of Glenavy highlighted around their personal situation and the impact that this would have on them, I took a decision over a year ago — before the planning decision was made — to commission a review of poultry litter management options.

The Department and the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute took that forward, and the review was published in April last year. Pam Brown referred to that. The review highlighted the fact that emerging technologies have developed in recent years, technology has advanced and science has changed. We have to be mindful of all that and take it into account.

Having met a range of stakeholders, I now believe that there are potential options that need to be tested. That is why I, along with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, launched the small business research initiative (SBRI) competition. We launched it to explore the potential for those emerging technologies. That competition opened on 10 December. It is important that I let Members know about the competition and that they are aware of the ins and outs. The applications for phase 1 of the competition will close on 20 February this year. Contracts will be awarded to those selected in May 2013, for completion within six months. If phase 1 identifies viable proposals for a phase 2 to develop and evaluate prototypes, phase 2 will commence in autumn 2013.

There has been significant interest in the SBRI so far. Earlier this month, DARD and DETI hosted an open day in Belfast for potential applicants, which was attended by 46 companies. As of last week, 65 organisations had registered for the competition. That is the scale and wealth of information that is out there. People think that they have a solution to this problem.

The formal review process for our nitrates action programme with the EU Commission starts in autumn 2013. We must be able, therefore, to demonstrate progress and find alternatives to the land spreading of poultry litter. The European Commission is aware that the Rose Energy planning application has been refused and that we are taking action to find alternatives through the SBRI. It is also aware that the poultry sector provides thousands of jobs and is a key part of our agrifood industry. We are not subject to infraction proceedings, but we need to demonstrate to the Commission, and continue to demonstrate, that we are taking action to resolve the poultry litter issue.

There is a very clear message from the Commission. It is keen to see sustainable technologies that are resource efficient and that recycle nutrients, particularly phosphorus. The Commission is not wedded to any particular technology and is keen for new technologies to develop. Phosphorus is an essential nutrient for food production, but it is a finite resource because the world's supplies are limited. It will, therefore, be increasingly important to have technologies that recycle that vital nutrient. I understand that the Commission is preparing a position paper on the sustainable use of phosphorus.

Although the Rose Energy planning application has been refused, we have a structured and managed process in place to progress alternatives through the SBRI. That will provide evidence for the Commission that government and the industry recognise that we have an issue with poultry litter and that we are working to find solutions that are sustainable and resource efficient. Officials will be meeting the Commission in the coming months to discuss the actions that we are taking on poultry litter, and we will update it on the SBRI.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs O'Neill: I am happy to give way.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister clarify what action she has taken to speak to Brussels to try to extend the derogation?

Mrs O'Neill: That is an ongoing part of our discussion. Obviously, this derogation has gone on since 2008 and will continue to 2014. It is vital that we keep in communication with the Commission to let it know how we are progressing. It is interested in the fact that we have an SBRI in place and are trying to find alternatives. I think that that will stand in our favour if we have to slip beyond 2014. Hopefully, given the SBRI timescale that I outlined, we will be in a better position come the end of that process.

Some Members picked up on the issue of contact between DARD and DOE. Obviously, being in communication with DOE is part of my everyday role. DARD has provided the Planning Service with reports and analyses on technologies for utilising poultry litter and subsequent updated developments with technologies. DARD has also provided the Planning Service with input on biosecurity, veterinary issues and the importance of the poultry industry to the agrifood sector.

I do not wish to repeat lots of things that were said today, but there are alternatives. In fact, there is a wide range of alternatives: 65 people have come forward to offer solutions; there is a clear action plan in place to address the issue; no one sat back and waited for the planning decision; I took forward the initiative with DETI; and the SBRI process is in place. There is a range of technologies, which I am happy to run through very quickly, but given the fact that we are in a competitive process, I do not want to set out one in particular.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for giving way. Will she give us more detail on the 46 companies and the 65 people who have come forward with regard to the SBRI? Will she confirm that some of those projects involve combustion?

Mrs O'Neill: I am not going to get into the detail of each project; I do not have that detail with me. However, I can say that a wide range of technologies have come forward. It is a competitive process, but I suppose I can highlight some of the things that have come forward. There are initiatives on drying it and using it as pellets for use in organic fertiliser and on incorporating it in compost for horticultural use.

We have seen anaerobic digestion as a pre-treatment phase, a range of thermal treatments and export for land spread. All those initiatives are coming forward.

That very robust process is in place. It will find a solution that is in the best interests of the poultry sector. There is also an opportunity for all parties in the House to recognise that people in Glenavy also have rights and need to be listened to. There is a clear way forward. I hope that I have updated the House on those methods.

4.00 pm

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an leasaithe agus in éadan an rúin. I will make the winding-up speech on Sinn Féin's amendment. I want to repeat what Mitchel McLaughlin said at the outset of the debate: the amendment is modest and, in a sense, tactical. It aims to facilitate an agreement in the Assembly that all parties can support. We could send out a united message.

It is possible to support the amended motion because it is worded in such a way as to achieve that agreement.

It is all about finding a viable solution for disposing of poultry litter. We have heard from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development on the action plan. I welcome strongly the approach taken by the three Departments — the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, DOE and DETI — in taking forward the small business research initiative competition, which was launched in November. As the Minister has just said, it opened in December. The timelines that have been outlined reflect the urgency that everyone wants to convey on the matter. The Minister also said that there has already been an expression of significant interest from 65 people and that that will be taken forward as speedily as possible. Mitchel McLaughlin and Cathal Boylan said in their contributions that they had faith in the local scientific community arriving at a viable alternative.

Various Members outlined potential job losses in the poultry sector. I have considerable sympathy for poultry farmers because of the rising costs of feed and energy, as was detailed by Pam Brown. A solution has to be found.

I found it interesting that the Member for North Antrim Jim Allister, when he emphasised that job creation and retention were at the heart of government proposals here, did not mention Radox Laboratories, a cutting-edge biodiagnostic company that is located near Glenavy, provides hundreds of jobs and exports to 130-plus countries. It also took part in the consultation. It said that, if the £100 million incinerator were built so close to it on the shores of Lough Neagh, it would relocate, resulting in significant job losses in the immediate area.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr McElduff: Yes.

Mr Allister: Yes, I was aware of that self-serving statement from Radox. However, I certainly do not believe that Radox, with its settled position and very profitable exercise, would locate away from a district where, as Mr Clarke pointed out, it already lives in an environment of air pollution — if that is its complaint — given the siting of the airport. I do not think that that washed with anyone who thought seriously about the proposition.

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

Mr McElduff: Thanks very much for that extra minute, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. When Mr Allister was emphasising job creation and majoring on that in his contribution, it would have been more honest, thorough and complete if he had included a reference to Radox and the possible dislocation of jobs, which the company mentioned in its contribution to the consultation.

Various Members mentioned that the DUP was a divided house on the matter. The MP for Lagan Valley, Jeffrey Donaldson, and — I stand to be corrected on this — the corporate local government authority of Lisburn council, which has a strong DUP presence, supported the objectors. At the beginning of the debate, Trevor Clarke was strong in his outlining of the motion. He said that he would have considered objecting and would not have been too happy if it was located in his area.

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr McElduff: Yes.

Mr Clarke: He is right. I referred to Nimbyism among those who objected.

Let me say something about the geography of Northern Ireland, given that you are from County Tyrone. The Members from Lagan Valley do not represent Glenavy. It is the Members from South Antrim.

Mr McElduff: I understand that, but there is no unified DUP position on the issue. That is something I wanted to outline.

Tom Elliott led the UUP charge in the debate. I wonder whether Tom would be so vociferous in his support for an incinerator if it was to be located in Kesh or Ballinamallard.

Mr Elliott: Will the Member give way?

Mr McElduff: Yes.

Mr Elliott: I am quite happy to reply to that. If they want to build it beside me, I would be happy with that.

Mr McElduff: Thank you very much. 'The Impartial Reporter' will, no doubt, pick up on that.

I will move on to the economic importance of the poultry sector. I have considerable sympathy for poultry farmers, given the rising costs —

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

Mr McElduff: I hope that this is addressed urgently. There is an onus on the various Departments, including DARD, to come forward with a viable solution sooner rather than later.

Mr Frew: Before I start my prepared speech, if you could call it that, let us counter the argument about a split position in the DUP. There is no split position in the DUP. We have a policy on this. You have to remember — I am surprised at Members who have council experience — that, on many occasions, politicians represent the arguments of the people they represent. I am not necessarily a planning expert, and neither is —

Mr McElduff: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: Yes, I will.

Mr McElduff: Is the Member effectively saying that Jeffrey Donaldson is a parish pump MP?

Mr Frew: You can call him what you like. That is the DUP representing our people to the best of our ability. There is no getting away from that. With planning, as anyone with council experience will well know, you can do that very easily, because you are representing people's views. It is the planning Minister who is meant to make those decisions and make them right.

That brings me to my point. There is no doubt that the broader poultry sector is a significant and vital part of the local economy. The sector sustains on-farm employment for over 1,400 people, with a further 5,000 people employed in processing. It generates over 14% of the gross output of the local agriculture sector. However, the industry also produces a significant by-product: around 260,000 tons of poultry litter per annum. Given the scope for further industry expansion, poultry litter production of 400,000 tons per annum may be a realistic possibility

in five to 10 years, based on a 50% expansion of current capacity. Let me tell you, Members, if we do not get this right, if we do not support the sector and the industry, there will be no expansion. Members talked about exporting the waste. If we do not make this decision and make it quickly, we will export the poultry industry to other shores. It will leave Northern Ireland and leave Northern Ireland for good. That is something that we cannot allow to happen.

I have been very disappointed with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Minister on the issue. I do not believe that she or her predecessor has, at any time in their tenure, actually come out in support of the industry and this planning application.

Mrs O'Neill: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: Yes.

Mrs O'Neill: Does the Member not agree that establishing an Agri-Food Strategy Board to look at the challenges of all sectors across the agrifood industry, poultry included, is an example of support for the agrifood industry? That is Executive support; we have that in a Programme for Government commitment. To me, that is testimony to the support that this Minister and the Executive have for the poultry sector and the wider agrifood sector.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for that contribution. However, the poultry industry came to government to say, "This is what we need". The industry applied for a planning application worth £100 million, which would have solved the problem we have with Europe, where we will face a barrage of criticism next year. They might turn around and give us no more derogations, and we will be in deep trouble. Yet, the Minister of the Environment saw fit to refuse this planning application, and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Minister have not supported the application and have never been seen to support it from day one. That has been a tragedy for the industry.

Even the Rose Energy chairperson, Tony O'Neill, said he was hugely disappointed by the decision, adding that the implications for the agrifood industry were considerable. He said that the planning application had been robust and thorough and that the proposed technology had been proven worldwide. That is what the industry is telling us. The Minister of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development have let the industry down in that regard. Let us talk about the alternatives.

Mrs O'Neill: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: I will.

Mrs O'Neill: Will the Member tell the House why he is wedded to one solution? Why is he not open to the fact that there are other solutions out there, and the SBRI process has proven that? You are nodding, so I hope that you agree that there are alternative solutions. We have a window of time to sort this out before 2014. We are engaging the Commission in that process, so there is an opportunity here to find an alternative solution that is more acceptable to all Members of the House.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for that question. It is a valid question, but the point is that there is no viable option or alternative available to the Rose Energy application. We talk about gasification, but the review of alternative technologies to fluidise bed combustion for poultry litter

utilisation/disposal actually pulled the rug from under that application. It states:

“gasification is increasingly being used across Europe as a method for treating municipal waste and the process extracts significant quantities of energy during treatment. However, a number of technical challenges need to be overcome in applying the gasification approach to poultry litter. These include evaluating the suitability of poultry litter as a feedstock, assessing the potential power output of a gasification plant fuelled by poultry litter and identifying and developing appropriate markets for the gas and biochar end product.”

Those are not my words; those are the words of the review of alternative technologies. Also, land spreading is not an option for this industry, and exporting is not an option because of the costs incurred to industry. If we say to the industry that export is the only show in town, we will be exporting the poultry industry of this country. That is something that we cannot afford to do. In fact, the review even has the cheek to lecture the industry on ways that it could bring transport costs down with regard to baling the product or the logistics of shipping poultry litter that need to be investigated. That is not only pulling the rug from under their feet; it is giving them a slap in the face also. That is something that this party cannot and will not support.

Even in the Committee — Dolores Kelly mentioned this with regard to officials coming to our Committee — it was said:

“We know that fluidised bed combustion will work with poultry litter.”

The officials stated that. They also said:

“There is a strong view that poultry litter can also be used with gasification, but, as yet, there are no working plants. That is the difference between the two processes.”

Therefore, officials from DARD said, on 15 May 2012, that we had a good application that ticked all the boxes to reduce and eradicate the issue that we have with Europe, yet the Environment Minister made this decision and the Agriculture Minister did not champion the cause of the industry.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Member for giving way. When the application went into the planning process, one thing that people were a bit baffled by — your party has curiously avoided this in this whole debate — was why there was no connection to the electricity grid. We talk about the plant being able to generate electricity. I think the figure was 30 megawatts. Why was there no connection to the grid in the planning application?

Mr Frew: The Minister knows well that, even with wind farms, the grid connection is a separate application at all times, so that is not really an argument. Plus, I have not even mentioned or responded yet on the connection to the grid and the proper order with regard to getting more power to the grid. I have not even come to that argument yet, but I am glad that the Member raised it as being yet another plus for this planning application.

4.15 pm

In the limited time that I have, I will refer to some of the comments that were made. Trevor Clarke, a Member for South Antrim, mentioned Moy Park's contribution to the Northern Ireland economy and said that this is the only show in town. He is on record as stating, as are many Members, that we support the Small Business Research Initiative because that is something that government should be doing anyway. We should support our industry, whether we have a valid, live, approved or refused planning application on Rose Energy. We should do this competition because it is good for the industry and is the way forward.

We should always look at alternatives to this problem. However, that does not take away from the fact that we had a perfectly good planning application where we could have placed restrictions on Rose Energy to make sure that the road infrastructure was in place and that there were clauses that meant that it could not walk away and leave a monster behind. Yet the Minister refused to do that.

Tom Elliott of the UUP asked why individual MLAs are saying that they support the economy and renewable energy yet object to applications for renewable energy that will help the economy.

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

Mr Frew: He cannot understand that.

I have run out of time, but I will certainly support the motion and will not support the amendment because there is regret that this has been refused.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 43; Noes 37.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dickson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr B McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Ó hOisín, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Boylan and Mr Mitchel McLaughlin

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr McCallister, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Clarke and Mr McQuillan

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the importance of the poultry sector to the Northern Ireland economy; further notes the decision by the Minister of the Environment to refuse planning permission for the Rose Energy incinerator project; and calls on the Ministers to outline the action being taken to find an alternative viable solution for disposing of poultry litter.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members, take your seats or leave quietly.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Daisy Hill Plant Nursery, Newry

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes. Other Members who are called to speak will have 10 minutes-plus.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I want to thank the Business Committee for allowing me the opportunity to speak about the Daisy Hill nursery.

The Daisy Hill nursery sits in the Ballybot ward, in which I was born and reared. It is where we grew up and spent many days playing. It was truly an adventure playground. The nursery sits in the middle of four of the most deprived neighbourhood renewal areas in Newry. It was once a vibrant and busy area, where for many years wild flowers and plants were grown.

At its busiest time, the old nursery held one of the most comprehensive stocks of rare trees, shrubs and herbs anywhere in Europe. In fact, one person springs to mind when talking about the nursery, and he is Peter McCann from the Meadow in Newry. The nursery was the first stop for many Newry people looking for bedding plants for their gardens. Peter spent many a year working in the vicinity of and in the nursery. Local schools and communities availed themselves of Peter's knowledge of the rare flowers that were made famous in the nursery grounds. Peter has since retired, but his work in the nursery will be remembered for a very long time.

4.30 pm

I have to mention the Daisy Hill conservation group, which came to me some months ago to discuss trying to get some focus back on the nursery. Today's debate is part of that process. That small group of people recognised some time ago that we had a wonderful asset in the middle of our area that has been left undeveloped and unused for some time. They recognised the beauty and value of the site, and they identified that that valuable site has massive potential for the people of Newry and further afield. The Woodland Trust has a 25-year lease in the area. It works in co-operation with the Daisy Hill conservation group, the members of which have voluntarily spent many an hour of their own time trying to maintain and look after the site. If the site were transformed and properly maintained, it would be a major attraction for people from right across the district. At present, due to invasive species, the site is of low local ecological value. However, with an eradication programme and native planting and management, the classification could well rise to high value.

Daisy Hill nursery is the home of some very rare and unique wildflower species. The walkways and paths take you on a tour of beautiful flowers and different types of trees, some of which are hundreds of years old. There is a huge variety of native and exotic broadleaf trees, as well as many types of spruce, pine and fir trees. In 2010, the area that is leased by the Woodland Trust was designated

as Newry and Mourne District Council's first local nature reserve. The size of the area is staggering, and the potential for turning the open space into an educational centre for the many schoolchildren from the Newry area is huge. For tourism, the park has the potential to attract many people into our area, which, in turn, would have a positive impact on the local economy. That has to be welcomed.

A book was written some time ago in which there were specific mentions of the Daisy Hill rose. It is found in places as far away as Australia. That plant is unique. The fact that it was developed in the Daisy Hill nursery and exported across the world says a lot for the site. The Daisy Hill nursery was once world renowned and had dealings with all the major botanic gardens, including Kew, Dublin and Edinburgh. Plants grown in the nursery were exported to places as far away as China, Japan, New Zealand, Australia and America, as well as Canada, Britain and, of course, across Ireland. The Bessbrook rose and the Narrow Water rose were also cultivated there. There are numerous cultivars of many plant species with either "Newry" or "Daisy Hill" in the name. I am sure that a lot of Newry people are unaware of that fact, and the development of the area would go some way to addressing that.

If you do a Google search for the Daisy Hill rose, you will find the following caption:

*"A lovely old rose with huge blooms of light pink with attractive golden stamens.
Spring or summer flowering but a great show in full blossom.
The blooms are borne singly or in clusters and have a strong fragrance.
The foliage is dark green and very hardy and healthy.
A very useful rose as it can be grown as a shrub, ground cover or a climber and will tolerate poor conditions.
It was bred around 1900 and introduced into the UK in 1906 by Daisy Hill Nursery, Newry, Ireland (hence the name)

(Quite a rare rose)"*

The nursery is home to hundreds of different species of wildlife and birds. Some time ago, the volunteers embarked on a project to promote the breeding of birds in the nursery. They set about installing nesting boxes of various sizes for a wide range of birds throughout the nursery. It was a total success; the number of birds in and around the grounds is huge. Other wildlife includes badgers, squirrels, rabbits, stoats and foxes, among others. The sheer volume of schoolchildren in the greater Newry area who could avail themselves of the site is enormous. The educational value that is held in the site is vastly underestimated and ignored. We, as political leaders in our areas, need to do more to support the volunteers who must, at times, feel that they are banging their heads off the wall because no one is listening to them. We need to actively seek out the opportunities on their behalf, and we need to ensure that their hard work and commitment is fully appreciated. Some of the volunteers are in the Public Gallery, and I welcome them.

Daisy Hill nursery can become a major open space and parkland area for all. The peaceful surroundings and beautiful settings can be used by young and old alike. The

number of voluntary groups in Newry that deal with older people, people who are disabled or people who suffer from mental health issues is huge, and I am sure that a friendly and open site, such as the one that is proposed, can be only a positive thing for everyone concerned. The group has plans to operate and expand the existing network of paths and walkways, and it also plans to incorporate new seating areas and benches for people to enjoy the surroundings and wildlife.

The Daisy Hill nursery site is in the ownership of Newry and Mourne District Council at present. I have taken part in several meetings with officials, and it is clear to me that they are also fully supportive of the group and its plans to revitalise the nursery. In fact, Newry and Mourne District Council has declared part of the nursery as a local nature reserve, which goes some way to show the importance of the site. The council recognises the importance of the site and the potential within it to bring much-needed tourism to the area. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the council for its co-operation, through which a site meeting, involving most of the Newry city councillors, took place to explain the vision the group has for the nursery. Those councillors are also fully behind the project and are keen to see some actual work commencing on site.

In March 2009, Newry and Mourne District Council published a local biodiversity action plan. In this plan, it outlined its vision for the Newry and Mourne area. In the document, the council identified some non-native invasive species, one of which is knotweed. In the confines of the nursery, hogweed and knotweed are growing unhindered, have spread quite rapidly across the area and are slowly strangling the grassland and plants. I believe that if the proper resources are put into the nursery, the site could be better managed and maintained and the growth of those invasive species could be restricted.

According to that report, there was a time when the North was almost completely covered in woodland. However, as a result of agriculture and development, it is now the least wooded region in Europe, with as little as 6% woodland cover, approximately 1% of which is native broad-leaved woodland.

Newry does not have a city park as such. There is the McClelland Park in the centre of Newry, but it is a small green space with a few benches, and with the ongoing parking problems in the Newry area, it is understandable that people do not want to drive to this particular park. Look at other places around the North. Some cities have two or three large parks where local people can spend time walking and relaxing. That is what is envisaged for the Daisy Hill nursery site, and the drivers of the project have rightly identified the fact that Newry needs and, indeed, deserves a park that the people can call their own. I believe that, once the site has been developed and enhanced, it will become a place that young and old will enjoy and be proud of. I also believe that the opening up of the site will bring much-needed attention and regeneration to that part of Newry. The fact that there are so many schools and communities around this park will also provide an educational aspect and bring much-needed tourism to that historic part of Newry. There is an onus on elected reps and on Newry and Mourne District Council to ensure that the park is up there with the rest of the tourist attractions in the Newry and Mourne area.

I finish by giving Minister Kennedy's apologies, which he contacted me with earlier.

Mrs McKeivitt: I welcome the opportunity to speak in today's Adjournment debate. I begin by giving my colleague Dominic Bradley's apologies: he cannot be here this evening.

The value of natural and semi-natural habitats in Northern Ireland is widely recognised, if not always fully appreciated. Natural areas provide homes for wildlife, trees and wild flowers. They also provide a wide range of benefits for the humans that live and work in and near them, including opportunities for recreation and relaxation, protection of soil and water quality, food regulation, carbon sequestration, and the sustainable production of food and fuel.

The Daisy Hill wood site was designated in 2010, as the Member who spoke previously said, as a local nature reserve (LNR). Local nature reserves are areas set aside for biodiversity, where people can enjoy wildlife and nature at first hand. LNRs such as Daisy Hill wood do not always support rare or threatened species of flora or vegetation. Exotic species are commonly associated with parkland and artificial pond habitats such as those in Daisy Hill wood. I was going to go into what the Japanese knotweed was, the cherry laurel, the Himalayan knotweed or the giant hogweed, which is so difficult to remove. However, as the previous Member to speak has already said it, I think that we can shorten this Adjournment debate.

Along with the snowberry shrub, the grey squirrel was originally introduced to Castleforbes, County Longford, from where it has expanded and eliminated the native Irish red squirrel from most of eastern and north-eastern Ireland through direct competition for resources and by spreading a virus that is lethal to red squirrels. It damages the young trees by stripping bark, often girdling and killing them. The grey squirrel was identified in Daisy Hill wood during the site walkover survey, which also went into great detail on the shrubs that were previously mentioned.

In the late 1880s, Tom Smith, a gardener and manager at Warrenpoint Road nurseries in Newry, purchased two daisy-covered fields overlooking Newry. On those six acres of north-east sloping, deep, slightly acidic, rich loam land, he started the Daisy Hill nursery. As business increased and improved over the years, the Daisy Hill nursery required expansion, as most of the plants sold were raised in the nursery itself. That required the acquisition of more land, until the nursery covered almost 60 acres and had a staff of between 70 and 80 men and women. At its greatest, the nursery held one of the most comprehensive stocks of rare trees, shrubs and herbs in Europe.

The nursery continued to thrive towards the end of the 19th century and into the very early 20th century. The advent of the First World War, followed by the Great Depression and the Second World War took their financial toll on the nursery. The resultant lack of demand consequently influenced falls in plant stock and employee numbers throughout the middle part of the 20th century. The nursery continued to operate under successive talented gardeners until 1996, when the grounds of Daisy Hill wood were acquired by Newry and Mourne District Council. In 2010, Daisy Hill wood was designated as Newry and Mourne's first local nature reserve, with the aim

of developing the site as a natural resource for people and wildlife.

Bird boxes can also be constructed for larger bird species, including birds of prey, such as the kestrel and the barn owl. Such boxes should be located on the woodland's margins at heights of between three and five metres. All potential species using a bird box will require good visibility from, and a clear flight path to, the nest. Ideally, a box should face north-east. Most importantly, however, it needs to face away from the direction of the prevailing wind. The RSPB, which has engaged in a number of such programmes, should first be consulted to ensure that a suitable habitat is available for these species and that the correct box is erected in the correct fashion.

The dominance of woodland within Daisy Hill wood indicates that the area is likely to support one of the most viable local feeding grounds and roosting sites for a range of bat species. Further studies of the Daisy Hill wood bat fauna should be commissioned, with the findings of such surveys used to inform the type and placement of bat boxes in the Daisy Hill wood study area.

From my previous role as a councillor on Newry and Mourne District Council, I am aware that dumping, which was noted during the site survey, and its control was the subject of conversation in the council, including the fact that the woodlands between Daisy Hill Road and Monaghan Row were habitually used for fly-tipping. Those areas should be routinely monitored to ensure that people are dissuaded from such activities. The main block of the Daisy Hill wood site is also used for antisocial drinking activities, which results in localised disturbance and littering. In an effort to preserve the area, measures should be put in place to restrict access to the site during late evening and at night.

I support the Woodland Trust's efforts to transform and properly maintain Daisy Hill wood, for the benefit not just of the wild animals but of local people. So, I am delighted to have added my few words to the Adjournment debate.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I will speak briefly to lend my support to my colleague Mickey Brady, who brought the debate to the Floor. I also commend the volunteers of the Daisy Hill Conservation Group, some of whom are here.

The Daisy Hill nursery site in Newry is a fantastic project that deserves the support of all elected representatives in the area and the local council. We, as MLAs, have an important role in ensuring that these types of community-based projects are fully supported. Since coming to the Assembly, I have been calling for essential funding opportunities to be directed into our constituency. In my opinion, Newry and Armagh is underfunded and there is a lack of promotion.

This project will provide a safe and friendly environment for local people to avail themselves of. I am sure that, given the application of the proper facilities and safeguards to this site, schools and communities — not just from Newry but from south Armagh and south Down — would be only too glad to use it for studies and nature projects. The fact that the site is in a prime location in the middle of the Newry area should be incentive enough for agencies to buy into the project and ensure that the site's full potential is realised. I encourage all interested bodies to get behind the group and show it support. I am aware that some

Newry-based groups have availed themselves of the nursery site for projects; for example, Sticky Fingers, the leading children's art organisation in the area, has placed some children's art in the forest part of the nursery. It is a paradise for children to play in, and to enhance and improve it would only open up further opportunities for those types of groups.

4.45 pm

In recent times, volunteers who work in the nursery have overseen the planting of over 300 metres of native hedgerow, so imagine what we could do if proper resources were pumped into the area. I know that Mickey Brady has a special interest in the Ballybot area, and he mentioned that the Ballybot ward is one of the most deprived areas in the Six Counties. We would be failing in our duties as elected representatives if we did not highlight that issue, and I trust that the dedicated people behind the project will continue to push it at every opportunity.

In south Armagh — I am lucky enough to come from there — we have the Ring of Gullion, which has been deemed an area of outstanding natural beauty. This site in Newry has the potential to be a continuation of that. Newry, as well as south Armagh and Armagh city, needs an injection of funds to promote tourism and attract people into our area. I believe that this project has the potential to do that, and I wish the group and all its supporters all the best in their endeavours. I take this opportunity to pledge the support of the Sinn Féin Newry and Armagh team for the group.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá. I want to say a few words. If we were talking about football, I would not be supporting my colleague, as an Armagh man with a Down man sitting beside me. I commend not only Mickey Brady's work on the issue but that of the Daisy Hill wood conservation group. I know that for many a long day — my colleague Megan Fearon mentioned this — in the Newry and Armagh area, there has been a lack of investment in those types of projects.

I want to support Mickey in his endeavours, but I also want to commend him. He met the group on a number of occasions and, more importantly, engaged with the local council, which has a big responsibility for the matter. Those of us who have been councillors know that, after a weekend's activity, we are normally phoned on a Monday morning to contact council cleaners to come out to clean parks and such areas. That happens regularly. Although I recognise that some parks are left to go to wrack and ruin — they attract antisocial behaviour — we have a good opportunity to regenerate this park.

The project that my colleague outlined has the potential to create a space that young and old from across the Newry area and further afield can use to relax and take in the wildlife, the wild flowers and the flora and fauna. If the park were developed to its maximum potential, it would remove the prospect of the area becoming a place where young people meet at weekends to indulge in drinking and general mischief. The local council has sole responsibility for the nursery, and all complaints go through the local authority. With the proper will, I believe that the council, in co-operation with the PSNI and others, can overcome any problems that might arise. They have a responsibility to speak to and to engage with residents in order to alleviate

any concerns about the regeneration of the park. I argue that the development of the area would help to end the antisocial behaviour associated with the site and would, in fact, enhance it for the residents and communities that reside there.

Local people in the direct vicinity of the nursery wish to see the area upgraded and managed in such a way that they can also avail themselves of the large walkways and paths. A multiagency approach is needed to ensure that everyone's needs and concerns are dealt with and catered for. I am heartened to hear that Newry and Mourne District Council has fully bought into the project, and I have no doubt that everyone will play their part in trying to redevelop the site.

The fact that the park is on the doorstep of so many schools and communities is very positive for its educational value. Provided there is proper access, that will ensure that a large volume of people visit the park. To have such an underused asset in a city as large as Newry is unimaginable. I am sure that parts of the Six Counties would envy that amenity. I wish the group all the very best with its endeavours on the project, and I assure it that my party will support it in its work to regenerate the park.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: There is no ministerial response.

Adjourned at 4.50 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 4 February 2013

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Speaker's Business

Mr Speaker: I want to return briefly to a subject that I made a ruling on some time ago. It is about the use of electronic devices in the Chamber. I know that there has been an increase in Members' use of electronic devices in the Chamber. My ruling then, I have to say, was very clear: electronic devices should be used responsibly and discreetly and without distracting other Members or interfering with the business of the House.

I have watched around the Chamber, and there are more and more Members who come into the Chamber and continually do nothing else but use their electronic devices. I warn Members that, at all times, they should respect the business and dignity of the House even in using their electronic devices. I ask Members to revisit my ruling, in which I was absolutely clear that, if Members feel that they have to use electronic devices in the Chamber, they should do so in a respectful manner. I have to say that some Members — some Members — are not doing that at this time. The Deputy Speakers and I have been concerned about this for some time. I hope that I do not have to revisit the subject because, if I do, I may make a different ruling on the use of electronic devices in the Chamber.

Executive Committee Business

Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

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

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions in clause 62 of the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill, as introduced in the House of Lords on 18 October 2012, dealing with estate agency work.

The motion deals with the extension to Northern Ireland of an amendment to the definition of estate agency work as specified in the Estate Agents Act 1979. This is necessary to ensure clarity in relation to the scope of the Act's provisions.

The definition in the Act is broadly drafted and provides that anyone acting on instructions from a client who wants to buy or sell an interest in land falls within the scope of the Act if they do anything for the purpose of or with a view to introducing a prospective buyer and seller and then for the purpose of securing that sale or purchase. One of the Act's specified exclusions from this definition is for businesses that do nothing other than publish advertisements or disseminate information in connection with the sale or purchase of a property. The proposed amendment is to make it clear that those who publish such advertisements or disseminate information in a way that allows potential purchasers to contact vendors directly and to remain in contact are exempted from this definition of estate agency work.

The amendment is clearly very limited in its scope. It will not apply to situations in which the business is involved in creating the advertisement or compiling the information that is disseminated. The need for the amendment was identified by the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) in its 2010 'Home Buying and Selling' report. This report found that, although the internet had made it potentially easier for anyone who wished to sell their property without using the services of an estate agent, the share of property transactions involving an estate agent had increased significantly from the levels found in previous reports carried out in the sector in 2004 and 1979.

The report found that, although some businesses had developed, offering services to vendors wishing to market their own property, the number of such businesses and the percentage of transactions involving them was relatively small. These businesses are referred to as

private sale intermediaries or private sale portals. As the name suggests, the businesses are internet-based, but they should not be confused with online estate agency businesses. Currently, there are fewer than 30 private sale portals operating across the UK. Many of those carry advertising for traditional estate agents, in the same way as newspapers do, as well as for private sellers.

The OFT report found that businesses in the sector considered that the small number of private sale portals was due to the uncertainty about whether their activities were covered by the definition of estate agency work and the potential compliance cost of the Act's provisions and other statutes using the same definition. The report concluded that it would be beneficial to look at amending the definition of estate agency work to ensure clarity and to see if any other activities could be excluded from the definition so that businesses did not require the regulation of the Act and could be excluded from it.

The Act regulates a range of activities associated with estate agents, such as the handling of clients' money, passing on of offers and declaring any interest that the agent may have in the property or in offering services to potential purchasers. The Act does not regulate advertising by an estate agent

A short UK-wide targeted consultation was carried out by the United Kingdom Department for Business, Innovation and Skills between June and August of last year. The consultation was sent to a range of bodies, including the National Association of Estate Agents and the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, both of which have strong membership bases in Northern Ireland. In addition, discussions were held during the consultation period with representatives of traditional estate agents, private sale portals, consumer organisations, local authority trading standard services and other interested parties.

Consultation responses confirmed that there was uncertainty about whether the activity of private sale portals fell within the strict legal scope of the Estate Agents Act. A large proportion of the responses came from traditional estate agents who were against changes that, they felt, would create an unlevel playing field and allow disruptive competition with consequent job losses. Almost all respondents expressed concern that the protections afforded by the Act to consumers should not be diluted. In light of the consultation responses, it was decided not to amend the broad definition of estate agency work but to amend one of the exemptions from it to ensure clarity in its scope.

Both I and the United Kingdom Government are conscious of the need to protect consumers, and the proposed amendment to the Estate Agents Act has been drafted accordingly. The United Kingdom Government have decided that the amendment could be made through a clause in the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill currently going through Parliament. As the regulation of estate agents is a transferred matter, the consent of the Assembly is required if the amendment is to apply in Northern Ireland. It is important for Northern Ireland that the Assembly pass the legislative consent motion. It meets a need for an updating and clarification of the law regarding businesses such as private sale portals. It will deregulate businesses that provide services that simply allow buyers and sellers to find and communicate with each other, provided that they do not otherwise participate

in a transaction. Northern Ireland will also benefit from the continuation of a single regulatory framework for estate agents across the United Kingdom. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Mr McGlone (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for tabling the legislative consent motion.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Minister on this matter at its meetings on 6 September and 6 December 2012. The Committee further considered the proposals at its meeting on 13 December, when members raised queries on the level of consultation locally. The Minister has gone into that in quite a bit of detail today.

Following a response from the Department that was considered by the Committee at its meeting on 24 January, the Committee noted that the consultation contained a specific question dealing with issues regarding the implementation of the proposal in the devolved Administrations. The Committee further noted that no consultation responses on that matter were received from locally based organisations or individuals.

Having carefully considered the proposals, the Committee is content that the definition of estate agent work should be amended as proposed and supports the Department in seeking the Assembly's endorsement for the legislative consent motion.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I do not have much to add to what the Chair said. All I can do is confirm that his comments reflect the view of the Committee and that I support the legislative consent motion.

Mrs Overend: This is a varied but important Bill that requires a legislative consent motion in this House on some of the proposals. The legislative consent motion has been brought today for clause 62 of the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill, which was introduced in the House of Lords in October 2012. The clause deals with estate agency work and changes that are deemed necessary to the Estate Agents Act 1979.

In the disposal or requiring of land, communication between persons must be considered an important area, specifically in response to the publishing of advertisements and disseminating of information. Therefore, the parties involved must be clear about how and when they can respond, how they can make contact with each other and how that is governed by law. The intention of the amendment is to update and clarify the law regarding businesses, such as private sale portals and to deregulate businesses that provide services that simply allow buyers and sellers to find and communicate with one another provided that they do not otherwise participate in the transaction by, for example, advising, negotiating or providing other services. In short, the Ulster Unionist Party is content to support the motion, which makes changes to this area of estate agency work.

Mrs Foster: I thank Members for their contribution and support for the motion. It is fair to say that the vast majority of people, in arranging the sale of what is probably their most valuable asset, will consider it prudent to obtain the services of a trusted professional and will continue

to use an estate agent. However, for those who want to advertise their own home and do not enter into the Estate Agents Act, this deregulates the business for them so that they can continue to advertise their own home. It enables vendors and purchasers to find and communicate with each other so that they can disseminate information. It is an important clause that enables that to be done without regulation under the Estate Agents Act. I thank Members for their contributions and look forward to the support of the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions in clause 62 of the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill, as introduced in the House of Lords on 18 October 2012, dealing with estate agency work.

12.15 pm

Committee Business

GPs: Annual Health Checks

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to making a winding-up speech. 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 make it mandatory for general practitioners to provide annual health checks for their patients to help promote good health, prevent ill health and detect disease at an early stage.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am delighted to move the motion on behalf of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I assume that the Minister is on his way. I could take it personally; he always seems to miss the first part of my speeches.

At the end of last year, the Deputy Chair, Jim Wells, and I visited Cuba to attend an international health conference and to learn more about the Cuban healthcare system in the context of our Committee review of health inequalities. It was a learning curve for me and for Jim — I think that I can speak on behalf of him when I say that — and we learnt an awful lot. I take the opportunity to publicly thank the Cuban Government, including the Cuban Health Minister, for opening a lot of doors for us and allowing us to see at first hand some parts of the Cuban healthcare system.

The Cuban healthcare system spends \$585 on each person every year, whereas we spend almost \$4,000. Despite that huge variance in spend, Cuba achieves health outcomes that compare with and, in some cases, exceed those produced by our system. At the heart of the Cuban system is the family doctor, who is an important part of the community that they serve. At any point in time, the family doctor can provide an overview of the general health of all his or her patients, and one reason for that level of knowledge is the fact that they carry out annual health checks. That allows them to get to know their patients and their history and to identify health problems at an early stage. The Committee fully accepts that some parts of the Cuban health system cannot be directly transferred to ours. However, the focus in Cuba on prevention, patient education and primary care fits in with the vision that the Minister and the Department have set out in 'Transforming Your Care' and the forthcoming public health strategy Fit and Well.

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

'Transforming Your Care' sets out a challenging and changing role for GPs, with more services being provided through primary care and where GPs work in close collaboration with other health professionals such as nurses, social workers, physiotherapists, podiatrists and

so on. That is to be supported by a shift of resources away from the hospital budget into primary and community services. 'Transforming Your Care' identifies 11 reasons why we need to change our health system. Let us be clear: 'Transforming Your Care' says that things cannot remain as they are and that there is a better way of doing things that will have better results for patients. The number one reason identified for change is the need to be better at preventing ill health. We know that the prevalence of many diseases such as cancer, heart disease, stroke and diabetes can be reduced by prevention, such as by helping people to help themselves by losing weight, reducing alcohol intake and so on. The new public health strategy, 'Fit and Well', which I understand is to be published shortly, is all about improving and protecting people's health through promotion, prevention and early intervention.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way. Will she agree that it was rather disappointing to hear at the last Health Committee meeting that the health promotion and health detection budget had been decreased over two years by some 6%? We encourage all budgets to be used for the purpose for which they were set up.

Ms S Ramsey: I could not disagree, Kieran. Today's motion is about getting in at an early stage. If we are talking about a radical review of how we deliver our health service, we have to get in at those levels. It is about education, prevention and early detection. As you are well aware as a member of the Committee, that is the school of thought behind the motion.

The public health strategy is of particular relevance to a motion on annual health checks by GPs. We know that people who live in the most deprived areas have higher rates of lung cancer, coronary disease, alcohol- or drug-related illness, suicide and mental health problems. To a large extent, all those conditions can be prevented. We need people who are at risk of experiencing health inequalities to be in contact with the health system early and at regular intervals throughout their life. A requirement on GPs to invite all their patients for an annual health check would make that more likely.

I am aware, as are other Members, that some workplaces are proactive and provide health checks for their staff. Recently, Chest Heart and Stroke was in the Assembly providing checks for cholesterol and blood pressure, which is to be commended. However, what about people who are not in employment or are not fortunate enough to work for an employer who provides such a service? We need to reach out to those people, and GPs are placed centrally in the community to do so. One problem with our health system at present is that GPs usually see people only when they are sick. Large numbers of people will go for many years without seeing their doctor and then turn up, perhaps in their 40s or 50s, with high blood pressure and high levels of cholesterol and need to be put on medication immediately. If those people were seen earlier and a pattern identified as a result of working in close collaboration with a GP, we might not be at that stage.

It is not just physical illnesses that can be picked up at an early stage. An annual health check with a GP could be used to ask people about their general well-being and mental health. That in itself would help to break the stigma associated with mental ill health. If GPs were to ask patients about that regularly, people might open up, talk more freely to and confide in their GP and then seek help

when they were experiencing symptoms of depression or stress. We also know that we have a problem with suicide in our communities, and the statistics show that those most at risk are young and middle-aged men. Interestingly, men are likely to have the least contact with their GP until they become ill and have to visit a doctor. Women are much more likely to be in contact with the health system and health professionals through routine screening. From the age of 25, women are called for cervical screening and, from the age of 50, for breast cancer screening. If they have children, they will receive significant antenatal and postnatal care, whereas, as far I know, the only routine screening test that men will be called for is bowel cancer, and that will not be until they hit their 60s.

A proactive system of annual check-ups for everyone would be a way to involve people more in taking responsibility for and an interest in their physical and mental health, and it would identify problems at an early age. We have only to look at the news coverage last week on cancer survival rates on these islands compared with Australia, Norway, Canada and other countries. The survey shows that one in six of men and women aged 50 and over was embarrassed about sharing their symptoms with a doctor. The researchers state that this may partly explain why we have a far lower cancer survival rate than other places. Recently, we were sent information from the BMA on some research that was done on this. The BMA says that there is no evidence that health checks reduce the risk of death, but the study found examples of health checks resulting in increased diagnosis of high blood pressure and high cholesterol levels. The research also states that most of the trials that it reviewed are old.

The BMA has already written to the Committee stating its concerns about annual health checks and quoting the research that I mentioned. The BMA states that the average patient is seen six and a half times a year. However, it seems to be missing the point that thousands of people are not seen, year in and year out. If we are talking about those who are hard to reach, we need to ensure that we are proactive. The BMA also says that annual health checks would be a waste of resources that are needed for sick people. Again, it is missing the point. We want people to come into contact with medical professionals before they are sick so that illness can be prevented and interventions can be made early.

The BMA report, 'Social Determinants of Health', states that doctors act not only as clinicians but as community leaders. That takes me back to my original point about our study visit to Cuba, where doctors are an integral part of the community and community leaders. There is a commitment by our GPs to provide good health, educate patients and keep people well. Providing annual checks would be a method of challenging and channelling that commitment into action.

A system of annual health checks, offered to all patients by GPs, would signal a move away from treating people when they are sick towards a system with the genuine aspiration of preventing illness and promoting healthy living. I call on the Minister to read Hansard so that he can go through what I have said.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. It is a very important matter for everyone in Northern Ireland. I will not talk about the merits or deficiencies of the Cuban health service, as I have no

experience of it. I will talk about the health service in Northern Ireland.

Health promotion must remain a key priority as we try to ensure that our healthcare system is fit for purpose and that our population's health and well-being are led by prevention rather than cure. Our health service continues to face many challenges, not least financially, and it is vital that we manage the limited financial and practical resources that we have in order to maximise their effectiveness and efficiency.

GP annual health checks, as proposed in the motion, certainly look very good in theory. We all want to promote good health, prevent ill health and detect disease early. However, I am not yet convinced that providing annual health checks is the most effective way of achieving the desired outcomes.

I have spoken to a number of GPs on this matter, and issues continually flagged up as potential barriers to providing satisfactory annual health checks were the time involved, funding, space and workforce levels. It is important that we listen to the professionals, including the British Medical Association, who deal with these matters daily. Much research has been done across the world on the effectiveness of MOT-style annual health checks, and many conclude that they do not have a sufficient impact on improving rates of morbidity or mortality, given the resources needed to provide such a service

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dunne: I will indeed.

Mr Wells: We all received that BMA briefing on research done throughout the world. It is known as the Cochrane report and was published in 2012. What the BMA conveniently forgot to mention is that it was based on studies carried out in 1963, 1965, 1967 and 1969. The most up-to-date study that it reported on was in 1992, which is 21 years ago. Clearly, diagnostics have moved on in leaps and bounds in the intervening two decades. Therefore, I think it somewhat mischievous of the BMA to cite information that is clearly out of date and not relevant to today's arguments.

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

Mr Dunne: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

I accept the Member's point, but I also feel that there are better methods, which I will mention later, using risk-based surveillance and checks. You identify risk areas and work around them.

There are also problems with low uptake of health checks despite significant investment in them. It is important that resources are managed effectively and use quality management system principles that can prove to be more effective through the use of risk-based surveillance and checks. It is important, therefore, that we concentrate our resources on the areas of greatest risk to health and monitor those patients through screening and testing programmes.

Under Transforming Your Care, which has already been mentioned and, I am sure, will be mentioned later, we look forward to more well-being hubs being established across the Province, delivering a range of multidisciplinary teams

all under one roof and improving healthcare services for the public while reducing hospital admissions.

12.30 pm

Other practical measures could be better tailored and targeted at those who are most in need and at risk of poor health. Specific measures should be encouraged and introduced to help to reduce the risk of diseases. Sustained public awareness campaigns often deliver results, so I feel that they should be encouraged. TV adverts and other targeted public marketing campaigns are often very effective methods of making a real difference to people's thoughts and actions.

In an effort to help to reduce the workload in our hospitals, steps could be taken to improve access to existing GPs, which is an issue that the Committee debated. For example, GP surgeries could open for longer in the evenings, and, obviously, they could open at lunchtimes. I find it unacceptable that GP surgeries close at lunchtime, which is a time that people could get off work and go to the surgery. It is not acceptable to be denied access at such times.

Another measure would be a more cost-effective telephone system, which the Committee also looked at. GP surgeries are using expensive 0844 telephone numbers, which is deterring people from getting access to their GPs.

It is important that we remain focused on ultimately improving the health of our population in the most sensible, practical and realistic ways. Thank you.

Mr Beggs: Preventing ill health and ensuring the early detection of disease must be given greater priority. It would be possible to reduce the pressures on our health service if we had greater health education. Early intervention in illnesses is effective, and, ultimately, it often requires less costly intervention by consultants.

The latest results for emergency care and waiting times at our consultant-led A&Es must be of great concern to everyone. I have a constituent who had a relative who was over 100 years old, and I learned recently that that person had to wait over six hours on a trolley at an A&E. That is not acceptable. Therefore, we need to bring about a better health service to ensure that that does not happen.

I noticed that, in October, November and December 2012, not a single target that the health service set for A&E waiting times was achieved by our consultant-led A&Es. Clearly, something needs to change. I would like an explanation of why there has been a further 4% reduction to only 71% of A&E patients being seen within four hours in Northern Ireland, while virtually every major A&E unit in England, Scotland and Wales meets the 95% target. Clearly, there is a need for improvement, in particular at the Antrim Area Hospital, the Royal Victoria Hospital and the Ulster Hospital, where waiting times are unacceptably long.

Too many patients arrive at our hospital emergency units with preventable illnesses or illnesses that could be better managed in the community, thereby avoiding those visits to A&E. We need proactive primary healthcare with a greater role in the community, and I welcome aspects of Transforming Your Care and, indeed, Fit and Well.

Regular monitoring by our GP practices and greater use of a range of other health professionals, such as community

pharmacists, can bring about those improvements. We need greater innovation and greater outreach to the community so that we can get the health message over. Evening clinics were mentioned. Visits to markets, where those who are hard to reach could gain access, as well as, as others said, visits to workplaces, must be further explored.

There must be a greater role in managing some of the chronic health conditions of constituents that result in frequent visits to A&E.

I will highlight a couple of recent reports. Queen's University recently published an article in the 'British Journal of Cancer'. It led with the question:

"Are we dying of embarrassment? Barriers to visiting GP may prevent early cancer presentation."

We should all be concerned about that. The article indicated that one third of those surveyed did not present themselves, because they feared that they could be wasting their GP's time. It also indicated that, on noticing a cancer symptom, about one fifth were embarrassed about visiting their GP. That is particularly important, because early intervention is critical in treating cancer.

Imperial College's faculty of health indicated that young people, particularly young males, are less likely to take medical advice or contact their doctor. That must be addressed, and more work should be done with our schools, colleges and universities to provide greater awareness.

After the Chair and the Deputy Chair visited Cuba, they reported the benefits of the annual health checks that were carried out there. There can be barriers locally to visiting our GP, and we need to be more proactive in encouraging more frequent visits. I recognise that the Cochrane Library report and the BMA have questioned the benefits, but, as has been said, that is somewhat dated information. Unlike Cuba, our GP numbers are restricted, while our GPs' salaries are on a different wavelength. I suspect that that might generate a slightly different dynamic, but we should be examining everything that we can do to improve the frequency of health checks and, ideally, aim for —

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Member for giving way. I appreciate the tone and content of his contribution. We need to realise that we need a radical overhaul of how we do things. All that we hear in the Chamber is that we need to spend to save and that we need to invest. Getting in at an early level will allow us to invest for our future and invest in preventing ill health. That is the purpose of where we are coming to, and GPs are at the heart of that.

Mr Beggs: I agree that we need to invest in our preventative side. More people need to be seen regularly — ideally, annually — but we also need to give over particular time to managing some of the chronic diseases that are around. It would be helpful if the Minister can advise us on whether we can do both. Ideally, I want us to do both. I recognise that there are huge challenges, but it is something that we should strive towards.

There are targets. Are we hitting the target of seeing 80% of patients every five years and recording their blood pressure, for instance? Are we hitting that target, even if it is a five-year target? Does that target need to be tightened up and made more frequent? Moving towards annual

assessment is something that will happen over time. I recognise that that is a huge challenge, but we must move in that direction in order to address health issues earlier. I certainly support annual check-ups as something that we must strive towards —

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

Mr Beggs: — and attempt to achieve as soon as possible.

Mr McDevitt: I support the motion standing in the name of our Committee Chair. Traditionally, the general practitioner has been the foundation stone of the NHS in Northern Ireland. GPs are the people who enjoy the trust of their communities; have a developed relationship with their patients; and probably understand the needs, at a communal level and at an individual level, of those whom they serve better than anyone else in the health service.

One of the very laudable objectives of Transforming Your Care is to try to return as much of our health and social care system to the community, to never lose its community roots and to ensure that those who work on the so-called front line continue to be those who take the vast majority of decisions around people's health and well-being.

Of course, many GPs spend their life treating people who do not feel well. You can argue that that is what doctors are there to do. You go to see them when you are not feeling great, and their job is to make you better. Except we know that the best doctors out there are those who stop you from getting sick in the first place. They are people who are able to identify tiny little signs early on and signpost you to other care or support you with your physical, emotional and life needs. We need to recognise that GPs are more than people who merely look at you in some biological sense. They look at you and know you as a person.

Something that strikes me is that, when you think about the amount of time our economy loses to work-related ill health, you begin to wonder whether there are ways of being able to be a bit more preventative in what we do. I acknowledge the BMA's opinion on the matter. I suppose that the current GP contract would not be obviously suited, as it stands, to introduce what is called for in the motion. However, that does not mean that it is not a good idea; it just means that we need to change. I know that the vast majority of GPs would like to spend more quality time with the people for whom they are responsible.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr McDevitt: Yes, of course.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that much of the monitoring does not actually have to be carried out by the GP and that some practice nurses and specialist nurses would be capable of doing it?

Mr McDevitt: Mr Beggs makes a very good point. I will come to that in a second.

The GP is at the heart of this. It is the GP's surgery or health centre, and the GP is the anchor of that little business or service that is offered at community level. If many of our best GPs, community nurses and specialist nurses actually like the idea of knowing their patients, are interested in being able to understand their patients' needs in order to be able to spot those little signs early on, and if they want to think about them as more than just people

they see when they are not feeling well, why would the Assembly not respond positively to their desire to be more proactive in what they do?

It is worth noting that although research suggests that diagnosing earlier does not necessarily reduce morbidity, which is fair enough and is a reasonable scientific assumption to make; it certainly increases diagnosis rates. If diagnosis rates increase, that certainly will not have a negative impact on society's health and well-being; unless, of course, it is being suggested seriously by people of a scholarly bent that by diagnosing someone one will do that individual a disservice. I challenge that assumption on one basic right, which is the human being's right to know whether he or she has a condition. That right is enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights.

I will give way to Mr Wells and Ms Ramsey. Ladies first.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Member for giving way. One thing that we also learned while we were in Cuba was that there is a map in the GP's surgery showing exactly what is wrong with people who live in the vicinity and what illnesses there are among them. Perhaps, if we had a similar thing, we would not have had to spend millions of pounds on population plans not long ago.

Mr Wells: The principle of screening is already established in the United Kingdom for conditions such as cervical cancer and breast cancer, for the obvious reason that if those conditions are detected earlier, they can be treated. Therefore, we are not breaking any new rule by going down that route on a more general basis.

Mr McDevitt: They are two exceptionally well-made points.

I will end by talking about that famous road that I live just off, the Lisburn Road in Belfast. Starting in town, you will have an average life expectancy of 71 years. By the time you get to our end of the road, you will have lived another nine years, if you are male. This is living evidence of the health inequalities that unite us in the House. It is not right that by accident of birth people in the Village area of south Belfast will have a much shorter life expectancy than those who live in Finaghy. The question is this: if we, as politicians, are up for it, and if the Department is up for it, which I believe it is, is everyone who works in the health service up for it too?

Mr McCarthy: Although I appreciate that this is a Committee motion, I am sceptical as to whether what is recommended, while good in theory, will actually be productive in practice. The Chairperson mentioned correspondence that the Committee received from the BMA recently. Although we might not all agree with what it contained, we must certainly listen to the experts in the field.

At first glance, the direction of the motion seems to be consistent with many of the other objectives for reforming the health service in Northern Ireland more generally, and Transforming Your Care and Fit and Well - Changing Lives more specifically. We want to encourage better public health and reduce problems that arise from smoking, alcohol abuse, poor diet, etc. We want to encourage better early intervention and prevention, as has already been said. As well as better health outcomes, there are powerful social, economic and financial reasons for so doing. For instance, it is important to try and reduce the number of costly bed nights in hospitals. I think that most Members, and the community, will agree with that.

GPs are already at the forefront of health promotion and primary and secondary prevention. We have already heard that they see patients on average 6.5 times a year. We are already set to shift the balance of the healthcare system in their direction. For instance —

12.45 pm

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCarthy: Very briefly.

Mr Wells: I am extremely disappointed on two points. First of all, the Member sat on the Committee when this was all discussed, and it was agreed unanimously that we would bring this motion forward.

Secondly, this figure where a GP sees the average patient 6.5 times a year — that means that there are tens of thousands of people in Northern Ireland who are never seen at all. I will give my own example. I did not visit a GP surgery between the ages of eight and 44, which was a huge gap. When I went to the doctor, they dusted down my medical card and said that three health boards had been formed and dissolved in that time. I was the last example of ye olde County Down sanitary authority, or whatever it was. That is the sort of person that we need to address, not the one who comes in six and a half times a year on average.

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

Mr McCarthy: I am not giving way to anybody else on the basis that that was a long speech. I expressed concern from the very day that this was mentioned. However, I will give you the benefit of the doubt. I did not have the pleasure of going to Cuba to see what was going on. Having said that, let us get on.

GPs are earmarked for playing a critical role in the new arrangements set out in Transforming Your Care, but there is still scope for developing other clinicians who can play a role in diagnostics and identifying patients most at risk.

Ms S Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCarthy: No, I am heading on, Sue. I have to go on.

There are many instances for a greater role —

[Interruption.] Mr Deputy Speaker, there are many instances for a greater role for community pharmacies. As a long-standing campaigner for this service, I would welcome that development, but of course we would have to have everybody's co-operation.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCarthy: No, sir, no. With all that said, it is nevertheless important to place on record that while integrated care partnerships may make a positive contribution to the delivery of care, the case for their creation is not yet proven. There are concerns regarding bureaucracy and adequate resourcing, but perhaps that is a debate for another day, and someone else can clarify it.

The crux of this debate is whether asking GPs to conduct annual checks for everyone is a sensible use of resources in terms of the additional value added —

Mr Wells: Yes, it is.

Mr McCarthy: Well, when Mr Wells becomes Minister, we will see what he will do in those terms — or whether a more targeted assessment of those individuals most at risk would be a much more effective and efficient use of resources.

We also need to be conscious of the time commitments involved and the knock-on consequences in terms of crowding out and engaging with other patients with greater and more pressing priorities. There are important messages to be communicated to encourage those most at risk of certain conditions to go for regular screening, as has already been said. The service is already there. We need to consider public education on the key and early symptoms of illnesses that people need to act upon early, and, perhaps most importantly, we need to consolidate our efforts to discourage smoking and alcohol, improve diets, etc.

It may be possible to run some local pilot annual GP health checks to see if they improve health outcomes without overly skewing resources. Similarly, it may be worth exploring if annual health checks could be provided by other clinicians, and I pay tribute to the groups out there that already give such an excellent service.

I appreciate the work done by our GPs and all those involved in the surgeries, but if Members read last week's 'Belfast Telegraph', they will see that there is real concern among GPs about working the new contracts. They will endanger lives, Mr Deputy Speaker. That is a serious allegation, and I hope that people will consider that. I do not support our GPs having to spend more time ticking boxes and form filling at the expense of looking after patients.

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

Mr McCarthy: I hope that lessons have been learned, and I await with interest the Minister's response to this motion.

Ms Brown: I support the motion as a member of the Health Committee. Making annual health checks mandatory will go some way towards helping us to deliver our aim of transforming healthcare for all.

We all recognise the dedication and commitment of those involved in delivering healthcare. As members of the Health Committee, however, it is our responsibility to look at ways to improve healthcare in a way that delivers maximum results, balanced against the cost of delivery. That is why we must look at issues such as screening, which is already a well-established practice and is used to test for specific types of cancer. Some countries have mass screening programmes for adults. We must look at a radical change if we are to deliver real change.

GPs play a very important role in our lives. We value their advice and opinion and rely on them to guide us through a lifetime of care for us and our children. We need to look at ways to enhance that service. This motion should not be seen as negatively impacting on GPs or placing an unreasonable burden on them. In theory, as was mentioned —

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Member for giving way. I know that you are not saying this, but the motion is in no way an attack on any GP. We are well aware that GPs are the heart of communities. It is about allowing them to get in there and be more proactive.

I am interested in some of the previous comments. This fits into what the Committee is doing around health inequalities and is about early intervention. We get all sorts of correspondence here, and what amazes me is how easy people sometimes find it to ignore advice or professional opinion when it suits them. The motion is about encouraging GPs to get in for early intervention, and I appreciate your comments on that.

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

Ms Brown: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Member for her intervention

As I say, I do not believe that the motion would negatively impact on GPs, and it should not be an unnecessary burden on them, either. As was mentioned by other Members, practice nurses often carry out a lot of that work. It is the results stage that involves GPs' analyses.

Would it not be much better for everyone concerned if, instead of trooping back and forward to a surgery every few months with various ailments, individuals were given a dedicated annual appointment, which would give them a clean bill of health or, in other scenarios, give them a reasonable chance to deal with negative results? I believe that most people would welcome and value that.

As we all get older, we feel the effects on our health as we change with age. We notice pains or lumps, and thanks to continued health education, we are becoming more aware of having them checked out. Some people do not heed those warnings and, sadly, leave it too late. By introducing annual health checks we will be providing reassurance for the public and giving health professionals every chance to deal with outcomes and save lives. It would also help to manage those increasingly worrying trends, such as the rise in obesity, issues around mental health and the many other concerns that we all have.

Nowadays, we have annual checks for our cars and even our pets. Do we not owe it to ourselves to ensure that we take even better care of ourselves? As I said in the debate on mental health issues last week, we are sent to this place by those in our communities who want change and want to see and feel the benefits of devolution. The motion affords us one such opportunity to promote positive change. For that reason, I support the motion.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Príomh LeasCheann Comhairle. I also speak as a member of the Health Committee and in support of the motion. I remind Members that this issue is central to the Health Committee's report on health inequalities.

Transforming Your Care (TYC) clearly indicated that the demand for services would grow by 4% a year by 2015. Therefore, we need not only to improve services but to do it in a way that secures improved productivity and value for money. It is, therefore, about prevention, earlier interventions, shifting from acute to primary healthcare and redirecting £83 million from acute to primary care.

Between 2007 and 2020, the prevalence of long-term conditions among adults in the North of Ireland is expected to increase by 30%. Those are startling figures.

The increasing number of people with those conditions will undoubtedly put more pressure on the Health and Social Care system and have implications for the sustainability of

services. TYC noted that this would result in 23,000 extra hospital admissions; 48,000 extra outpatient appointments; 8,000 extra nursing home places; and 40,000 extra 999 ambulance responses.

As the Chair and others quite rightly outlined, alongside all that, we have high levels of health inequalities across a number of sectors and constituencies. A recent Assembly report looked at health inequalities by constituency and indicated very clearly that the three wards of Belfast West, Belfast North and Foyle remain top for health inequalities in the North of Ireland. Therefore, we need to target resources in order to tackle those inequalities in a way that will change health outcomes for all our residents.

Mandatory GP health checks are about detection, prevention and, in effect, the core principles of Transforming Your Care. Although some studies have indicated and suggested that health checks do little good, Ministers in other regions suggest that such checks can save as many as 650 lives every year. Combining the mutual interest of patient welfare with experience and expertise can improve outcomes for all involved.

The Department of Health in England has shown that NHS health checks result in savings over the long term, particularly in relation to — I want to single this out — identifying and treating diabetes. It is estimated that 9,700 cases of diabetes could be predicted each year, with 8,000 cases likely to be prevented in the early years.

Campaign groups in Wales have stepped up calls for annual cancer tests, which some parties set out as a manifesto commitment.

As the Chair stated, an examination of Cuban health indicators places its total spend at \$585, while ours is in the region of \$4,000. What we have to learn from that experience is how they have managed to produce those healthcare statistics, which are sometimes better than ours, while having only 1% of our expenditure.

Health inequalities are, therefore, not changing and are particularly stark in some of our most-in-need communities. A change in emphasis from acute to primary intervention is required, and mandatory GP health checks are one way to assist in that process. I support the motion.

Ms P Bradley: I also welcome the opportunity to speak on this important motion as a member of the Health Committee.

The National Health Service has many roles in our society, and I am proud to be a former member of it. I believe that we have one of the very best healthcare systems in the world. We ensure that the sick are treated, but, in recent years, the focus has shifted from the treatment of disease and illness to preventative medicine. Annual health checks are just one facet of preventative care. We should always advocate such care, as it is easier to prevent than to treat.

Turn on any medical documentary or talk to any healthcare provider, and they will tell the same story. They are being asked to deliver more and more services on an ever-stretched budget. For the person in the street, their main concern is not always preventative medicine. What is more important to them is being able to access the appropriate healthcare professional when they are in crisis or ill.

I believe that we as consumers of our healthcare system need to work in partnership with the professionals to ensure that we do everything in our power to minimise the

risks of certain conditions. As has been said, in Northern Ireland, we have put in place many screening programmes for, for example, breast cancer, cervical cancer and bowel cancer. Those screening programmes have been proven to save lives. We are in a position where local community pharmacists are already delivering services for weight management, smoking cessation and minor ailments.

Rather than having to attend the doctor, it may be possible to use that resource, which is already at the heart of our community.

1.00 pm

It is known that males are even less likely to attend their doctor for an annual health check. Research shows that they are among the most reluctant to attend their GP in general. When they need medical help, they wait until a minor ailment has become a major issue. The voluntary and community sector has also played a role. I have attended many health fairs that organisations in north Belfast have held for their own community. At one such event, men were encouraged to participate through the use of other incentives to get them through the doors. Those events are usually well attended by local communities because they can use the carrot-and-stick approach that the NHS cannot provide. Obviously, the downside to these events is that, if something is flagged up for concern, an onus is put on the individual to attend their GP to seek further investigation and, therefore, take responsibility for their own health.

Preventative medicine is vital. If GP health checks are to become a viable option, they must be robust and fit for purpose. We need to think of new and innovative ways to reach those who, traditionally, do not take responsibility for their health.

Mr Gardiner: I recently checked the cost of visits to a GP as charged by BUPA GP services. The figures revealed that a visit costs £67 for 15 minutes, £123 for 30 minutes and £225 for 60 minutes. That helps to put in context the cost of delivering annual checks for all patients on a GP's register. The average GP has 1,562 patients on his or her panel, so the cost of annual checks for all patients as opposed to at-risk groups will be considerable and could be as much as £105,000 per GP.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gardiner: I will.

Mr Wells: I assure the Member that the checks do not have to be carried out by the GP. The practice nurse can take the blood samples, the urine samples etc. In my experience, which I will allude to later, it takes 10 or 15 minutes, and those are sent off for analysis. It is only when they come back that any GP time is involved. If it is all clear, that can be five minutes. I am not suggesting for one minute that they are not good value, but I think that the costs are slightly exaggerated.

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

Mr Gardiner: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank Mr Wells for drawing that to my attention, but I am speaking in general about costs to a GP's practice.

Of course, I expect the NHS, for reasons of scale, to be able to improve on BUPA's prices. In many cases, patients

are initially seen by a practice nurse and are recalled only if they need a consultation with a GP because of their medical conditions. All of that would reduce the cost, as would the fact that GP practices have already been well funded in previous financial settlements. A high number of existing GP practices already screen over-55s with such tests. Therefore, it would be a matter of additional tests rather than starting from scratch. I ask the Minister to confirm the additional cost to the health service of creating a universal system of annual GP checks for all patients.

On 1 February last year, Dr Tom Black, chairman of the BMA's GP committee, told the Health Committee, with regard to the health and social care review, that, in Northern Ireland, we provide 10.5 million consultations a year. That is 30% above the United Kingdom average and 100% to 200% above the Irish Republic's average. We carry out 20 million tests and write 25 million prescriptions. Seventy-nine per cent of patients get same-day or next-day access, and there are, on average, six consultations per patient per year. The Republic of Ireland's average is fewer than two. I welcome the movement towards GP federation, with groups of practices combining, usually for out-of-hours cover in the initial stage. There are decided advantages when general practitioners operate together in group practices.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Member for giving way. I do not for one minute dispute any of the figures he has highlighted. However, I remind Members that the issue is not about people not getting access to their GP; it is about allowing people to access their GP before they become ill and need to go to their GP. It is about early intervention and a proactive approach.

Mr Gardiner: Thank you.

That approach would enable general practitioners to offer services such as annual testing for their patients.

The benefits of GPs operating together is one of the drivers behind the new primary care centres proposed by the Minister. Annual health checks for all patients could be one of those benefits. With this in mind, I ask the Minister how many GPs operate in group practices that are situated alongside other group practices in large health centres and how many still operate on their own. I also ask the Minister what the geographical distribution of those practices might tell us.

Many GPs already offer annual monitoring checks for groups of patients who are particularly at risk. One problem I foresee — I would welcome the Minister's comments on it — is that annual checks for every patient, while good in themselves and an important part of moving towards a preventative, early detection, non-hospitalised primary care model, will distract GPs' attention away from at-risk patients as they try to meet the huge volume of testing involved. Clearly, however, annual checks for every patient is the place we must get to. We need to establish a clear pathway to this goal as soon as possible. I support the motion.

Mr Easton: When the NHS was first established, the idea behind it was that people would have access to healthcare when they needed it, regardless of their ability to pay. Since the concept was thought of, the role of the NHS has expanded to such an extent that, I expect, the founding fathers of the system would not recognise it today. Nevertheless, I suggest that they would be amazed

at the services we provide and at the people who work in our system.

The ideal that every person in Northern Ireland would have an annual health check with their GP is one that, I think, every Member of the Assembly would implement if time and cost were no object. Such health checks could have enormous benefits for individuals, communities and society as a whole. Health checks involve tests on a person who does not feel ill or have any symptoms of anything being wrong in their body and form a common element of healthcare in some countries.

We need to address the issue of whether annual health checks are always a good thing. Research has shown that general health checks are not widely recommended by national expert panels. Instead, a number of professional bodies have recommended focused health checks that are guided by patients' specific risk factors. Research has indicated that general health checks are considered by physicians and the general public as a necessity and are recommended. Evidence from screening programmes for individual diseases has shown that the benefits may be smaller than expected and the harms may be greater.

I also worry whether the NHS could cope with the greater demand that such health checks would place on our GPs and their surgeries at this time. I have already heard from residents about delays in GP appointments, and, although the situation may be improving, we are not in a position where everyone instantly gets an appointment to see a GP. I worry that, by increasing demand from those wanting to see a GP, we will delay appointments for those who have symptoms and need to be seen without delay.

Another concern is the economic viability of such a scheme. In countries where such health checks are common, there tends not to be such a strong culture of state provision of healthcare. Rather, the private sector tends to be the lead partner in the healthcare system. A cynic may argue that such checks are conducted from the viewpoint not of the patient but of the health insurance companies.

Another issue that has not been addressed is individual accountability for health and well-being. We already run health awareness campaigns promoting the need for us to eat less, smoke less, drink less and exercise more. A number of campaigns are also being run on issues such as bowel cancer, prostate issues and the need for vaccinations.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Easton: Yes.

Mr Wells: I detect from the Member's comments that he is not entirely enthusiastic about the motion. Might I suggest to him that one way of allaying his fears would be to carry out a pilot in Northern Ireland? We could take two communities — let us, for the sake of argument, say Comber and Castledearg — one in the east, one in the west and one predominantly rural. We could run a pilot project and invite all the residents of those areas to come in for screening, analyse the results to see the success or otherwise of that process and get a clear indication of whether it is a good way forward. That would meet many of his concerns.

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

Mr Easton: I thank the Member for his intervention. Certainly, a pilot could be the way to address this and look into it more, but that would be up to the Health Minister and not me to decide. I am open-minded about these things, so thank you.

I fear that we will not reach the hard-to-reach demographic that we want to, such as working-class communities, by offering yearly health checks. Rather, we will see the people who have taken the messages on board, people who are already aware of the warning symptoms that they need to see a doctor about anyway. Before we move to a system of annual health checks with a GP, we need to ensure that we have in place a robust system that is able to economically withstand the extra demand. Perhaps, rather than a GP, some other body in the voluntary or community sector should offer health checks. Perhaps it could be pharmacists, who already offer a range of checks in the community.

This is a great idea, but, realistically, can it be afforded, and could GPs cope with it? That is the real question that we need to address today.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I am grateful for the opportunity to address the issue raised by the Health Committee.

I have stated many times that the provision of safe, sustainable and resilient services to meet the needs of the Northern Ireland population is a key priority for me. In my role, I want to ensure that I do everything that I can to deliver on that priority. I am strongly committed to the principle that health and social care services should be driven by and responsive to the needs of patients, clients and carers. True high-quality health and social care can be achieved only when they are designed around the needs of people who use them and then properly resourced. Patients are entitled to receive the right care in the right place at the right time. Patients are at the centre of our policy development and planning assumptions, and what really matters to them is the design and delivery of services that meet their needs and expectations. To achieve this we need to look at how we can improve health and social care and, in so doing, reshape how we interact with all those who use our services.

Our society is changing, which means that its needs may also be changing. We have witnessed dramatic growth in the age of our population, and that indicates that healthcare has been improving. We should be proud of that and celebrate it. It also means that there are many more people with long-term conditions, which inevitably places more demands on our health and social care system, including hospitals and other resources. The fact that Mr Wells did not attend a doctor for around 30 years has more to do with the fact that he is one of the 85% of the population who do not use our services very much, as opposed to the 15% who use them heavily and account for 85% of the spend. It has nothing to do with the fact that he is a vegetarian.

Although the changes present us with challenges, they also offer us opportunities to look innovatively at how we can reform and modernise our services to meet the changing needs of society, now and into the future. Transforming Your Care proposes significant and major changes across health and social care in Northern Ireland. It focuses on reshaping how services are to be structured

and delivered to make best use of all the resources available to us and, in so doing, ensure that our services are safe, resilient and sustainable. We need to make better use of the resources that we have.

Evidence shows that greater investment in preventative care and improved health and well-being is not just good for patients, service users and the public but is highly cost-effective. Examples of highly effective public health programmes already in place that prevent ill health or allow earlier diagnosis, more effective treatment and better outcomes for patients include the stop smoking services; public information campaigns on obesity prevention; advice on alcohol and drug misuse; early recognition of and support for mental health problems; and a variety of cancer screening services, most recently for bowel cancer. The proposals for the future approach to population health and well-being are set out in *Fit and Well: Changing Lives*. They complement the proposals for the Transforming Your Care initiative and form an essential foundation for them. Service frameworks are also set out in the standards of care that service users, their carers and wider family can expect to receive from the HSC.

1.15 pm

Generic standards are included in all service frameworks, and they support key health improvement messages, such as healthy eating, physical activity, smoking cessation and alcohol consumption. The integrated care partnerships proposed in 'Transforming Your Care' would provide a collaborative network for local health and social care professionals working as part of a multidisciplinary team to come together to work in a more integrated way to provide care and support on a more complete range of services in response to identified need. That would involve discussing, agreeing and taking action to improve how patients and service users are treated and dealt with through their interactions with health and social care services. That approach could include the future development of annual health checks by GPs for their patients.

GPs play a vital role in prevention, early intervention and helping to inform behaviour and influence it towards more healthy choices by signposting people to additional support services where that is needed. It is important that GPs take every opportunity to positively engage with people on not just the treatment but the prevention of ill health. Although genetic make-up plays some part in our chances of leading a long and healthy life, there are many more factors within but also beyond individual control that interact to influence our health and well-being at various stages in our life. Coronary heart disease, cancer and respiratory disease continue to be the main causes of death for both sexes. Many of those deaths occur before the age of 65 and are potentially preventable, since smoking, unhealthy diet, raised blood pressure, diabetes and physical inactivity contribute to a large proportion of those conditions.

It is crucial to understand the wider context in which health is shaped. Poverty, neighbourhood deprivation, housing conditions, employment and educational opportunities are powerful drivers of the choices that people can or cannot make and, consequently, of ill health and health inequalities. Crucial to the delivery of improved services is the proactive and early identification of people with long-term conditions. That can be done, for example, through

GP practice-based registers, which enable people to understand their condition and how to manage it. They can also help to enhance the patient's overall well-being and quality of life.

I am sympathetic to Members who have patients' best interests central to their thinking. After all, we have dental check-ups every six months. However, in weighing up the pros and cons of the annual GP check-ups, common sense and intuitive initiatives are not necessarily the best when it comes to the hard science. We have to look at the evidence base to inform policy decisions. The most recent research on general checks indicates that they may not be as beneficial as some Members might believe. The evidence does not indicate a reduction in morbidity, the risk of illness or mortality that Members might think is the case.

Mr Wells: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: Yes.

Mr Wells: The Minister might want to respond to me in writing about this, but I am interested in the sources of the advice that he has been given. As I hope to indicate later, the BMA briefing quotes studies that go way back to 1962. I think that he will accept that diagnostics have moved on dramatically since then. There is much more up-to-date research that shows a more positive outcome from mass screening, so he might want to let Members know the source of his information on that issue.

Mr Poots: The most recent source that I have is the Cochrane report, which was produced in 2012. That report, which dealt with 188,000 people, analysed all the previous work that had been done.

Mr Wells: Does the Minister accept that the Cochrane report starts with an analysis of case studies from 1962 and ends in 1992? There has been a huge degree of advancement in that aspect of medical science since then. Therefore, although that report was published in 2012 and looks quite modern, in fact, it deals with what is almost ancient history in diagnostics and medical conditions.

Mr Poots: I accept that it goes back some time. It is perhaps more recent than 1992, but I stand to be corrected. However, the report analyses all the work that was done in the past against more modern diagnostics and so forth. Nonetheless, it is not the Bible, and it is therefore something that we can test and look at further.

There are potential undesirable effects of general health checks, including overdiagnosis, increased concern for patients, a possible increase in work absences and increased healthcare costs. Those are the potential negatives.

It is important to highlight the fact that GPs currently carry out reviews for patients who suffer from chronic diseases. Through the quality and outcomes framework (QOF), GPs deliver services relating to the secondary prevention of a number of chronic diseases. For example, GPs monitor patients with chronic diseases through reviews and periodic health checks, which also provide GPs with the opportunity to offer advice on lifestyle, increasing physical activity, smoking cessation, safe alcohol consumption and healthy diet. GPs also review patients with chronic conditions through additional services, directed enhanced services and local enhanced services. Those services require face-to-face patient reviews. GPs also provide preventative medicine through child immunisations,

influenza vaccination, pertussis immunisation for pregnant women and cervical screening. In addition, they deliver alcohol screening services for patients aged over 18 to detect high-risk alcohol consumption as well as practice-based specialist smoking cessation.

There is the potential to do more through the QOF. We could reflect what is happening with health checks in England. The NHS health check programme started in England in 2009 but will not be fully implemented until later in the current year, 2012-13. That health check aims to help patients lower their risk of common but often preventable diseases, particularly heart disease, stroke, diabetes and kidney disease. It is for adults in England aged between 40 and 74 who have not already been diagnosed with any of those four diseases. If eligible, patients will be invited for an NHS health check once every five years. At that check, patients' risk of heart disease, stroke, diabetes and kidney disease will be assessed, and they will be offered personalised advice and support to help lower their risk. The checks are likely to be offered in GPs' surgeries and, Mr McCarthy will be pleased to hear, at some local pharmacies. I am very supportive of making better use of our pharmacists. Health checks can also be offered at other suitable and accessible locations in the local community. To some extent, that matches some of the work that we are doing in Northern Ireland. We have, for example, the farm families' health check programme, which is jointly funded by DARD and the PHA. That takes the work out to a hard-to-reach group, for example, at cattle marts. We have seen very good work conducted there.

Work is being carried out on health inequalities. For example, the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust is carrying out health checks in conjunction with local partnerships. They are targeted at specific population groups by the South Eastern Trust and by the Colin Neighbourhood Partnership for over-65s. Therefore, there are initiatives that can be taken that may go some way to meeting Members' concerns.

Changing the configuration of how, where and when services are delivered is only one part of the equation. We need to encourage greater personal responsibility among members of the public about what they eat, how much alcohol they consume, how much exercise they take and the way in which they look after their own health and well-being. That will require sustained and growing investment in public health, early diagnosis and early intervention services to support individuals to make healthier choices.

I fully support the concept of promoting good health, prevention and early disease detection in primary care. However, the case for universal annual health checks by GPs needs to be made more fully. For example, would the benefits of providing checks in prevention and early detection outweigh the resources needed for treatment down the line? Would it divert resources towards treating the worried well? As I outlined, the Cochrane report is not particularly supportive of it.

The impact of annual health checks on the provision of other aspects of care in general practice, including the availability of appointments and urgent assessment, must also be taken into account. Consideration would have to be given to the significant resource implications attached to providing such checks for the population given that current resources are targeted at meeting the needs of patients

on the basis of clinical need and through screening programmes.

I will go through some of the responses from Members. I would like to respond to the Chair, although I was not present for most of her speech. She was unusually succinct. She said that the Committee had looked at the Cuban system in this respect. I would very much like — no, I do not really want to have our doctors on the same wages as Cuban doctors. It would certainly be much easier to fund programmes if that were the case. They would be below the minimum wage, and that might not be very acceptable. We cannot easily transfer what happens in Cuba, given the fact that people earn such low wages in that health system.

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

Mr Poots: That is not to say that there are no lessons to be learned, and I would appreciate seeing in due course the findings of the Chair and the Deputy Chair from their visit to Cuba and giving them due consideration.

Mr Wells (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): This has been a useful debate in which we have looked at the whole issue of health inequalities and the prevention of serious conditions.

The Chair quite rightly outlined the experience of the visit to Cuba. Cuba is remarkable in many respects. It is, to all intents and purposes, a Third World country but has very modern Western health outcomes. The Minister made the point about salaries being very low, and, indeed, they are. The average GP in Cuba earns \$82 a month, and the average consultant or professor, as they are called, earns \$120 a month. That explains to some extent why, although they spend only over \$500 per annum on health, we spend \$4,000. However, it is interesting to note that, despite the fact that those clinicians are paid extremely low wages, morbidity levels and health outcomes are as good if not better than those achieved by Western clinicians who are paid between £90,000 and £120,000 a year. What did we see in Cuba that is so significantly different in its approach that it produces such extraordinary life expectancies of over 80 years of age? We cannot achieve that in parts of west Belfast or in Foyle. Why are they achieving such wonderful outcomes given the lack of resources and the low pay?

One of the elements that we discovered was the concept of the annual health screen. The Minister is right: there are fundamental differences between Cuba and the United Kingdom. We would not, for one minute, stand over Cuba's political system nor would we suggest that we pay our medical staff any like the wages that are paid in Cuba. However, what Cuban society has done is to buy into the concept of going to the GP, getting tests done, going back for the results and following whatever guidance is given.

We even asked the taxi drivers who, notoriously, would not be healthy in most societies, what happens if they do not turn up for their annual check. They looked at us in amazement because they could not understand why anyone would not go for their annual check. I know that we have a problem in the United Kingdom and in Northern Ireland with that, because a lot of people do not show up when they are asked to, do not turn up for their results and do not take whatever action is recommended. There are

differences, but the principle is an important one and we need to explore why that works.

It irks me slightly that, if a Committee debates an issue for a considerable period and agrees unanimously to put a motion before the House with the full support of all 11 members, some individual should then decide to try to torpedo the motion because he has got a letter from the BMA. That is a lack of loyalty which, I hope, will not continue in this Committee.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: I certainly will.

Mr McDevitt: Given that the Deputy Chair has raised this matter, I must say that it is a matter of deep frustration that Mr McCarthy can fail to turn up for a meeting at which it was agreed that the Chair and the Deputy Chair should go to Cuba, disagree with the outcome of that meeting in public, turn up for a meeting that unanimously agreed this motion as an output from that visit and then come to the House and disagree with his own agreement.

It is really quite depressing. It sends out a very negative signal about people's attitude to their role and responsibility in this House.

1.30 pm

Mr Wells: I am sure that Mr McCarthy is a very wise person in the context of Kircubbin. However, it is not the wisest thing to do to undermine the collective and unanimous view of the Committee, because it makes us look somewhat silly. I know why he has changed his mind. He got the same briefing from the BMA as we all got. When I first looked at it, I thought to myself that it is interesting and tends to refute what we are suggesting — until I actually looked at the document on which the BMA bases its opposition to the motion, and that is the Cochrane report that many have referred to already.

That report was published on 17 October 2012, but the problem is that the scientific data that was gathered to back it up started in 1962. I will just read the examples. Gothenburg: data collected in 1962, published in 1963. San Francisco: 1965. South-east London: 1967. Malmö in Sweden: 1969. Denmark: 1992. The vast majority of the data in that paper is at least 20 and sometimes 40 years old. There is only one up-to-date paper, which is from 1998. I accept that, at the time that that data was published, they were absolutely right: diagnostics and bringing people in for health screening probably did not work. However, the world has moved on leaps and bounds over the past 40 years, and particularly since 1998. We are almost doubling our understanding of diagnostics every five years. Therefore, it is a bit unfortunate that Mr McCarthy did not check the information that he was given.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

I accept that GPs feel slightly threatened by this proposal. If information is gathered by outsiders and they do not have direct control as gatekeepers, they could feel a bit threatened by the proposal. However, I see this as a positive rather than a negative. To too great an extent, we have an illness service rather than a health service. If we carried out the same diagnostics as they do in Cuba, we could detect conditions long before they arrive at the GP surgery, where the doctor then has to see people

an average of 6.5 times a year to treat ongoing medical conditions that should have been detected much earlier.

There is really not much sense in saying that GPs see people on average 6.5 times a year. They do not see each of the 1.8 million people in Northern Ireland 6.5 times a year. They see the people who call regularly. As the Minister said, 85% of us do not avail ourselves of that service at all, practically. It is the other 15% who consume 85% of the costs. I know that there are people who go to their GP surgery almost every week. The problem, particularly among males in working-class, deprived areas of Northern Ireland, is that very few ever darken the door of a GP surgery until it is too late.

I feel that I must quote a very personal and difficult example. I lost a very valued member of staff and a close friend in November. That gentleman had a long-term condition. If he had been screened for it four or five years ago, it would have been detected and, hopefully, work could have been undertaken to stabilise and treat it. Sadly, that did not happen, and he died in his sleep of a heart attack. That was a dreadful loss. Looking back now, we all saw the warning signs. If we had acted and encouraged him to go in and have some form of test, he would still be with us today. The evidence is very clear. The BMA is perfectly entitled to make its views known. However, in its document, the BMA could have quoted from the 2007 Boulware report, which looked at 36 studies and concluded that it is indeed beneficial to have annual GP tests and check-ups. Therefore, the evidence is not as clear-cut as it seems.

Following my return from Cuba, I decided to take the bull by the horns. I was not aware that this debate was coming up, but I went in for a test. I paid for it myself. I went to Radox in Crumlin, and I was tested for 87 conditions. John McCallister will be very sad to hear that there is not much wrong with me, but the fact is, I was tested for 87 conditions, and those tests could in fact have referred to up to 200 other conditions. What was involved? I went in. I was not checked by a GP — we do not need to waste GPs' time on this. Two blood samples were taken from my right arm, and another sample was taken from somewhere else, which I will not go into. *[Laughter.]* Had it not been for the cosy chat that I had with a nurse, I could have been out in 15 minutes.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Member for giving way. I had the same tests done. However, once I got my report, I had to have all the tests done again by the health service because the health service would not follow what the private doctors had said as being absolutely true. Does he agree that we need to find a way through that?

Mr Wells: The tests are treated with a great degree of suspicion, and I know of people who have had the diagnostic tests and presented the results to their GPs, who have poured very cold water on top of them. I can see why the GPs feel threatened by what is going on. However, the fact is that those tests could have revealed something quite serious, and if they had, I would have gone to my own GP for further treatment. I am not saying that we need to be tested for 87 conditions; I was tested for the basics, such as blood pressure, cholesterol, etc. If we do the basics, the tests will undoubtedly show, on many occasions, conditions that need to be addressed.

The tests are not very expensive if you are doing them on a mass scale through the National Health Service, and they do not take very long. In my case, the test did not take up my GP's time at all. However, had it revealed something, I would have gone straight to my GP for further tests and some form of treatment.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: Certainly.

Mr G Robinson: Would the Member agree that people like me, who have had heart attacks, should voluntarily go for check-ups that measure blood pressure, weight and cholesterol every six months? I encourage as many people as possible to do that on a voluntary basis.

Mr Wells: If only we were in a position where the vast majority of people were going voluntarily for those tests.

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

Mr Wells: Unfortunately, I have not had time to deal with many of the points raised, but I would be interested in the Minister coming back to us with his research sources.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make it mandatory for general practitioners to provide annual health checks for their patients to help promote good health, prevent ill health and detect disease at an early stage.

Private Members' Business

School Transport

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 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 recognises the wide-ranging benefits associated with using public transport; notes with concern the increase in car traffic during school term time; recognises the financial strain on parents paying school transport costs and the administrative costs to implement the current school bus pass system; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development, in conjunction with the Minister for Education, to conduct a feasibility study into providing free public transport for all school pupils.

The advantages of public transport are evident for all to see, especially when we compare it to the most popular alternative, which is the use of private vehicles. Public transport is an essential part of a strong economy, as it allows people to access jobs, education and health services. It also reduces congestion and allows goods and services to gain access to essential markets. It is estimated that congestion costs the economy millions of pounds a year, and with Belfast being one of the most car-dependent cities in Europe, it makes sense that we look at the direct and indirect benefits that encouraging public transport usage would bring.

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

The obvious benefits of using public transport include better air quality in the local environment and energy conservation. That is because a single bus will emit less fumes than 20 cars combined. Train emissions of carbon dioxide for every passenger kilometre travelled are, on average, approximately half that of car travel. Using public transport reduces the amount of energy consumed per person per kilometre, as public transport uses significantly less energy than comparable travel by private car. In Northern Ireland, transport accounts for 25% of all greenhouse gas emissions, which is surely a good reason to tackle that area.

Public transport can also positively influence personal safety and personal gain. First, by using the bus or train, you are directly reducing the number of private cars on the school run. That, in turn, reduces congestion at or around the school gates, which makes for a healthier and safer environment for pupils and staff. This is illustrated by the fact that the accident rate for children aged up to 15 increases between 8.00 am and 9.00 am, which is the morning peak, and at around 3.00 pm, which is the afternoon peak. On a general note, statistics have shown that using the bus is seven times safer than using a private car, while taking the train is 15 times safer than using a private car.

Taking a bus or train instead of a car also increases physical activity, so much so that the average person drops more than six pounds in as little as a year. In fact, recent research has suggested that increasing the use of

public transport could improve health and lower obesity levels. The average nine-minute walk to and from bus and train stops for a young person has the capacity to account for almost one third of their recommended daily exercise requirements. As the majority of people who use public transport tend to walk to and from the bus stop or train station, encouraging the use of public transport can ensure that children build physical activity into their daily routine. Using public transport can also improve our children's confidence as they have more interaction with members of their local community and will gain valuable road safety skills. It can also reduce stress and can be an enjoyable time to spend talking with friends, reading or listening to music.

Since 1997, free home-to-school transport is only provided to a child who travels more than the qualifying distance to the nearest suitable school. Originally, it was to the school of choice. There has been a resultant 10% increase in the number of children driven to school, and that means that two in five children are now driven to school. That fact was supported by some House of Commons research, which found that a reduction in free bus travel resulted in an increase in the number of car journeys. Those of us who commute enjoy the school holidays when traffic is so much lighter. Indeed, 20% of cars on roads in urban areas at the peak time of 8.50 am are taking children to school. That not only increases congestion but, as I said, reduces road safety. It also increases travel time and can affect the quality of life in the local community by impacting on people's work/life balance.

Getting a child to school safely and on time can be a challenge. As I said, some children are eligible for assistance from their local education and library board, and children with disabilities or special educational needs get extra help. The current eligibility distance is two miles for primary pupils and three miles for post-primary pupils and is measured by the shortest route along which a child, accompanied as necessary, can walk with reasonable safety. It is the responsibility of parents residing under the qualifying distance to determine whatever method they consider most appropriate to deliver their child to and from school.

Unfortunately, many parents feel that the private car is cheaper and more convenient than paying for public transport for their children, and when you have more than one child to transport, that rationale is multiplied. Could that be part of the reason why 63% of car journeys in Northern Ireland are shorter than five miles and nearly one fifth of all journeys are shorter than one mile? Those types of journeys are also the least efficient for a car, as a cold engine uses almost twice as much fuel as one that has warmed up. With the continual rise in petrol and diesel prices in Northern Ireland, along with all those other reasons, we get a lot of communication from constituents requesting free public transport for all schoolchildren.

To fully assess the potential benefits of free public transport for all schoolchildren, it is worth looking at the cost of the current set-up to the Department of Education. In 2012-13, £74 million was spent transporting approximately 90,000 Northern Ireland pupils from home to school and back, with payments to Translink accounting for 43.8% of the total home-to-school transport budget. There are also payments to private providers, taxis and for board buses for services outwith the current Translink routes. The recent efficiency review has highlighted where

savings could be made in those areas. Savings can also be made, for example, in the controlled and maintained sectors, which largely employ different school buses even though, as a result, they sometimes pass each other half empty.

For children who are able to use the current Translink routes, around 48,250 post-primary students avail themselves of sessional passes each year at an average cost to the Department of £31.6 million or around £655 per head. It is concerning that the average annual cost of administering the operational arrangements for that scheme is around £1.85 million, or, if Members care to indulge me for just a moment, the administrative costs are equivalent to an extra 2,825 schoolchildren receiving a free bus pass. That figure does not surprise me when we consider the cost and time taken for the board to commission an exact measurement over a three-mile route and then argue about 50 yards with the result that, in one specific street, one child receives a bus pass and the child two doors up does not. There is also the cost of appealed decisions, and I am quite sure that every Member here can share their experiences of that process. Should the Department not consider cutting the costs of administering the system of assessing and issuing sessional passes and use those savings to put towards allowing all children in school uniform to have free access to public transport?

Recently, when I asked the Regional Development Minister what consideration he might give to extending free public transport to all schoolchildren in a similar vein to that on offer to our over-60s, he, somewhat unsurprisingly, referred to current budget pressures as the reason why he is not in a position to extend free public transport to all schoolchildren. He did, of course, refer me to the Education Minister as a reasonable alternative. However, in recognition that school transport is not a core objective of the education sector, with the money spent on school transport reducing the amount available for the classroom, my motion does not call upon the Minister of Education in isolation. It is not unreasonable to ask that the Minister for Regional Development and the Education Minister collectively consider a feasibility study into the provision of free public transport for schoolchildren, taking into account the differences between urban and rural needs.

1.45 pm

When assessing which pupils are eligible for transport assistance, a suitable school is defined solely as one in the recognised categories of controlled, integrated, Irish-medium, maintained, denominational or non-denominational grammar. The categories do not extend to take account of other factors such as the range or nature of the curriculum provided, proficiency in certain subjects or single-sex or co-educational schools. Preferences expressed on these or on similar grounds do not currently qualify for transport assistance if an otherwise suitable school exists within the statutory walking distance. We recognise that, in the next few years, there will continue to be a wide variety of school types in Northern Ireland, and parental choice is important. Until there is more integration in our schools, we must recognise that limiting the choice of school to the nearest suitable school means that those who live next to each other are also more likely to be schooled together. Although schooling children locally can strengthen communities, given the level of segregation in our housing, this is a worrying trend. It may mean that

only those who can afford to travel will have the choice to operate outside a postcode lottery.

Sharing between schools is already becoming more commonplace due to the entitlement framework, which allows wider choice of subjects to pupils. However, this is placing additional burdens on budgets, as children are often transported between schools in taxis. A feasibility study should, therefore, examine, when a child has chosen a school that delivers all subjects on site but is not their closest school, what the costs are for a free bus pass for that child in comparison with the costs that are associated with travelling between schools in taxis a few times a week to access their subject choice. Such a study would look at whether that is more expensive.

As we know, not all learning takes place inside the classroom, and there are many benefits associated with extra-curricular activities. There are many instances of where the current school transport set-up allocates a place on a bus that leaves at a certain time and means that the pupil —

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

Mrs Cochrane: — cannot attend such activities.

I call on the Ministers to conduct a feasibility study into providing free transport for all school pupils, and I hope that Members will support the motion.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I will make my first comments on the motion as the Chairperson of the Education Committee. Home-to-school transport is a subject that the Committee for Education has spent a considerable amount of time considering in this mandate and in the previous mandate. We have considered the drive to improve health and safety and the need to control costs. This is, of course, a cross-cutting issue that impacts on, as the proposer of the motion said, the Department for Regional Development (DRD) and the Department of the Environment (DOE). I am glad to report that the relevant Committees have been working together, sharing information and holding joint departmental briefings. We have been gradually unpicking a very complex and challenging issue for the Assembly.

Undoubtedly, we will hear in the debate a lot of statistics, and some of those have already been given to us. Let me add one that I think is of utmost importance: 60% of accidents that kill or seriously injure children on the roads happen between 8.00 am and 9.00 am and between 3.00 pm and 4.00 pm. That is on the way to and on the way home from school. Most of those serious injuries and deaths happen to children in cars or children who are pedestrians. It appears that bus travel is far and away the safest way for children to get to and from school. That having been said, the Committee believes that the relevant Departments should not be complacent about this relatively good safety record. Members will want to see all our public transport providers complying with the best standards for vehicles and, indeed, their drivers.

The motion refers to the administration of bus passes or seasonal tickets. Undoubtedly, the bus pass system has a number of unusual quirks. Why is it, for example, that bus passes come into operation some time after schools start back in the autumn and then continue in the summer, sometimes for weeks after the schools have broken up? The inefficiency of that historic arrangement, if not very significant, is nonetheless well overdue for correction. The

seasonal ticket system also allows for the surrender of bus passes and the receipt of an allowance in lieu. Members of the Committee were surprised to learn of that practice and perhaps take the view that it is overly complex. A review of that element would be extremely useful as would the practices being brought under some scrutiny.

The motion does not mention the substantial costs to the Department of Education for school transport. Those costs rose from £64 million in 2004-05 to £75 million because of increased costs for board-owned vehicles and Translink. Indeed, as pupil numbers have gone down in post-primary schools, the unit cost has increased by as much as 28%. The Committee recently learned that the education and library boards (ELB) are to report by 18 February to the Department on measures to align school calendars, and school starting and finishing times, in order to reduce school transport costs. Parents up and down the country are regularly frustrated by differing school calendars, and a sensible level of alignment will cut school transport costs and be a relief for the parents of schoolchildren everywhere in Northern Ireland.

As the House is aware, at the Minister's request, an independent panel — some may query the use of the word "independent" — recently produced a report on the common funding formula scheme for schools. The report argues that the home-to-school transport policy should be revisited at the earliest opportunity.

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

Mr Storey: The panel says that eligibility for free transport should be reviewed, and the potential for some parents to contribute to costs should be considered. I would appreciate it if the Minister, in his response, were to make clear whether he will undertake such a review and whether the Department will consider curtailing the eligibility for free school transport.

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

Mr Storey: Thank you.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Although I have some concerns regarding a few of the points for discussion, I think that the motion raises some important arguments concerning school transport. I am content to support the Members' call to examine the future of school transport.

Many of the dynamics that we will discuss this afternoon have been known for a few years. Indeed, the 2010 review of the education sector revealed the depth of the situation that we face in establishing and maintaining an effective and efficient school transport system. With the five main modes of home-to-school transport cost the Department of Education some £75 million a year, it is pertinent to suggest that we should seriously examine ways in which we can ensure the effective use of taxpayers' moneys. Moreover, as that figure of £75 million represents nearly a 20% rise on the 2005 figure, it is important that we explore ways in which we can ensure value for money.

In addition, the rise in costs is not uniform across the five education and library boards. The cost per pupil in the South Eastern Education and Library Board increased by 14% compared with an increase in the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) of 58%. Of the five modes of transport, Translink has the lowest cost, while transport by taxi has the highest. If all the ELBs matched the unit cost

of the best-performing ELB for each mode of transport, a high-level estimate is that the cost of providing the service could be reduced by some £10.7 million. Indeed, funding for home-to-school transport is determined by the Department and distributed to the education and library boards through the assessment of relative needs exercise (ARNE). Although the ARNE formula implies an indicative level of funding for transport, ELBs have discretion as to how they spend their overall budget allocation. The actual spend on home-to-school transport in BELB is 25% higher than the amount implied. Although that means that there is more available for transport, it also implies that there is less funding for other important education services. That highlights some of the issues that we must bear in mind when considering whether to extend an already bulging budget for school transport.

How do we move forward in this situation? The 2010 review made some suggestions. First, we could target free home-to-school transport at those most in need. As children move beyond compulsory education, they are less likely to attend school every day because of exams or being able to drive their own car or travel with friends. Therefore, as pupils progress beyond compulsory education, they have lower levels of utilisation of free home-to-school transport, leading to wasted resources.

It has also been mentioned that parents could make some contribution. That is related to the general issue of why the service is currently provided for free. If it is to prevent children walking excessive distances from home to school, the primary duty is to ensure that the service is available rather than going further and providing it for free. Alternatively, if the rationale is not to impose additional costs on low-income families, it would appear inefficient not to means test the service. Therefore, is there an argument for introducing a means test for parental contributions to home-to-school transport? All those issues need to be taken into consideration.

We could also extend the daily allowance of pupils eligible for free school transport, potentially at a reduced rate so that the ELBs could withdraw from providing home-to-school transport. For a large number of pupils, this would simply mean that they would still use the same public transport service, but they would be responsible for payment, which would be offset by the daily allowance.

No doubt, these options would involve a major sea change in our understanding of how home-to-school transport works. Indeed, I am sure that some would not be overly popular with parents, as free school transport is often considered a right. However, the reality is that home-to-school transport is not a core objective of the education sector, as the money spent on transport reduces the amount available for teaching in our classrooms. In this context, there is a need to target resources at those most in need. The alternative is to consider the introduction of a parental contribution to the service, which would have two benefits: it would be convenient for the parent and safe for the child.

Although I support the idea that we must examine the ways in which we make effective and efficient use of taxpayers' money, I am not convinced that free school transport is the best way to achieve that. Certainly, we must ensure that those in need receive fair and equitable services, but a universal approach to school transport would lead only to fewer resources being available for teaching in our

classrooms. Moreover, I have concerns that free school transport implies that even pupils who live a stone's throw from their school would also be entitled to free transport. Surely, that would be a regressive step in our attempts to reduce childhood obesity through physical activity, such as a short walk to school each day.

I am content to support the motion and its call for the exploration of a future strategy for home-to-school transport, but I am not convinced that extending free school transport to all children represents the best way forward.

Mr Kinahan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. Many good points have been put forward already. It is a similar topic to one that my party brought before the House in 2011, at the start of this mandate, in which we noted the importance of an effective home-to-school transport policy and called on the Minister of Education to initiate an overarching review. The Assembly passed that motion, so I can only assume that the Minister carried out the subsequent mandated review. Therefore, I hope that the Minister is in a position to tell us the findings today.

We should also note that home-to-school transport is a matter not only for the Department of Education but for the Department for Regional Development, especially given the significant role of the latter in the public transport system. I note that my party colleague's Department is wisely mentioned in the wording of the motion. I am sure that he and his officials will review the main points of the debate as, ultimately, they would have the real programme of work to undertake if free school transport for all pupils were to be rolled out.

Nonetheless, this is a welcome motion and one that I and my party will have no difficulty in supporting. However, the viability of universal free school transport has been discussed before in my party. Making a good education freely accessible should, most definitely, be a consideration for the Department, but, like most good things, it will come at a cost.

We must bear in mind that, every day in Northern Ireland, thousands of children are absent from classrooms for no valid reason. Although, no doubt, there are many reasons for that — Roy Beggs recently brought a helpful motion to the House detailing many of those — we can be sure that if transporting your kids to school were no longer an issue of long walks or arduous searches for parking spaces, it may well be easier to tackle the rate of absenteeism.

2.00 pm

While the benefits of free school transport are clear, so too are its potential shortcomings. Not only would it send mixed messages to kids whom we are trying to get to walk and cycle to school more often but potentially huge costs would be involved in opening up enough seats on our buses in the mornings.

Lots of matters that are linked arise today with the motion, and one incredibly important issue was raised at a recent meeting on transport. One company mentioned that, if one company were given the job of managing all the transport, it could reduce the cost of school transport by half. If the feasibility study were to be done, that should be included. Surely that must be something that we should look at, particularly in today's climate.

I will move now to a different issue, which the Member who proposed the motion touched on. If we thought of the benefits that there would be to our roads system if every pupil took the school bus or train, walked or bicycled, we would see that we should be facilitating all four of those types of transport. There would be no cars jamming up the roads or housing developments, which is something that we have problems with in Templepatrick. Everyone parks in those housing developments when they wait for the bus. All our children are being put at risk around all our schools as cars jockey for position not just outside schools but near bus stops. Now that I am talking about bus stops, I should say that we should be looking at the fact that there is, I think, a mass of children who do not take school transport because there are no bus shelters. So, as part of the feasibility study, we need to relook at the provision of bus shelters.

Many years ago, I was lucky enough to be in Boston. I noticed that, in the mornings, all the children are out on the roads and standing at the side of the road before rush hour. The school buses drive round and stop. When they stop, an arm swings out across the road. No one is allowed to overtake the buses, which have priority. Everybody takes the bus, they all go to school and rush hour then starts. So, that would be a major change, but if we are looking at the feasibility of it all, we should certainly be looking at such changes to see how we can do it better.

There are already 110,000 kids travelling to and from school, and we have heard the costs of that quoted at between £70 million and £80 million. I believe that the Minister should at least be tasked with conducting the feasibility study, as we call for it today.

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

Mr Kinahan: We support the motion and look forward to seeing the results of a feasibility study in the future.

Mr Rogers: I support the motion. It is fair to say that, since the current arrangements for the provision of home-to-school transport came into effect in 1996, a number of its provisions are, clearly, out of date. Since then, a number of papers have been published into various cost-saving measures that the Department could utilise to improve the school transport policy for children. Those papers included a number of joint reports from the Department of Education and the Department of Finance and Personnel on trying to assess potential efficiency savings. The independent review of the common funding formula has also set out possible routes for savings.

Following the publication of those papers, it is time for the Department of Education to adopt a collaborative approach with the Department of the Environment and the Department for Regional Development to assess the possibility of free public transport for all school pupils. Increasing the availability of public transport would have a knock-on beneficial effect on the level of traffic on our roads, which other Members talked about. It would reduce the financial strain on parents and improve school attendance figures.

Eligibility for transport assistance is determined by two criteria: distance and suitable school. A review of the home-to-school transport policy is long overdue, and an opportunity exists now for the Ministers to have a joined-up approach and to assess the feasibility of the policy,

which would provide all school pupils with access to public transport. That must be done with minimal delay.

In Sir Bob Salisbury's review of the common funding scheme, he recommends that a transport policy be reviewed at the earliest opportunity. That would include eligibility, the definition of a suitable school and the potential for some parents to contribute to costs.

Many children avail themselves of concessionary rates on public transport. I understand that the concessionary fare schemes that are currently in place cost the Department £30 million per annum, but that support is crucial to alleviating the financial burden on parents. It is essential that access to public transport is not undermined by curtailing access to concessionary schemes. Young people should be able to avail themselves of a service that they can rely on to get them to school safely, efficiently and without incurring a cost burden. I am reminded very much of the rural White Paper and rural access to services for our children, particularly as I come from a rural constituency. It is a long way from Boston to Brackenagh. Someone mentioned a nine-minute walk to the train or bus. In rural areas, I want to keep that firmly on the agenda.

Great inroads have been made to improve public transport services across the North. What better way to continue that than to deliver children to school in that way? I acknowledge the presence of the Minister of Education. I urge him to work with the Minister for Regional Development to pursue fully a study of how to use the transport system to the benefit of all pupils.

Mrs Hale: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. I state from the outset that I broadly support the sentiments behind it. Many in the House already know my views on the need to reduce traffic, especially in rural villages.

My concerns relate to the future cost implications and the actual desired need to develop such a system of funded travel. There is also a lack of high-level information on which to consider the implications of such a motion. I stress that an in-depth study is needed on which to base any future discussions.

The motion is going in a somewhat different direction from the Department of Education's current and future education policy. Education boards have been asked to improve efficiency and reduce costs to the sum of £5 million from the home-to-school transport budget. Home-to-school transport costs have increased by nearly 30% over the past five years to a total of £71.5 million. There has been a marked increase in the number of pupils who use free transport, even though actual pupil numbers have been falling in some areas.

The Department of Education and the library boards have been asked to consider four possible options in an attempt to lower the cost of home-to-school travel: first, to provide transport to only those children from low-income households; secondly, to provide transport only for a period of compulsory education, which is up to the age of 16; thirdly, to consider parental contributions; and, finally, to increase the statutory walking distance.

That is backed by an independent review paper produced into the common funding scheme. The panel behind the review had great concern over the escalating expenditure on home-to-school transport. It also took issue with the arrangements for parental contribution, as article 23 of the

Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 empowered the boards to provide transport arrangements free of charge. That would limit the number of options available for future consideration. What is most notable is that none of the options being considered is to look at extending the policy to all pupils by completely overhauling the old criteria for free transport.

There are new opportunities to review the mode of transport that is utilised, improve best practice and consider the cost of each mode of transport, whether contracts are through Translink or other, private, providers. That may provide options to fund such a change of policy. However, it may not be enough to fund adequately such a move.

I will switch to the implications on the Department for Regional Development (DRD). Any move to cut the amount of traffic that uses roads during rush hour must be welcomed. In my constituency, I am contacted constantly about traffic jams and the difficulty for other commuters and pedestrians that the school rush hours cause. Again, I have concerns that actively encouraging pupils who live within a safe and suitable walking distance to use public transport may be in conflict with other policies that the Executive have endorsed owing to their positive impact on health and the environment.

I am most certainly all for creating a service for pupils and their families. However, I want to be sure that there is a need for that type of change and that families would not just continue to use their own vehicles as an easier option. Thus, any feasibility study must focus on the need to ensure that money would not be wasted funding such a change.

It is for those reasons that I welcome the motion. However, I stress that any feasibility audit must be done across all the Departments concerned. The full financial costs must be considered against current progress, and a scoping exercise on conflictual policies must also be considered.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. Like the previous Member to speak, I, too, have concerns about the cost of such a study.

I agree with the motion, particularly about the benefits of using public sector transport during term time, as that helps to conserve natural resources, helps to reduce air pollution and is less harmful to the ozone layer. It goes some way to reducing parents' stress levels in the morning rush-hour traffic, some of whom may have to drop children off at more than one school.

As has been said, 89,000 eligible pupils get transport assistance, which is around 92%. Thankfully, education and library board buses and public sector transport are safe and sustainable ways of getting a child to school. I want to make the point that the previous Member made, which is that there is an emphasis on getting children fitter. There is an increase in obesity, and money is being spent on anti-obesity campaigns in schools and in the wider public. Walking to a school that is within a safe walking distance may be the only exercise that a child can get.

In my area of Strabane, many children have to walk to school daily, and, in my opinion, those routes are unsafe. I was involved with a number of families in the Glebe and Dunnamanagh area who lobbied to have a route deemed

unsafe to walk. An assessment was carried out and the road was deemed safe, even though the PSNI felt that it had potential dangers for the children walking along it.

The added cost to parents of sending their children to school includes the rising price of uniforms and school lunches. The added cost of transport has a severe financial impact on families who already may be struggling. In the interim, or in the absence of any study, we need to have a balanced system for those who can afford transport and those who cannot.

The Department of Education's policy for delivery of home-to-school transport gives scope for variation in its operational policies across all the education and library boards (ELBs) to ensure greater flexibility and best practice to meet the needs in each ELB area. However, there are differences in the calculation of the distance when accessing eligibility for free transport, as well as the policy in respect of concessionary seats; for example, allowing non-eligible pupils to use spare seats on buses. In addition, there are different variances for deciding what provision should be provided for pupils with special educational needs, which is the biggest part of our school transport budget. So, we need to have a fair and equal system for our whole school fleet.

As I said, 89,000 pupils are currently assisted with transport to school. The remaining 231,000 pupils make their own arrangements. The cost of providing the service is approximately £700 million per annum. I believe that there is merit in a feasibility study, but you would have to look at the costs.

I am also aware that our colleagues in the Regional Development Committee are doing their inquiry into the use of public and community sector funds for the delivery of bus provision here to include school transport and how the different Departments can pool funds to maximise savings, making better use of our public funds. The Committee has received evidence from the Health Department, the Education Department and the community sector, and I commend the Regional Development Committee for that. I await the outcomes of its inquiry and look forward to its recommendations.

In many ways, this motion duplicates what the Regional Development Committee is trying to achieve. We need a value for money feasibility study to ensure that a fair and equal transport system is in place. A review is overdue, and it needs to happen soon. I look forward to hearing the Minister speak to that later.

Mr Hussey: First, I apologise to Mrs Cochrane for not being here at the start of her speech. Unfortunately, I am a lot slower than other people, and it took me a while to get here, but I reassure you that I did not come by bus.

As you are aware, I represent the constituency of West Tyrone, like the previous Member who spoke, and there is no doubt that, regardless of the constituency that we represent, there are issues that cause concern to parents when children have to walk to school. We discussed that matter some time ago under a UUP motion in relation to home-to-school transport. The issues that we raised with the Minister of Education are as relevant today as they were then.

Michaela Boyle referred to the fact that she represents Strabane. I, too, represent Strabane, and I ask Members

in the House if they consider it wise to send a child from the village of Ballymagorry to walk to Strabane along the main A5 arterial route. This particular road has little or no footpath provision, and to follow the Highway Code, the child should walk towards approaching traffic. The traffic could be a tractor or, just as easily, an articulated truck travelling at up to 60mph. If you were 10 years of age, the blast from the lorry could knock you over or, worse, suck you in towards the vehicle, with unimaginable consequences.

2.15 pm

The problem has not gone away. We are aware of the various regulations, and the Education Minister has reminded us in the past of circular 1996/411, updated in 2009, which relates to eligibility criteria. Clearly, rules are rules, but that particular rule dictates the distance from home to school. If you are three miles or over, you are granted a place; if you live next door and are outside the three miles by even 100 yards or less, you are not eligible.

We all accept that school traffic in any town is a nightmare, with cars being parked anywhere to pick up children. They park on double yellow lines and corners; they block school gates and car parks. Entire towns can come to a standstill for up to an hour during the morning and evening school runs. The problem is not restricted to schools in towns. Some rural schools have a similar problem, and those attempting to walk to school may have to avoid cars on windy country roads as they attempt to get home.

We recently experienced severe winter weather, and the prediction is that it may well return later this week. I ask you to picture the scene, with children having to walk through snowstorms. That vision on its own should be enough to seriously consider providing transport. I asked during the last debate on this issue what value would be put on a child's life. In the Strabane area, we had a local GP killed on the A5 as he cycled along the road. The driver of the lorry that killed that man did not know that it had happened, because the bicycle had been sucked in under the lorry.

There would, no doubt, be significant cost implications if universal free home-to-school transport was introduced. If all parties want that, then all parties need to accept that DRD will need support to meet the additional cost. Cost should not be a consideration when we are dealing with children's safety. Let us see a united approach to this issue from all Departments. Children are our future. Let us see us doing as much as we can to support children and ensuring that the journey to and from school is as safe as we can make it, not just in rural areas such as Tyrone but in all areas of Northern Ireland.

Let us see a determined effort to provide free school transport for all families to revolutionise our approach to this issue, reducing traffic build-up at school times; hopefully, improving the environment, with fewer cars pumping poisonous gases into the air; and ensuring that those families that cannot afford school transport can ensure that their children are taken to and from school safely.

Finally, I appreciate that we in Northern Ireland have a problem and that our children walk less than those in other parts of the kingdom. Possibly our statistics are slightly improved by those from rural areas who have to walk long

distances daily. The exercise question may be resolved by providing and encouraging attendance at sports clubs and leisure centres.

There can be nothing more important than the safety of our children. Cost should never be an issue. The risk to our children's safety far outweighs the problems associated with their need for regular exercise.

Mr Dallat: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this motion. I rely on my length of time on this earth to, perhaps, paint an overview of how I see it. I believe that school transport is hopelessly out of date and is, basically, the same system that was introduced in the early 1950s when people passing the 11-plus, largely middle class, had to be bussed to their posh grammar schools.

The secondary school system came into being, of course, and there was simply an add-on to that. Very little has changed, really. It has expanded on an ad hoc basis. Some of that transport is provided by Translink on a contract basis. Yes, the education and library boards, particularly those in the west, have a large fleet of buses. There is, of course, community transport, and do not forget that the health boards have school buses for children with special needs. So, a whole plethora of people provide transport.

Of course you cannot have this debate without referring to the cost, and that has already been mentioned. It is absolutely astonishing that, as far back as 2005, the Public Accounts Committee got an undertaking that there would be some kind of effort made by the Department for Regional Development, presumably in conjunction with the Department of Education, to create a network of transport in which there would be no duplication and which would provide a network of services to many more people than is the case. I believe that until we have such an integrated system of transport, the prospect of introducing free transport for all pupils is perhaps not a realistic proposition, but I hope that I am wrong.

What I am saying to the House is that, if the motion is to be taken seriously, and I hope that that is the case, the feasibility study cannot be confined exclusively to school transport but must, in fact, embrace an overarching view of transport as a whole, particularly for those living in rural areas, because we still have a system that dates way back to the 1950s, as I said. If that happened, I would be hopeful that the motion would not simply gather dust and that we could, in fact, have a really modern system of transport.

If I were to ring somebody in Birmingham today and order a spare part for my vintage car, it would be here tomorrow, because new technology, barcodes and all sorts of things allow that to happen. Why can existing new technology not be applied to our transport system? I believe that it can.

Some Members spoke about the needs of rural areas. I can tell our urban friends that living in a rural area is not a pleasant experience for a child today, because the roads are no wider than a single vehicle and there are no footpaths, and there are dangerous bends, unprotected watercourses and, indeed, many other obstacles, not least fast-moving agricultural machinery. So, you can see that there is a particular need to facilitate children in rural areas and provide transport for them.

I live in an area where, astonishingly, school buses pass children who do not qualify for transport because of the

three-mile limit for secondary schools and the two-mile limit for primary schools. Of course a concessionary system operated on an ad hoc basis, and a blind eye was sometimes turned. That was a good system — I know that from teaching in a secondary school for 23 years — but it has gone now.

We really need to look seriously at the system we have. We need to get up on the balcony and start to look down, and then, hopefully, at the end of the day, we will have a system that can fulfil the needs of our people. That is not to say that I am discouraging —

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

Mr Dallat: — groups who walk to school. I am certainly not discouraging cycling or anything that cultivates a better lifestyle.

Mrs D Kelly: A number of contributors to the debate thus far have raised the cost of the feasibility study. I am somewhat confused by that, given that much of the information is already available and that there could be some in-house desk research. I am sure that the proposer of the motion is not calling for consultants to be used, so perhaps her party can respond to that when others have finished their contributions.

Other Members also raised the issue of the Committee for Regional Development's inquiry into community transport, which is currently under way. During questioning, some health and education officials were unable to give the Committee any firm steer on the working group, which we were led to believe was already established, to see how Departments could better collaborate on the provision of transport. Perhaps the Minister will give some indication of where that is at.

The Minister, as someone who shares the same constituency as me, will, I am sure, be aware of the closure of the school in Kilwarlin. As a consequence of that, 28 pupils have no transport provided to travel to the Maralin school — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind Members that they should not be having audible conversations when someone has the Floor.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Deputy Speaker.

Perhaps the Minister will give a commitment to looking further into that case.

The motion is right: there should be a better way of doing things in the 21st century. As Mr Dallat said, the system was set in the middle of the last century; it is well due an overhaul. I fully support the call for a feasibility study, but I do not really buy the argument that others presented about the detriment of cost, particularly at a time when the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) has been unable, after almost two years, to spend any of the money in the social investment fund. I believe there is a kitty of some £80 million.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time is due to commence at 2.30 pm, I suggest that Members take their ease for a few minutes. This debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Steven Agnew.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Environment

Local Government Reform: District Electoral Areas

1. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the timescale for the drawing of the district electoral area boundaries as part of the ongoing local government reform process. (AQO 3283/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): I thank the Member for the question. As the Member will know from the debate last June, when the Local Government (Boundaries) Order was passed by the Assembly, responsibility for taking forward the detailed work in respect of the district electoral areas passed to the London Government, given that that is their responsibility under the devolution settlement. The Member may also be aware that the Secretary of State recently appointed Mr Richard Mackenzie — a person well known to many in the Chamber, and he will, no doubt, be very well known over the next year as well — to take forward the detailed work, with the intention of bringing forward his recommendations later this year. The London Government advise me that they will be in a position to pass the relevant order in advance of our council shadow elections in June of next year.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will the Minister comment on any contingency that might exist in the case that boundaries are not published and consulted on until several months later than the current timetable would suggest?

Mr Attwood: I do not have a contingency, because I am being advised by the London Government that they will complete their processes in good time to have an election in June of next year. In the event that those processes are not completed, an issue will arise, but I am not working on that basis, the London Government are not working on that basis, and I hope that nobody else is working on that basis.

Mr Givan: Will the Minister give us an assurance that any proposed changes that Members may wish to be made to the boundaries — they can often be controversial — will ultimately not be for this Minister to take a decision on? Will he assure the House that it will be a decision for the London Government and, therefore, we can be assured that there will be no unilateral gerrymandering of boundaries by the Minister, such as has happened with retail boundaries in Northern Ireland?

Mr Attwood: I am tempted to remind the Member that there was political uncertainty, doubt and delay in respect of local government, ostensibly in the last mandate, because Members had issues around the boundaries at Forestside and Dunmurry.

Mr Givan: What about Warrenpoint?

Mr Attwood: I will come back to Warrenpoint. If the Member —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister will resume his seat. I ask that there is no dialogue across the Chamber. We have a system here. It seems to work well for most people, and it should work for everybody.

Mr Attwood: I would not necessarily use the word “gerrymandering”, but, in the previous mandate, there was certainly a lot of political interest in where boundaries would end and begin. The process being taken forward by Mr Mackenzie and the London Government is reserved to them under the devolution settlement. Therefore, I trust that there will be no political interference. Obviously, the public, political parties and others can input to the process of consultation. I have not taken unilateral action in respect of any matter. I act in a way that is loyal to government policy, planning policy and the regional development strategy. It is others who are acting outwith those issues.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for his responses so far. Has the Minister considered a legal challenge to any of these processes? Also, will he assure the House that, as part of the process, he will run the severance package in tandem —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. One question.

Mr Attwood: It is for others to decide whether there will be legal challenge. I understand, as hinted by the Member opposite, that there is some interest in another part of the North in respect of a legal challenge and that legal correspondence has been communicated in that regard. However, it will be for others and, ultimately, the courts to decide whether there is legal challenge in any one area.

Had he been given time to make it, Mr Boylan’s point would have been about how a severance package might run with the process around the delineation of the district electoral areas. I have said on a number of occasions and am pleased to say now that, whatever happens with the severance proposal — I trust that that will be adopted by the Assembly in due course — the arrangements will remain open for qualifying councillors until such time as the district electoral area issue is resolved. That is only fair and respectful to councillors who may wish to stand down.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I gently remind Members that it is one query and one query only.

Mr Elliott: DEA boundaries are outside the Minister’s remit but the local government Bill that he plans to bring forward this year is within it. Given the current difficulties around the issue of flags, does he anticipate bringing forward a provision in that Bill to allow the Union flag to be flown at every new council civic centre in Northern Ireland?

Mr Attwood: I note that the Member has, if I may put it gently, a whimsical look on his face, but it is a serious matter. Let us be clear: the issue of flags, emblems and symbols will be settled only when all parties and political leaders uphold the principle of parity of esteem. What does that mean? It means that, in this part of the world, because of the new political order that we are all meant to have embraced, things will look and feel different from how they did before. That is the outworking of respect for difference. That does not mean that any one person or community has lost or won; it is the outworking of the principle of parity of esteem.

Mr Elliott knows that before Christmas, at a meeting of the political reference group, which is part of the RPA structure

going forward, I made the point that we might have to capture the issue of flags, emblems and symbols in the work of RPA. If that is necessary, we should not shirk it. We do not need to go onto that ground at the moment, but, if we have to do so, we should.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Elliott and the Minister seem happy to diversify into another subject, but it does not make my job any easier. So from now on, we will stick to the subject. I call Mr Gregory Campbell, who, I am sure, will do that.

Urban Dereliction

2. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he will consider funding an intervention programme for councils aimed at removing the worst urban degeneration blight in tourist areas and locations where large events are scheduled during 2013. (AQO 3284/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member, who has been very consistent in raising this issue on the Floor and in other ways, and he is right to do that. He will know that I announced this morning that a further £1 million will be allocated in this financial year to be spent between now and the end of the financial year to take forward decay and dereliction interventions in Fermanagh, Moyle on the north coast, south Down, Down and Belfast. I did that because I think that the experience of Derry, in its City of Culture year, and in Portrush and Portstewart demonstrated that, for quite moderate moneys, there was a substantial improvement in those areas and confidence in trade and visitor experience. I want to acknowledge that, although the Minister of Finance and I may differ on proposals for welfare, pensions and a national crime authority, he eventually agreed that spending £1 million on those decay and dereliction interventions would be money well spent.

Mr Campbell: It is nice to see the Minister sticking to the topic — not.

I welcome his announcement this morning. He is right about the benefit that accrued to Londonderry and the north coast. He mentioned the figure of £1 million, and there is a little concern that the source of that money may be a redundancy scheme for which the time limit for applications has not yet elapsed. Will he guarantee that the £1 million will be secured for the package?

Mr Attwood: Clearly, this late in the financial year, you have to assess, in spending upwards of £1million before the end of the financial year, whether all that money will become available. As the Member said, the money has been released by my Department, with the Minister of Finance and Personnel's consent, on the basis that we think that the take-up of the early retirement scheme — it is not a redundancy scheme — in the Planning Service will involve x number of people. We have forensically interrogated the figures to come up with a figure of £1 million. Indeed, it is my sense that, in the near future, there may be one or two further interventions and further spend beyond the £1 million for other parts of the North.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Minister, how do groups avail themselves of that money given that it has to be spent before the end of the year and most of the large events take place in August? I am thinking of two in particular: the Irish rowing

championship in the village of Carnlough and the Heart of the Glens festival.

Mr Attwood: As I believe very strongly that the £1 million spent to date in Portrush, Portstewart and Derry has had a material impact, I asked all 26 councils in the North to provide proposals in advance of Christmas. Twenty-two of the 26 councils did so, and, on the basis of that, I made a bid for £4 million in January monitoring. That failed, but, in subsequent discussions with the Minister of Finance, we agreed to release £1 million. It was the councils that developed the proposals. The Member's council produced proposals for the east Antrim and Moyle areas. The councils will now spend the money. We have been very careful and diligent in ensuring that the councils that get the money can demonstrate their authority through being able to spend the money by the end of the financial year.

The story is not over. I continue to have conversations with the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I see that his successor is not here, but I hope that there will be further conversations with the current Minister's successor to embed the roll-out of decay and dereliction interventions across all councils in the North on the basis of allocations in monitoring rounds: moderate moneys — big impact. It is time for the Executive to go beyond where they are now and dedicate quarterly monitoring moneys to this worthwhile project.

Mrs McKeivitt: I welcome your announcement this morning, Minister, of the dereliction moneys, particularly those for the south Down area. What are your views on dereliction moneys when the location in question is not a particular tourist area or is not due to host a major event?

Mr Attwood: We have a scoring matrix in the Department, which assessed all the bids that came in from the 22 councils. One aspect of the scoring matrix is whether events in a particular area during the year might lead to the conclusion that money should be spent. That is why money went to Derry, Portrush and Portstewart and why £350,000 is going to Fermanagh. Money is going to Lisburn because it is the European City of Sport. It is a factor, but it is not the only factor. In my view, whether there are or are not major events in an area — major profile events, as opposed to the annual run of events — the scheme works by stabilising local trading conditions and maybe encouraging small business opportunities. As a fund for that purpose, never mind the events, it seems to me to be very worthwhile.

Planning: Enforcement

3. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he plans to bring forward legislation to expedite planning enforcement. (AQO 3285/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. As the Member knows from a debate in the Assembly in recent weeks, we are bringing forward into the life of this mandate planning enforcement proposals that were not anticipated to be in force until 2015. The consequence of that is that, in primary legislation, we will have increases in the fines that a court can lay down for failure to comply with stop and enforcement notices. Also, in the regulations arising from the Planning Bill on the far side of its passage, multiple fees will be charged when somebody goes ahead and builds and then applies for retrospective planning permission. There will also be an accelerated passage of

enforcement through fixed penalty notices. In that family of enforcement measures, in primary and secondary legislation and in this mandate rather than in 2015, I am trying to demonstrate that the underside of good planning is robust enforcement.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for his answer, but, in my experience, it takes up to a year for a planning enforcement case to reach an outcome. In this day and age, that just is not on, Minister. I urge you to do something in the meantime to speed that up.

2.45 pm

Mr Attwood: I have said that, when it comes to enforcement, there has been some tendency — I will put it no higher than that — to take the path of least resistance in the planning system. Senior management in planning know full well that that is not my approach. That is why, for example, in heritage enforcement, we have served more urgent works notices for listed buildings in the past 18 months than in the previous 38 years. That is why 40 live enforcement cases are ongoing to ensure that those who are responsible for the maintenance of listed and heritage buildings fulfil their responsibilities. I agree with the sentiment behind the question. Where it is proportionate and necessary, be it in planning, environmental crime or other problems, the planning system needs to demonstrate that it will go after the worst offenders in a fair and proportionate manner.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his responses. Minister, will you consider reviewing some policies to ensure greater clarity and understanding so that applicants and their agents are aware of and properly understand the planning policies that are in place?

Mr Attwood: Many applicants employ agents, and those agents, who are professionals, should know full well the character and content of the planning system. I do not know whether the Member is hinting at this, but there are some agents whose planning applications leave something to be desired. For other cases, the planning system is difficult to find a way through, given the range of planning policies, guidance notes and other interpretation that exists. That is why, as part of planning reform going forward, work is ongoing to capture all the current planning policies in a single planning policy, very much in the image of what happens in Scotland. So, rather than having 15, 20 or 25 planning policies, we would have a single document that would be reduced in size and more accessible to the citizen, the community and the professional person so that the pathway through the planning system would be better understood and the planning system more fit for purpose.

Ms Lo: The Minister is right to say that we need a robust enforcement unit to ensure compliance with the legislation and policies. I ask the Minister for his assurance that the Department will be given adequate resources to carry out its work, particularly with the new enforcement measures in the Planning Bill.

Mr Attwood: There are two answers to that. I do not think that there are enough resources for enforcement generally in the Department of the Environment. It is our responsibility to protect the environment, land and heritage, which are very much part of the quality and character of the lives that we lead and the appeal of this

place to visitors and tourists. More should be invested in time, law and resources when it comes to enforcement. That is why we recently recruited and continue to recruit significant numbers of new people to get the environmental crime unit — the environmental police officers in DOE for serious environmental crime — up to the threshold of, I think, 33 members of staff. If that is the right model for environmental crime enforcement, it is a model that can be usefully deployed in planning enforcement.

I accept the sentiment behind the question. Work is being done, and more is ongoing on a compliance enforcement unit, led by my chief planner, on taking forward comments and recommendations made by the Criminal Justice Inspection. Some corners have been turned; there are more to turn.

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

4. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the Belfast metropolitan area plan. (AQO 3286/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. He will be aware that, contrary to all previous practice, when the Department received the Belfast metropolitan area plan (BMAP), I published it. I published it without prejudice, because I thought that it was important that, after the length of time that BMAP had been in preparation, people saw its content in advance of adoption. That happened in and around a year ago. It was my ambition then that adoption would occur in and around the end of March. There may be a little bit of slippage because we are completing a habitats regulation assessment and an equality impact assessment. Save for those matters, I intend for BMAP to be adopted shortly after Easter.

Mr Easton: Did BMAP play any role in the Minister's ludicrous decision on the John Lewis planning application in Lisburn?

Mr Attwood: There was meant to be a planning inquiry. I regret that such an inquiry did not take place, because it would have been very useful had all the information that came from DOE, the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Department for Regional Development (DRD), as well as from other third parties, been interrogated in front of a public hearing through a planning inquiry before recommendations came back to the Government.

I note that the Member says that the decision was ludicrous. I do not know whether the Member is aware that there are 100,000 people in retail employment in Northern Ireland or that 50,000 people are employed in retail in the BMAP area. If he is not aware of that, he cannot make the claim that the advice that I gave to the planning inquiry on the Sprucefield proposal was ludicrous. Why? What was going to be the impact of 20 shops in Sprucefield, twice the size of Forestside — only one of which was going to be John Lewis, if even that — on all the other retail centres in the greater Belfast area where 50,000 people work in retail? The impact on Craigavon would have been a retail diversion of 35%. It would have been over 20% in Lisburn and nearly 15% in Belfast. Do the maths. What would have been the impact of that on our retail businesses and our retail workforce? It would have been significant, and I would have been negligent had I not given that advice to the planning inquiry.

Mr Copeland: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. It is fair to say that this plan has been around for a very long time. What is your assessment of its usefulness when it eventually arrives, with particular reference to the proposed changes to local government boundaries with areas perhaps previously not in the Belfast metropolitan area now included in it?

Mr Attwood: I anticipate that, without prejudging it, the adoption will generally not be as controversial as the advice that I gave to the planning inquiry on the retail element of BMAP.

The Member is right: the process has taken far, far too long. However, it tends to be the nature of legal and development processes, and, in that way, I am not being critical of the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC), if anyone thought that I was being. Even though BMAP is now not as up to date as it might otherwise have been, it is my view that plan-led development, as a matter of principle, is the right way to develop an economy and communities in any place, including Northern Ireland. In the Republic of Ireland, 80% of the land mass now has development plans, showing that areas gather together and outline their priorities in order to profile the area for economic and sustainable development. Plan-led development, even if it is late, is better than no plan-led development at all.

Mr Allister: Given the negative regional impact of the Minister's recent disastrous and destructive decision in respect of John Lewis, is it not time to abandon the Belfast-centric approach and recognise that it should be Northern Ireland plc that comes first, not Belfast comes first?

Mr Attwood: It is Northern Ireland plc that comes first. That is the entire emphasis in the regional development strategy adopted only last year by all my ministerial colleagues, even though some seem to forget that. What does it say? It says that to have a Northern Ireland-sustainable approach we need to protect our town and city centres and we should take a precautionary approach to out-of-town retail. That applies to Belfast as it applies to Derry, Coleraine, Magherafelt, Newtownards and all other places in the North. That is good, balanced retail planning that puts Northern Ireland first.

When it comes to Belfast, it is the express policy of the RDS and it is the experience in other parts of these islands and around the world that, to drive an economy forward, you need a thriving, vital and vigorous city centre. Given that Northern Ireland's capital is Belfast, given that 23% of shops in Belfast are vacant, given the RDS and given the need to protect Belfast city centre as an economic driver, are we going to send out the message to retailers, shop owners and shop workers in Belfast and those in Lisburn, Newtownards, Bangor and all the other parts of greater Belfast that they will be left on their own to sink or swim? That is not sustainable planning. It is not good planning. It is not consistent with good government. It is not consistent with government policy. That is why I gave that advice to the planning inquiry in respect of Sprucefield.

Rates: Review of Public Administration

Mr Beggs: Some suggest that the sizeable rates increases —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The Member needs to call a question number.

5. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of the Environment what progress has been made in funding rates convergence costs within the new councils so that ratepayers do not face rates increases as a result of the review of public administration. (AQO 3287/11-15)

Mr Attwood: As I indicated, I have some differences with other Ministers. However, I do not think that there is any difference — certainly not in argument although maybe ultimately in scale — as regards the principle that, given the need for rates convergence across the council clusters, there will be a need for government assistance in so doing. I think that there is a political acceptance around the Executive table in that regard. We will work that through over the next short while.

Mr Beggs: Some ratepayers face increases of up to 10% as a result of convergence. Are the Minister and, indeed, the Finance Minister aware that ratepayers are rather incensed at the thought of not only having to pay those increased rates but maybe having to pay for the borrowing and interest payments of councils that have been suggested as a means of easing the situation in the difficult convergence period?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for the supplementary. I work on the basis of three principles. The first is that there will be a need for government assistance with rates convergence. The second is that there will be a need to provide soft loans, potentially with the interest being paid by central government, in respect of a council's funding for the transitional and transformative costs that fall to it. The third principle is that there needs to be upfront assistance — some have said that that should be in and around £40 million — where there are no cash-releasing benefits to councils on the far side of RPA. We continue to have that conversation with Executive colleagues. I find it frustrating that we have not brought it to a conclusion. I understand that there may be a meeting some time on Thursday in advance of Thursday's Executive meeting. Perhaps that will bring it to a conclusion.

The point of all that in respect of rates convergence is simply this: there is a need to converge, but there will not be a Big Bang convergence on the day of reorganisation. It will have to be managed over a period of time so that the convergence occurs over a period of time and in a way that does not place a burden on ratepayers.

3.00 pm

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Fuel Poverty: Energy Policy

1. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how the formation of energy policy within her Department is monitored to ensure that it addresses the issue of fuel poverty. (AQO 3298/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): My Department's work on implementing the strategic energy framework, which recognises our high level of fuel poverty, is monitored on a six-monthly basis

by both myself and the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer. Can she explain the logic behind the Department for Social Development (DSD) taking the lead on fuel poverty issues when her own Department has primary responsibility for two of the three measurements of fuel poverty?

Mrs Foster: DSD has always had the lead in relation to fuel poverty, but we do work together on the fuel poverty cross-departmental group. We very much take on board the issue of fuel poverty, and it is one of the key elements of the strategic energy framework.

In relation to policy development, which is what the question alluded to, we very much see the extension of the gas network as having a fundamental part to play in relation to fuel poverty, particularly for those homes in the west of the Province. We have put the renewable heat incentive in place, which will also help with fuel poverty. Our new Energy Bill, which looks at energy efficiency elements, will also help with fuel poverty. So, while DSD remains in the lead in relation to fuel poverty, we very much assist and work with our colleagues in that Department.

Mr Dunne: Does the Minister agree that the proposed North/South interconnector, which has experienced many unnecessary delays, will provide economic benefits in relation to the cost of fuel in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: It is not a case of it being beneficial. The North/South interconnector is a necessity. We have a single electricity market in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, and if we are to benefit from that we need good interconnection between both parts of this island. We also need it, of course, to move ahead into the future, when we are looking at regulation right across the British Isles in Scotland, Wales and England as well as with ourselves. Therefore, it is not just a luxury; it is an absolute necessity and it is costing consumers in Northern Ireland a large amount of money. Therefore, it is imperative that it is progressed very soon.

Mr Swann: The Minister referred to the need for good interconnections and good interconn—interconnectivity — *[Interruption.]* Sorry? I cannot help if I stutter a bit. If that is funny to you, that is fine.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask Members to remain quiet and allow Members to ask their questions. If I feel that there is something out of order, I will address it. Carry on.

Mr Swann: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker.

In regard to the Moyle interconnector and its downtime, is that having any adverse effects on the electricity bills of those who are with the supplier and is that having an effect on fuel poverty?

Mrs Foster: The Moyle interconnector and the downtime is much to be regretted, as I am sure the Member will agree. I am meeting with Mutual Energy after Question Time to discuss some of those issues. I understand that it is looking to its insurance company on those issues and hopes that there will be no cost to the consumer. That would also be my wish. I will have more clarity after the meeting this afternoon, but that is my understanding.

“The Gathering”

2. **Mrs McKeivitt** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on any discussions with the Irish Government on events to be held as part of “The Gathering”. (AQO 3299/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I have met Minister Varadkar on a number of occasions and discussed a number of tourism issues. I also met Minister Ring at the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) tourism sectoral meeting in November 2012 and received an update on “The Gathering”.

Mrs McKeivitt: What initiatives will the Minister be bringing forward to increase the number of overseas visitors to the island of Ireland?

Mrs Foster: I do not have control over the island of Ireland. I do, however, very much have control over tourism in Northern Ireland.

In Northern Ireland, we have a very exciting year ahead of us, as I am sure the Member will agree. The Member joined with me at the Sons and Daughters concert up in Londonderry a few weeks ago, which was a tremendous start to what will be a tremendous year for the UK City of Culture. As well as that, we have the World Police and Fire Games coming in August, which, again, will bring a lot of people from different countries to Northern Ireland who have not been here before. We are very much looking forward to that. Of course, I remind the House again that the G8 will come to Fermanagh in June.

Mr Gardiner: Although the Minister has touched on part of what I will ask her, she could maybe elaborate a bit. What preparation has she undertaken to ensure that Northern Ireland can maximise the potential tourism gains from “The Gathering” and what is her estimate of extra revenue and visitors as a result?

Mrs Foster: I have said many times in this House when the issue has arisen that “The Gathering” has been brought to fruition by the Government of the Republic of Ireland. It is not just about tourism but also about attracting inward investment. It is an idea to bring people back to the Republic this year and to have a gathering.

I have to repeat myself at every Question Time, and I will repeat it again today: if tourists come to the Republic of Ireland during this year, we are more than happy to accommodate them in Northern Ireland when they come to visit us. Of course we are. We want them to come and experience for themselves what Northern Ireland has to offer, and that is exactly what we will do in conjunction with Tourism Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

Mr Campbell: Further to the Minister’s response, with “The Gathering” or with any other events or series of events in neighbouring countries, is it the intent of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to actively target people to see whether it is possible, that, if they come to Dublin, Limerick, Kerry or wherever, they might visit Northern Ireland when they are here?

Mrs Foster: We have been asking Tourism Ireland to concentrate on that. We are saying to it that, if gatherings — for example, a golf gathering — are taking place across the Republic of Ireland, we want to try to ensure that they experience the premier destinations on the whole of the island of Ireland, such as Royal County Down or Royal Portrush. With any type of event in the Republic of Ireland,

we want to make sure that we target those and market ourselves in a proactive way so that we can gain benefit from visitors coming to Northern Ireland.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister said that if people want to come north, we will accommodate them. Will she encourage local event organisers to use "The Gathering" website to promote their events?

Mrs Foster: They are at liberty to do whatever they feel is necessary to promote their own events. I will not stop anybody from promoting their events through any mechanism. They can do so very freely.

Job Creation and Job Promotion

3. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the conversion rate between jobs promoted and jobs created. (AQO 3300/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI's most recent analysis calculates that 75% of jobs promoted through new inward-investment projects were actually created. That work has been scrutinised by the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), which regards the figure to be "the most reliable estimate available". It should be recognised that grants will only be paid to a business upon its successful achievement of targets such as actual employment creation.

An example of a recently assisted project is Allen and Overy LLP, which announced 67 new jobs last week, bringing the total number of new jobs promoted to 384. Of those, 300 have already been created by the company well ahead of schedule. The jobs fund was launched in April 2011 and, since then, has promoted more than 4,000 jobs and created over 2,200 jobs.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for her response. How many jobs have been created and sustained during the current Assembly term? What work is ongoing to implement a more transparent measurement indicator for jobs?

Mrs Foster: As the Member knows, in the past, we did not have that mechanism, and I am very pleased that we have it now. We can relay the information, either through questions or through correspondence, and I am quite content to give those answers. Our record on that is very clear.

As I indicated, the jobs fund has promoted 4,000 jobs and created 2,200. The jobs fund is a tremendous mechanism. I was with some companies in Tyrone and Portadown last week, and I could see that jobs have been made available very quickly in those companies because of the jobs fund. It is a tremendous mechanism and one that I hope we can use more and more.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as na freagraí. I thank the Minister for her responses.

I know from speaking with the chief executive of Invest NI that progress is being made, and that is very useful. Business and all of us think that actual jobs created, as opposed to jobs promoted, would be a much better benchmark for those of us with a common and shared interest in the economy. So, can the Minister give us some specifics on the time frame for when that assessment

method will be introduced and when we could be seeing the full details of that presented to us at a Committee?

Mrs Foster: As I indicated, the Northern Ireland Audit Office is content with the mechanism that we have put forward, so I am hopeful that that will be able to be used very soon. The Member will know that the basis upon which the Programme for Government and, indeed, the corporate plan targets have been set are on jobs promoted as opposed to jobs created. That does not mean to say that we cannot give updates periodically to the Committee on how many jobs are created now that we have that mechanism there.

Mr Newton: In the Minister's answer to the sceptical Mrs Overend, she used the words "the jobs fund", which was an initiative that was undertaken by the Minister. Will the Minister confirm the success of that scheme and, perhaps, outline the budget allocated to it?

Mrs Foster: The jobs fund came about in April 2011. I cannot remember what it was called initially. We changed the name to jobs fund because we believed that that is what it really was all about. It was about creating jobs and doing so quickly. As I said, I was able to see some of those jobs recently in JW Kane in Portadown and in Edge Innovate in Coalisland, County Tyrone. I have been able to see the way in which those jobs can come on very quickly. The money is not as slowly paid out. It is paid upfront instead of under selective financial assistance. The jobs have to come and be there for a certain time before the money is given. The fact that the money is able to be allocated early on means that people can be taken on. It does not cause cash flow difficulties, because the money is there, so it has been of great assistance to those companies. As I said, 4,000 jobs have been promoted, and it has created over 2,200 jobs to date.

North/South Ministerial Council: Tourism

4. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the agenda for the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in tourism sectoral format. (AQO 3301/11-15)

Mrs Foster: No date or agenda has yet been set for the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in tourism sectoral format.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for her answer. Can she ensure that on the agenda will be how we maximise the number of visitors to Derry in this the year of the City of Culture?

Mrs Foster: That was on the agenda at the previous North/South Ministerial Council meeting in November of last year, when we had a very good discussion about the events that were happening in each of our jurisdictions.

As I indicated, Minister Ring was in attendance on that date, because Minister Varadkar was called away on European duties. We had a very good discussion; he was talking about the Government's plans for "The Gathering", and we were talking about the importance of Londonderry to our plans for this year. I am sure that we will be discussing that again at the next North/South Ministerial Council.

Mr Cree: The Minister is on record as wishing to change the method that is used to measure tourism numbers. If it appears on the next NSMC agenda, will she consider using the new system but running it in parallel with the existing one just to compare the numbers?

Mrs Foster: I am not sure that the Northern Ireland Statistics Research Agency (NISRA) would allow us to have two systems running at the one time. It would certainly be interesting to see the differences between the two.

Part of the difficulty is that, at present, we get three main elements to make up all of our tourism figures. We get the Great Britain overseas market estimates, the Republic of Ireland market estimates and our home estimates. We then have to put those all together. The difficulty for me has been that we get these all at different times of the year, so we get a skewed picture. We might get the overseas figure, but we do not have the home figures or the Republic of Ireland figures.

Part of what we are trying to do is ensure that, when we give out figures, we give out figures that mean something and that they are something that we can look at and work from. That is my hope from the new figures that will come out.

Mr Frew: Will the Minister detail the work that she is doing to put pressure on Tourism Ireland to promote and achieve more flights into Northern Ireland's airports?

3.15 pm

Mrs Foster: That is a matter that is very dear to my heart, as is the whole subject of air access. At present, in band B, we have only the flight to Newark. We need to have more international flights, and indeed more European flights, coming into either of the airports. We have some key objectives in relation to that issue. I have told Tourism Ireland that I will be asking it for an update every month, because this is something that we really need to deliver on, given that we now have a competitive advantage with air passenger duty set at zero for band B flights.

In looking to Europe, I have a key objective in opening a direct service between Northern Ireland and a major city in Germany, which we need not just for tourism but for investment purposes. Furthermore, I make no secret of the fact that I very much believe that we need to have a Canadian connection brought back, both for tourism reasons — there are many connections with families and friends in Canada — and from the point of view of investment and business. Those are my two key targets, and we will be working very hard on them.

Mr A Maginness: In relation to the agenda for the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in tourism sectoral format, what initiatives could be discussed in relation to increasing the number of overseas visitors to Ireland as a whole, both North and South?

Mrs Foster: As I said in my last answer, I think that that is a critical piece that we need to look at again. I will be asking for the whole issue of air access to be on the agenda again. Just recently, for the first time since it left the control of the Dublin Airport Authority, Shannon Airport has secured a new route into Europe. So, we really need to up the game, in respect of air access to Northern Ireland, to make sure that we get direct connectivity. A

lot of our visitors come through Dublin Airport, and that is why we have taken a lot of advertising, as you know, in the baggage halls of Dublin Airport. However, we want to have direct access to visitors, because then we capture them immediately. That is very much what we want to do.

Agri-Food Strategy Board

5. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the work of the Agri-Food Strategy Board. (AQO 3302/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Agri-Food Strategy Board has made good progress in respect of the development of a long-term strategic plan for the agrifood sector in Northern Ireland. The board is currently drafting the strategic plan following extensive engagement with the industry and other relevant stakeholders, and the Agriculture Minister and I anticipate receipt of the document in the coming weeks.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for her reply. She is aware of the very difficult conditions experienced by farmers during 2012. In the light of that, does she accept the importance of the Agri-Food Strategy Board addressing the need for primary producers to receive a fair price for produce?

Mrs Foster: This is a very topical issue: the need for primary producers to receive a fair price for their food. The downward spiral of pricing has added to some of the difficulties that we are seeing at present in the agrifood industry.

Both the Agriculture Minister and I want farmers to have a key voice in the Agri-Food Strategy Board. We were very clear that we wanted it to listen very carefully to the primary producers and to their concerns. I have no doubt that part of that will be in relation to pricing and the fact that primary producers need to be able to make a living from farming. There is a perception about farming that farmers are all doing very well because the agrifood sector is doing very well. I believe that there are downward pressures on farmers and that those need to be recognised in the agrifood strategy.

Mrs Dobson: Will the Minister inform the House whether she is aware of engagement between the strategy board and the industry or Government representatives of Scotland, a region which has been successful in promoting its produce worldwide?

Mrs Foster: Certainly, I hope that the chair and the members of the board have taken into their view all the strategies of all our surrounding neighbours. I imagine that they will have looked at the Scottish examples, as well as at other examples in the British Isles, on how to promote agrifood.

Tony O'Neill, who is the chair of the strategy board, has briefed me on the main issues that are considered to be important by the agrifood sector, and I expect that the draft strategic plan will include recommendations as to how we address those issues when possible. It is about government facilitating the industry. The Agriculture Minister and I set the industry a task, which was to go away and come up with what it saw as the way forward and to give that to us. We will try to facilitate those plans. I am hopeful that I will have that plan very soon, and we can then take the matter forward.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Given that the strategy will be expert-led, and with major potential markets opening up in China, Russia and elsewhere, does the Minister agree that brand Ireland will give us an advantage in those emerging markets?

Mrs Foster: Given the past couple of weeks, I would have thought that the Member would have looked at that question again. I would have thought that brand Northern Ireland is our strongest brand. I have set the Agri-Food Strategy Board the task of looking at the industry in Northern Ireland, not to the exclusion of the industry in the Republic of Ireland, Scotland or the rest of the British Isles but to take the best of what they have done, to do what is right and to make it for Northern Ireland. In the strategy, I want to see "Made in Northern Ireland", which is what I hope I will get.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for her answers. Will she give an assurance that food-processing companies will get all the necessary support? Will she acknowledge the difficulty that McColgan Quality Foods in Strabane is facing, and will she give some support and succour to it over the unfortunate development?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. I commend McColgan Quality Foods for the way in which it has co-operated with the Food Standards Agency in the investigation of the incident. I recognise that it is a very difficult time for the management and staff of McColgan's. Of the four samples taken, two were found to contain trace levels of pork DNA — trace levels. Investigations are under way to identify specifics around those findings.

The company has quarantined all products supplied to the Prison Service and stated that at no point has pork of any kind been included in the recipes of any of the halal-certified products that it supplied. I commend it for the positive way in which it is working with Invest Northern Ireland, the Food Standards Agency and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), which, I understand, it is meeting this afternoon. It is a difficult time for the staff and the community in Strabane, and I hope that we can work through this.

Economy: Net Fiscal Balance Reports

6. **Ms Fearon** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what consideration is given to the net fiscal balance reports of 2009-2010 and 2010-11 in relation to the development of a local economic strategy. (AQO 3303/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The net fiscal balance reports of 2009-2010 and 2010-11 were published in November 2012 after the publication of the Northern Ireland economic strategy (NIES) in March 2012. The NIES, however, recognises that one of the long-term challenges constraining economic performance is an over-reliance on the public sector as a key driver of growth. That, alongside a comparatively small private sector, has contributed to a large fiscal deficit.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat. Will the Minister outline the relationship between the fiscal deficit estimated revenue and the block grant, and how all that is considered in the development of local economic strategies?

Mrs Foster: I have just indicated that the estimate came out after the NIES was put in place. Given that the Member

has asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel some 20 questions on the issue, I would have thought that she would have been able to address those issues there.

Mr G Robinson: Does the Minister agree that now is the time to strengthen ties between the regions of the UK rather than increasing ties with the Republic of Ireland?

Mrs Foster: Of course, as a unionist, I always look for ways to increase ties with the rest of the Union. Given that we have a very strong economy in the UK — the sixth-largest economy in the world — that will be my growing view. That is where our focus should be.

Mr Kinahan: Given that the Northern Ireland public sector revenue has remained flat with an increase of only 2.8% even though the rest of the UK has gone up by 5.7%, and given that the fiscal policy unit has stated that all countries are chasing the same high-tech business, are we looking widely into other areas to ensure that we can narrow that gap in the future?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. He is probably referring to the NISRA figures for GVA that came out last week. It is the first time that we have had a measure of GVA for Northern Ireland, and it indicated that we are bumping along and are, frankly, quite flat. It also indicated that, nationally, the UK economic situation is not much better.

I accept what the Member says about technology jobs. That is our particular strength, as we have seen in and around Belfast, with the way in which we have been able to attract high-end jobs, such as those in the Chicago Mercantile Exchange on the back of the New York Stock Exchange technologies. We have been able to attract our fair share of those high-end technology jobs, but we are looking more widely. We spent some time this afternoon talking about the agrifood strategy. I believe that that is certainly one of the areas on which we could continue to focus. Of course, the creative industries also provide us with a great opportunity, and that is one area that we will look at.

Job Creation

7. **Mr McGimpsey** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline alternative means of developing the economy in terms of job creation apart from selective financial assistance. (AQO 3304/11-15)

Mrs Foster: All actions identified in the Northern Ireland economic strategy will contribute to the Executive's collective goal of creating jobs, wealth and prosperity through a focus on export-led economic growth. Selective financial assistance is only one of the means available to us to boost job creation, but it is one of the most important. It is imperative, therefore, that the revised regional aid guidelines deliver the best possible outcome for Northern Ireland. I will continue to press the Business Secretary and the EU Commission to ensure that this important job creation tool remains available to Invest NI beyond 2013.

The economic strategy also recognises the need for the Executive to secure new policy levers if we are to deliver a step change in Northern Ireland's economic performance. The Executive will continue to press the Prime Minister for an early decision on the devolution of the power to vary the rate of corporation tax.

Mr McGimpsey: How much does she estimate that she will spend on selective financial assistance in the current financial year? How will that spend break down between indigenous and foreign businesses?

Mrs Foster: It is true that we spent 65% on indigenous businesses last year, I think, and 35% on businesses from outside Northern Ireland that were looking to invest in Northern Ireland. I do not have the specific figures to hand, but I am happy to write to the Member with those.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister outline to the House the steps being taken to address concerns about the regional aid guidelines? What impact will they have on the private sector and its potential growth?

Mrs Foster: That is a huge issue for Northern Ireland, particularly as we still have not received an answer on the devolution of corporation tax. We face the worst of both worlds — we have no decision on the devolution of corporation tax, but we face the threat of having the 100% automatic status removed from us.

We have been spending considerable time on the issue. I went to see Commissioner Almunia in December, and, last week, I raised the issue in Europe. Our colleagues in Westminster have been meeting the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. I think that they met Minister Michael Fallon in January. I also took the opportunity to meet Vince Cable while I was at an event last week. We will continue to push the issue of regional aid for Northern Ireland. It is the wrong time to remove the 100% status, particularly when we do not have clarity on corporation tax.

Private Members' Business

School Transport

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly recognises the wide-ranging benefits associated with using public transport; notes with concern the increase in car traffic during school term time; recognises the financial strain on parents paying school transport costs and the administrative costs to implement the current school bus pass system; and calls on the Minister of Education, in conjunction with the Minister for Regional Development, to conduct a feasibility study into providing free public transport for all school pupils. — [Mrs Cochrane.]

Mr Agnew: Home-to-school transport is a significant issue for all of us, regardless of whether we have children, because we are well aware of the increase in traffic congestion at the beginning of and throughout the school term.

3.30 pm

As Mr Kinahan mentioned, we had a motion on the issue previously. Indeed, I tabled an amendment to that motion calling on the Minister to work with his colleague the Minister for Regional Development to provide a sustainable home-to-school transport policy. The cross-departmental nature of the issue needs to be recognised. We will find a suitable way forward only if we find a solution on a cross-departmental basis.

I think that it was Mr Dallat who mentioned the plethora of providers of home-to-school transport. We need to look at reform to find ways to provide that more efficiently. I think that I am right in saying that Michaela Boyle mentioned that a fund from the various Departments could perhaps be pooled for that. As part of my private Member's Bill, I have looked at the services delivered to children. I increasingly hear and see strong arguments on the need for Departments to start to pool budgets to meet such cross-departmental objectives.

Sometimes when we speak on private Member's motions, we wonder whether they have any effect. Given that it is over a year since our previous debate on the matter, I hope that the Minister will tell us not only that he will consider the issues raised but, indeed, that he has considered them since the previous debate and that effective joint working is happening with the Minister for Regional Development.

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

I mentioned the cross-departmental nature of the issue, but it also relates to the Programme for Government. For example, the economic impact of congestion generally should be considered. As we are aware, home-to-school transport has a significant impact, costing the economy an estimated £250 million a year due to the delays that result from congestion. The point will be raised that it would be a costly policy to provide all schoolchildren with free transport. However, we could look at some of the money that the Minister for Regional Development spends. It is proposed that, in my constituency, £2 million will be spent to save two minutes of travel time. The A5 is probably the best example of that, where we propose to

spend hundreds of millions of pounds to save 20 minutes in journey times. I wonder how much more benefit would arise if we put that sort of money into home-to-school transport to tackle the issue once and for all and get children to travel to school by more sustainable modes of transport, including, as has been mentioned, active transport models such as walking and cycling, with the necessary provision to make those options safe.

We talk about fuel poverty quite a lot in the Chamber. We have to accept that this is also a fuel poverty issue. The AA estimates that families spend up to £400 a year to fund transport to school. So, again, I ask the Minister whether his Department has been involved in the cross-departmental working group on fuel poverty and whether this issue is considered in those terms.

Obesity has been mentioned, as has safety. It has been pointed out that bus travel is probably the safest mode of travel. However, I reiterate that we have to make walking and cycling to school safe options. There are certainly examples across Europe of how that is being done. For example, there are walking buses and safe routes to school programmes, which to date have not had a huge take-up by our schools. As Ms Cochrane pointed out in her opening remarks, there are, obviously, environmental benefits. Currently, 52% of primary-school pupils are driven to school, most often within a distance of two miles. We need to address that.

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

Mr Agnew: We need to achieve a cultural change.

I certainly support the motion. The feasibility study needs to take into account not only the issues that are solely in the Department of Education's remit but those that are across Programme for Government priorities. We need to look at how we can meet objectives through that policy.

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

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Fáiltím roimh an deis freagra a thabhairt ar rún an lae inniu. I welcome the opportunity to respond to today's motion.

I should begin by addressing the claim that the school transport policy is uneconomical and outdated. Over 92% of pupils eligible for assistance with their journey to school travel on mass transport, either through a board, private operator or Translink bus. The vast majority of pupils travel by the most economical means available. Approximately half the remaining 8% travel to school by taxi. Where a pupil is in possession of a statement of special educational needs, such statements regularly stipulate that taxi transport is the only suitable means to meet those needs. For the remainder who travel by taxi, that is the most economical response available to boards, as to provide a bus would be significantly more costly. For the remainder, the appropriate response is a parental allowance.

The existing policy is founded on supporting compulsory education. When parents select a grant-aided school for their child to attend, they are legally obliged to ensure their child's regular attendance at that school. Only three exceptions are permitted, one of which is that a child lives so far from the school that, if they had to walk there, they would not be physically able to give of their best. In that instance, a board is legally obliged to assist with transport

to school. As a number of Members pointed out, the distance criterion of two miles for primary-school children and three miles for post-primary-school children is based on what children are physically capable of.

I have no difficulty in supporting a feasibility study, as mentioned in the motion. Unsurprisingly, no Members objected to the motion, but it refers to "all school pupils". If we were to proceed down that line, the figures and costs would be astronomical. It is not the cost of carrying out the feasibility study, which would be relatively cheap in comparison, but, as the proposer of the motion pointed out, somewhere in the region of £74 million is currently spent on transport, and, of that, £1.8 million is spent on administration. However, to provide all schoolchildren with free school transport would cost somewhere in the region of £200 million annually and would cost us around £500 million capital investment in buses and so on.

Mrs Cochrane: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Just one second. The costs are quite astonishing when you look at them. I am more than happy to give way to the Member.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for giving way. I just want to clarify the exact wording of the motion. It refers to:

"providing free public transport for all school pupils."

Therefore, there is a recognition that there will still be the need for eligibility criteria for those who cannot use an existing public transport network.

Mr O'Dowd: I am glad that the Member clarified that. Therefore, we are saying that it is to conduct a feasibility study into providing free public transport for all school pupils. That means that we will no longer use any transport other than Ulsterbus and so on.

Mr Dickson: Read the motion.

Mr O'Dowd: I am reading the motion.

Mrs Cochrane: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will be happy to give way again to get clarification.

Mrs Cochrane: To clarify, it is to encourage more children to use public transport on the public transport routes that are already available and to ensure that there is free transport for those children. You will still have a situation in which children in rural areas will need to have separate buses put on.

Mr O'Dowd: The important thing about motions is that they need to state exactly what Members mean. The motion states:

"to conduct a feasibility study into providing free public transport for all school pupils."

That is exactly what it says. In the Member's introductory remarks, she stated that we spend £1.8 million on the administration of school transport. Therefore, if I use the example that the Member has given to me to clarify the motion, she also suggested that we do away with the £1.8 million for administration and use it for public transport. Who will administer the scheme that the Member proposes? You need administrators. That is the reality of the situation. The system that the Member pointed out to me will need to be administered. It will need individuals

to decide who is eligible for the transport that you pointed out, what bus routes they will travel on, how those passes will be issued, who will be eligible for the passes etc. I point that out because, although Members can, quite rightly, stand up in the Chamber and support all motions and feel free to do so, there are cost implications, resource implications and personnel implications in all these motions.

I think it was the UUP that secured a debate about a year ago calling on me to have a review of school transport and asking why it had not been conducted as yet. It will be conducted. I am examining who would be best to carry out the review. There has been a time lag because I want further information and clarity around the area planning process before bringing forward the review. The report by Sir Robert Salisbury and his team also recommends that the review is carried out sooner rather than later. I am conscious of that, and I will now bring that review forward in the short term because the legislation and criteria require to be reviewed. We are dealing with a £75 million budget, which is a significant budget in my Department, and I want to ensure that it is spent in the best possible way. As part of that review, it would be best to carry out the feasibility study called for in this motion, which refers to providing free public transport.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for giving way. Will he assure the House that, in relation to the proposed review, the information already obtained by the PEDU work in his Department, which looked specifically at transport, is also taken into consideration? There was a lot of valuable information there on savings that could be made in the transport process.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member is correct. The PEDU review will be invaluable in carrying out the transport review. A number of Members have stated that significant pieces of work have been carried out on these matters already that will be invaluable to whomever carries out the transport review going into the future.

Members are right in the sense that one of the most prolific schools issues, as regards mail to the Department of Education and the education boards, is how we provide transport to schools. However, there will always be a cut-off point, whether it is three miles, two miles or one mile. There has to be some form of regulation. We have to ensure that we provide a form of transport that is based on the provision of a service based on equality and need. The review will allow us to do that. The clarification of the motion may assist in some of these things.

We also have collective responsibilities. A number of Members referred to the health and well-being programmes of the Department of Health, DRD and, indeed, my own Department, which encourage children to walk and cycle to school. I acknowledge that this is not the easiest option in some rural areas because of safety concerns around rural roads, but we also have to take it into account that we want to encourage more young people to walk or cycle to school for their own well-being.

There is little for me to say about a motion on which everybody seems to be in agreement other than that I will carry out the feasibility study as part of the ongoing transport review. I welcome the clarification from the proposer of the motion of exactly what the motion means. Whatever the outcomes of the transport review, however,

we will have to take into consideration the budgetary constraints placed on Members.

Members asked a number of questions, for instance about the joint working group with DRD and the Department of Health on the use of board buses. My officials had another meeting about that last week, so that work is ongoing, and they will report on it. One Member asked whether DE was a member of the all-party working group on fuel poverty. I am seeking clarification on that and will respond to the Member directly. I will publish the terms of reference of the review, making them available to the Education Committee when they are available. We will progress and then report to the House with regard to the review.

3.45 pm

Mr Dickson: I thank my colleague Judith Cochrane for bringing the motion to the House today. I will not waste the House's time by reiterating the mainly positive comments in support of today's motion from around the House today.

I would like to preface my remarks by saying that this is not about the Department of Education. This is a genuinely cross-cutting issue and presents a challenge to the Assembly to lift its horizons and consider a new approach to solving a problem. Minister, this is not an attack on you or your Department; rather, it is about trying to get something right for the people, if we could all work together to raise our horizons and deal with these issues. The motion is about requesting a feasibility study of the prospect of free public transport for children attending school.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. Unfortunately, I was not able to stay for the whole debate. There is one issue about the motion that still bemuses me. Although I have no difficulty in accepting that a feasibility study should be carried out, we need to be careful that we do not end up in the same position as we were with another debate that took place in the House about free prescriptions. The people of Northern Ireland need to understand that, if you take money out of one element of the system, that will affect some other one. Do the Member and the Member who proposed the motion accept that that should also be included in the remit of the feasibility study, so that we know exactly the real cost to Northern Ireland plc?

Mr Dickson: I wholeheartedly agree with the Member. There is no such thing as a free prescription, and there is certainly no such thing as a free gallon of water either.

Free public transport schemes have been tried and tested in various ways in countries across the globe. This is another way for Northern Ireland to lead, innovate and think outside the box. In some cases, it is restricted to specific areas such as city centres or, indeed, in Northern Ireland, to the over-60s, who all can avail themselves of free public transport. The emphasis is on that public transport. Members may be aware that, for example, in the capital of Estonia, in the last month they have embarked on a city-wide free transport scheme, and that includes children attending schools in the city.

My colleague Judith Cochrane has today asked for a feasibility study to be carried out. I know that the Department for Regional Development, which I have perhaps more insight into than the Department of Education, will have some experience of undertaking such studies and delivering programmes when we consider

the concessions that have been afforded to the over-60s population, as I said. Although I do not speak for everybody in the 60-64 age group — I am actually 62 — I have been contacted by constituents in that bracket, many of whom are still at work and do not want to use that concession. However, it is free and open to all of them. Likewise, there will be parents who decide that any free transport on offer is not necessarily for their children. Nevertheless, part of the logic for offering the concession to the over-60s is to tackle social exclusion. Research has shown that children and young people are more at risk in that regard, adding another reason why we should give serious consideration to free school transport.

To add a comparison, the operational cost of delivering concessionary fares last year to those aged 60 to 64 was £6.7 million, which would actually fund a further 10,300 bus passes for our schoolchildren. Although we appreciate that those savings need to be made as a result of a more constrained public expenditure environment, the Executive must also invest to save. In Budget debates, the Alliance Party has frequently raised the issue of silo decisions. What we are trying to do today is get out of that silo and encourage you, Minister, and the Minister for Regional Development to work together to solve this problem and to come forward with innovative ideas for delivering free public transport to children attending schools. That would, of course, take us in a different direction from that which is currently envisaged in the joint report from the Department of Education and DFP, which recommends reducing the numbers eligible for home-to-school transport. That would be a retrograde step, given that we should be attempting to bring about a shift in attitudes to public transport, which is another benefit of a policy such as this. If we can instil a preference for public transport in children and young people, that will help us to widen our effort to bring about a modal shift away from our dependence on the private car.

Providing free school transport for all would obviously incur substantial costs. Those, however, could be balanced by the potential savings; for example, reduced congestion, which is estimated to cost our local economy some £250 million a year. Research has shown that approximately one in five cars on the road at peak times is on the school run and that nearly half of parents would send their children to school by bus if it were free.

There is potential to cut the number of vehicles on our roads, which would reduce congestion. It would also bring about savings in our road maintenance and wear and tear and benefits for people's health. Reducing the number of vehicles, as Members have made reference to in the past, would also improve safety. As my colleague Judith Cochrane noted, you are nine times less likely to be involved in an accident if you travel by public transport. That is particularly relevant when you consider the massive build-up of cars at schools around drop-off and pick-up times. It would have the further consequence of allowing the children who wish to walk or even ride a bicycle to school to do so in an environment in which there are fewer cars, which are an obvious danger for children, particularly around schools.

In addition, there are potential environmental benefits and associated savings. Emissions from vehicles and exhausts are significant, and they are the source of air pollution. That is particularly important for us, as Northern Ireland is the second most car-dependent society in Europe. As my

colleague said, a single bus journey will emit fewer fumes than 20 cars combined. Train emissions are 50% less per passenger per kilometre than those from private cars. We really need to calculate the potential environmental benefits and associated savings against the costs. That is why this is about thinking outside the box.

In recent months, we have been attempting to consider the active travel strategy and how walking and cycling are much connected to the availability of public transport. The combination of walking, cycling and public transport could bring about excellent health improvements and pass on financial benefits to our health service. We should not underestimate the health benefits of a daily walk to the bus stop that replaces a car journey from the front door of your home to the front door of your school.

Members may believe that free school transport would simply cost too much to deliver. However, I remind Members that we spend £270 million every year on subsidising water for our citizens, the benefits of which arguably do not offer the same scope for savings elsewhere. We need a comprehensive feasibility study that allows us to weigh the costs against the benefits, to take properly informed decisions about the future of school transport and to encourage the House and Ministers on a cross-cutting basis to think about innovative and imaginative ways to deliver for the young people of Northern Ireland and their future. Potential savings need to be made. In a genuinely shared society, this is a challenge that the Assembly needs to rise to.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the wide-ranging benefits associated with using public transport; notes with concern the increase in car traffic during school term time; recognises the financial strain on parents paying school transport costs and the administrative costs to implement the current school bus pass system; and calls on the Minister of Education, in conjunction with the Minister for Regional Development, to conduct a feasibility study into providing free public transport for all school pupils.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

National Crime Agency

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. As a valid petition of concern was presented on Friday 1 February, the vote on the motion will be on a cross-community basis.

Mr Elliott: I beg to move

That this Assembly supports a legislative consent motion in relation to the Crime and Courts Bill to give effect to the proposed National Crime Agency operating in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Justice to progress this as a matter of urgency.

I appreciate the opportunity to move the motion at a very timely stage in the process. Her Majesty's Government of the United Kingdom are bringing through legislation to have a National Crime Agency. The Ulster Unionist Party believes that this is vital to fight the entire crime organisation not only in the United Kingdom or in Northern Ireland but internationally and throughout the world. This is a fight against serious and organised crime. I know — at least I have been informed — that there have been attempts to bring a legislative consent motion to the Executive and that those attempts have failed. That is very costly to Northern Ireland and to the fight against crime and serious international crime.

No one, no party and no organisation should oppose the legal and honourable methods of reducing serious and organised crime. I will listen with intent to those who may wish to put forward their views on why they would want or try to inhibit the fight against such crime and criminals, not only in Northern Ireland but throughout the world.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way so early in his speech. Given the context in which we are having the debate, does the Member agree that, in Northern Ireland — set aside from the rest of the United Kingdom — crime, criminality and terrorism are closely related? Does he also agree that crime and criminality often feed terrorism financially?

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for that. Clearly, there has been a history of terrorism and criminals being linked in Northern Ireland and of one being the other. However, this is not just about terrorism and the dissident terrorist threat in Northern Ireland. It is much wider. It is about international crime and criminals. It is about the drug trafficking, the people trafficking, the smuggling, the serious organised crime and the paedophiles. By and large, that is the type of crime we are talking about. It is important that the people of Wales, Scotland, England and, indeed, the Republic of Ireland have every right to as much protection as we have in Northern Ireland. On the other hand, that is why we in Northern Ireland have as much right to that protection as they have. That is all that I and the Ulster Unionist Party are asking for. We ask for equality, which should help to cut out this criminal activity.

I was very surprised that Sinn Féin has tabled a motion on the regulation of social networking websites, which will be debated tomorrow. I may be surprised, but I am

glad that they are bringing it forward. However, they are doing so against the background of what I assume is their opposition to a Bill that would help to fight exactly the things they will discuss tomorrow. I am interested to hear why they have opposed this legislative consent motion yet still want to table their own motion. I just cannot understand that. It is quite —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Elliott: OK.

Mr Allister: Could it be because, in the words of my Member of Parliament, Mr Ian Paisley, there are those in government, he seems to say, who wish to keep their hands in control of these matters because they:

"have their hands in the pie of organised crime."?

Who does the Member think the Member of Parliament for North Antrim was referring to in the context of the Northern Ireland Executive? Who might they be who:

"have their hands in the pie of organised crime."?

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for that point. That is obviously an issue that he and his Member of Parliament can discuss and perhaps more openly tell us in here who they are talking about, rather than me second-guessing them. I do not think that any of us need to look too far to assume who he is talking about.

There is a responsibility on all of us to support and protect the citizens of Northern Ireland. I can only assume that there is a lack of confidence among those who want to oppose this legislative consent motion and oppose the National Crime Agency having jurisdiction in Northern Ireland. I can also only assume that they have a lack of confidence in the policing and justice system in Northern Ireland that they helped to bring about.

So, that is a severe lack of confidence, and I must be absolutely open and blunt about it — I think that it is an emotional nationalist/republican green agenda, rather —

4.00 pm

Mr McDevitt: Will Mr Elliott give way?

Mr Elliott: Sorry; not the Green Party. It is a green agenda that is being brought forward by them because they just cannot accept anything that might have a hint of Britishness. I will give way in a moment. They cannot accept anything that is just British or national here in Northern Ireland.

Mr McDevitt: I appreciate Mr Elliott's giving way. To save him his rhetorical flush for the remaining three minutes, I say to him that the debate is not about whether there should be a National Crime Agency (NCA). That is not the debate. The debate is about whether, when it operates in a devolved framework, it should be as accountable as the PSNI is today.

In other words, when we have PSNI officers that we hold fully to account through the Policing Board, and we have, potentially, National Crime Agency officers, they should be held to the same standard of accountability. That standard is one that, I believe, his party and mine have fought hard for 15 years to protect and defend. I trust that he wishes to continue to protect and defend it. So, sir, this is about

accountability; it is not about some fantasy of yours, which appears to be about your politics.

Mr Elliott: If anyone knows anything about rhetorical speeches, it is certainly the South Belfast Member who has just spoken. He certainly espouses it. I can tell you — *[Interruption.]* Then, what about the accountability, Mr McDevitt, through you, Mr Speaker? I understand that concessions have been got by the Minister here from Her Majesty's Government: concessions that actually mean that the Chief Constable is still the senior officer; that the National Crime Agency will have a secondary position to the PSNI; and that it will be accountable to the Police Ombudsman. What more do you want? Do you actually want it to be that it is of no use at all to Northern Ireland and to the public here? I have to tell you that I think that that is what Sinn Féin and the SDLP want. Because it is accountable and concessions have been given by the organisation to allow it to accept the more delicate nature of policing in Northern Ireland.

I listened to your colleague, Mr McDevitt — sorry, I did not listen to him, I read his statement. He is sitting beside you. In his statement, Mr Maginness indicated:

"Scotland is wise to oppose this move. We should do the same."

I understand that the Government in Scotland are showing great co-operation towards this. They are going to implement it and support the proposals, along with Her Majesty's Government.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Elliott: If you are very quick, Mr McDevitt.

Mr McDevitt: I have not long left a meeting with the director of the proposed NCA, and he was the first to admit that all the so-called concessions are not in statute and that he cannot make a commitment that they will go into statute. Therefore, I am afraid that what we have is promises. What we need is law.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member further give way?

Mr Elliott: OK.

Mr Dickson: I, too, attended the meeting with the director of the NCA, and one thing that he made very clear to me, and I hope that Mr Elliott will agree with me on this, was that not one single officer of any proposed NCA operating in Northern Ireland would have the powers of a constable. Therefore, the Chief Constable of the —

A Member: That is not true.

Mr Dickson: Sorry — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr McDevitt: He does not know what he is talking about.

Mr Dickson: I know what I heard — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Dickson: I know that I heard the director of the organisation say to me that he would not have the powers of a constable and, therefore, would report to the Policing Board and through the Chief Constable of the PSNI.

Mr Elliott: Like always, I am much too generous with my time and everything else. *[Laughter.]* However, I will say, finally, that this is about protecting people in Northern

Ireland and throughout the world. I support it, and it is time that others had the confidence to do the same.

Mr Givan: I support the motion and apologise for missing the first couple of minutes of the debate. Just to pick up on Mr Elliott's last point: this is, ultimately, about the protection of the people. That is really what is at play in all of this; and it is disheartening that the SDLP, in particular, is playing politics with people's safety. Sinn Féin's position does not surprise me, but the SDLP's position in all of this is hugely regrettable. A party that prides itself on having stood for years against the Provisional IRA's campaign and for law and order, today stands on the side of the criminal. I will give way to Mr McDevitt.

Mr McDevitt: It is a simple request. Mr Givan works the systems provided by the Good Friday Agreement. His leader is in office because of the will of the people to support the Good Friday Agreement. His party colleagues sit on the Policing Board. It is a simple ask. If agents of the state are operating in a devolved part of criminal justice, they should be accountable through and to the Policing Board. Why does he not stand with us to make that so, so that we can get back to the business of doing it the right way? The right way is with the accountability framework that is in place in this jurisdiction.

Mr Speaker: The Member has a minute added on to his time.

Mr Givan: The Member will know that this party operates the system according to the St Andrews Agreement not the Good Friday Agreement. He makes a point about operating the institutions in the way in which they have been established. Why then operate the policing structures when the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) —

Mr McDevitt: We opposed that.

Mr Givan: You signed up to policing under Patten, with the arrangements that currently exist for SOCA. *[Interruption.]* So did Sinn Féin.

Mr Speaker: Order. Members should not debate across the Chamber.

Mr Givan: The position of the SDLP and Sinn Féin is completely bankrupt because they cannot now argue against a principle that they conceded when they signed up to policing to do with the Serious Organised Crime Agency. Of course, they are operating under a system in which they have a Policing Board, but, ultimately, this organisation will be subject to the arrangements of the Policing Board.

In opposing the legislative consent motion, the National Crime Agency will still be able to operate on issues such as immigration and customs because they are reserved matters. Under this arrangement, which is a compromise, they would be subject to Policing Board scrutiny and to Police Ombudsman investigation. If Sinn Féin and the SDLP continue on this line, those functions will operate, I suspect, without any scrutiny from the Policing Board and without the Police Ombudsman having any jurisdiction, because why would you volunteer that when the overall package is being snubbed by the SDLP and Sinn Féin?

They operate a policing structure in Northern Ireland that they signed up to, with MI5 operating in Northern Ireland. That is the system that currently operates, so now they argue on a principle that was long conceded —

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I am not going to give way to the Member. He will have an opportunity to address these points shortly. They are arguing now on a principle that they conceded a long time ago. Maybe it is some kind of charade that they want to play to the backwoodsmen in their parties who are rankling them and asking how they allowed MI5 to continue to operate and why that was not sorted out as part of the deal. They lost that argument, and now they are holding the safety of the public to ransom by the position that they are now taking, which is wholly wrong.

We will have these arguments, but I will make a point to the Home Secretary: if Sinn Féin and, sadly, the SDLP continue to take that approach, the clock will be wound back. The Home Secretary should act, if she has the legal authority to do so, to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland do not get a second-rate policing service.

That is ultimately what will happen if this is allowed to stand and the SDLP and Sinn Féin exercise a blocking mechanism. It is beyond me why they want to position themselves on the side of those who exploit children and traffic human beings in Northern Ireland. I can understand why there is unease about fuel smugglers being targeted, but surely when it comes to children and to human trafficking, we want to make sure that we have the most competent resources at our disposal to be able to tackle those heinous types of crime. Their position is flawed and should be opposed, and this party will continue to expose it as being politically and morally bankrupt.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Members will know that policing was a crucial part of the Good Friday Agreement. In fact, it was so contentious that the only agreement was to send it off to an independent international commission — the Patten Commission — to bring back recommendations, which it duly did.

At the core of those recommendations and of the new beginning to policing was the fact that it should be impartial, free from partisan control, representative and, perhaps most importantly, accountable. Let me make it clear: Sinn Féin is very much for fighting organised crime, whether it is human trafficking, child abuse, drugs, illegal cigarettes —

Mr Wells: Petrol.

Mr G Kelly: — petrol, theft, burglary — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Wells: Diesel. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr G Kelly: — fuel laundering — whatever you want to name it, Jim, OK? Sinn Féin is for policing and for moving ahead. I remind the UUP, which tabled the motion, that it also signed up to that. Where is the confidence in the PSNI now? This debate is about the notion of having another police force in the North. That does not show confidence in the PSNI.

We have reached a point where the PSNI is capable of handling all crime. It has a huge serious crime unit. It has asked for international reach and information-sharing through Europol and Interpol. It sometimes asks for outside expertise, and it should have access to that. We support that. That is all available already. Direct and mutual assistance exists with the guards and many other

police services. We are against a second police force that would not be accountable to the Chief Constable.

I would like to explain something for the benefit of one of the Members who spoke earlier. Keith Bristow said that he personally, as the leader of the NCA, would not have the power of a constable. However, every other member of the NCA will. The Member should check that. That is the legal position that is being pushed forward.

The NCA will not be accountable to the Policing Board or through any of the other accountability mechanisms. It will have more power than the PSNI: it will have the power of a constable, the power of customs and the power of a border patrol. It will also have the power of secrecy. We have already had that: we had the force within a force. That is why we had to have the Patten commission. We do not want a force outside a force. The way that this is going, with the British Home Secretary saying that she will expand the NCA's power, points to an FBI-type expansion of powers in the future.

I ask people to have sense. This motion is about undermining the PSNI and the Patten reforms, not strengthening them. Co-operation between the PSNI and other agencies is supported by Sinn Féin, but not at the cost of local accountability. It took until 2010 to get policing and justice powers into a local Department. Frankly, the Minister is now offering to give power back. Without that power, he would not even have become Minister.

The PSNI has a budget of £1.2 billion. It has a workforce of up to 10,000 civilians and police officers. We support that. If they need new skills, let us talk that out in the context of accountability. If new resources are needed, that is dealt with by the Policing Board on an ongoing basis.

Mr Givan: The Member talks about a need for greater resources. Will he outline how the PSNI would be able to acquire the necessary international resources, particularly to deal with cybercrime and the monitoring of paedophiles, without a national organisation that does that across the world on our behalf?

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

Mr G Kelly: The Member is making a mistake. The NCA exists. No one here is arguing against its existence. However, any required expertise that is not in the hands of the PSNI can still be acquired. I repeat clearly that you cannot have another force within a force, or outside a force: people who are not accountable to the Chief Constable — they will not be — or to the other accountability mechanisms.

We have gone through weeks of damage to confidence in policing. If we needed more damage, this is the way to do it. I urge people not to support this motion.

We were told that David Ford was going to London to have negotiations to win more effective safeguards, not to come back here and tell us that we should be in line with London after it took so long to wrest that power away from London and into local hands. This is not London, Birmingham or Finchley. We —

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): Will the Member give way?

Mr G Kelly: You are going to get up for 10 minutes at the end, so I will let you answer me then. I am nearly out of time.

We do not need a reversal of accountability mechanisms. I argue very strongly that we should reject the motion. The PSNI is capable of doing this. If it needs more expertise, we can get it.

4.15 pm

Mr A Maginness: I want to make it plain that the SDLP is against organised crime, human trafficking, economic crime, child exploitation and cybercrime. It is for online protection. It is against all those things about which Members quite rightly spoke and with which the NCA will deal. The SDLP is not against the NCA.

What we are for, however, is Patten. We have made that plain in this House and at Westminster, through, in particular, Mark Durkan MP. He has talked in very strong terms about protecting Patten and ensuring that the accountability measures under Patten remain in place.

Under the present legislation, those protections and that accountability under Patten will be under serious threat. That is what the SDLP is against. It is sad that we have disagreement in the House, because we are all agreed that we are against organised crime. The sadness is that we cannot reach a political agreement to preserve the gains that Patten made for us all here in Northern Ireland. I think that it is important that we preserve those gains.

That is why the motion comes at a very difficult time for everybody. The legislation is going through the House of Commons, and, of course, we know the ramifications of that. It would be much better —

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: Yes.

Mr Wells: Patten is not the Koran or Holy Writ. What is more important: that you continue to worship in the temple called the Patten report, or that we protect children, stop drug abusers, stop fuel launderers and stop organised crime? Which is more important? Is Patten so sacrosanct that it cannot bend one iota to protect the wider community?

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

Mr A Maginness: The reality is that we have achieved an immense amount under Patten. For the first time in the history of this region, we have a police service that enjoys the support of the vast majority of people right across the community, whether they are republicans, loyalists, unionists, nationalists, Catholics or Protestants. Most people support the PSNI, and that, whether you like it or not, is because of Patten. That is the reality of the situation that —

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: Yes.

Mr McGlone: Continuing on that theme, would the Member accept that transparency and accountability in policing are key elements not only of Patten but of human rights compliance and the acceptability of policing? Does the Member also accept that the current NCA proposals can, indeed, only widen that accountability gap in policing?

Mr A Maginness: I accept everything that the Member says; it is well said indeed. That view is very much supported by the Committee on the Administration of

Justice and other human rights organisations that have taken a very close interest in this debate.

Indeed, the Westminster Joint Committee on Human Rights complained recently about the fact that, under the present legislation, the NCA will not be accountable under the Freedom of Information Act and will be exempt from it. That is entirely wrong. We want transparency and accountability.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No, I cannot give way; I am going to run out of time.

The Chief Constable of the PSNI will not have authority over the NCA here. That is the reality of the situation. There may be all sorts of understandings and rubrics for the operational side of the NCA here, but when it comes to creating law, which is what we are about here, there will be no statutory basis for that. That is the problem with this proposal.

Let the British Government go back to the drawing board and redraft their legislation so that there is accountability here and so that we can preserve the gains of Patten, which have been enormous.

In a recent 'News Letter' article describing the SDLP's attitude, Mr Elliott said that we are anti-British. First, I am not anti-British at all, nor, indeed, is my party. What I will say is this: there is nothing anti-British in saying that there is a lack of accountability. Peter Hitchens, a well-known columnist in the 'Daily Mail', says that the legislation put forward in the House of Commons and the House of Lords is, in fact, anti-British. Why does he say that it is anti-British? He says that it is anti-British because the concept of a national single unitary police service in Britain is anathema to the British tradition. He says that because there is not a national police service in Britain but 32 constabularies. In fact, the reason that the British Government want to establish this —

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

Mr A Maginness: — type of authority is precisely because of that lack of a unitary police service. We believe that the Government —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is gone.

Mr A Maginness: — should go back to the drawing board, look at this again and come forward with proposals that can satisfy all of us in the House.

Mr Dickson: I support the motion, but I regret that it has had to be brought before the Assembly. I further regret that it is subject to a petition of concern.

The chief aim of the proposed NCA is to tackle organised crime. That is crime that affects everyone in our society and costs the United Kingdom economy, which is also our economy, between £20 billion and £40 billion each year. The NCA will target four key areas: organised crime; border policing; economic crime; and, last but not least, child exploitation and online protection. Failing to pass a legislative consent motion (LCM) will come back to bite those who oppose it. They will make it much more difficult for us to deal with those crimes in our community. The motion is about backing the PSNI, not undermining the PSNI.

There are other organisations operating in Northern Ireland that have the powers of a constable and for whom there are direct rule responsibilities and not local accountability, not least HMRC officers when they act in that role.

The alternative to the NCA operating in Northern Ireland is an administrative nightmare, with some areas becoming operational because the Assembly cannot stop them becoming operational and others, despite the efforts of Sinn Féin and the SDLP, having to reinvent the wheel and, if it were necessary, costing the PSNI and the Budget of this Assembly even more money to do so. That will fragment efforts to tackle crime nationally and internationally, and, frankly, will make us the laughing stock of the community across the border in the Republic of Ireland, throughout Europe and throughout international policing.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: No, I want to finish this. In contrast, the NCA would work throughout the UK, fostering a co-ordinated national and international approach. It is clear that the latter aligns itself much better with everything that is appropriate in expertise and experience, telling us about what we need to do to deal with organised crime in the 21st century. We must not allow political dogma to drown out the evidence. Just because this is an all-UK approach does not make it bad and something of which we should be suspicious.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: No, I will not. Organised crime is increasingly transnational. It has no respect for borders, whether between Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland or in the rest of Europe. Crime groups are quick to take advantage of the differences in legal codes or state capabilities across borders to accomplish their ends. We have witnessed that when people and traffickers have used countries with lax immigration controls as transit states and when thieves and smugglers have exploited flaws in border controls. Sadly, we see that all too often across the international border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Crime groups are quick to catch on to those weaknesses.

In those circumstances, do we really want the NCA, which will co-operate with groups across the world, operating everywhere but Northern Ireland? No, we need it to operate in Northern Ireland. We are already being targeted by international crime gangs that operate on a global scale.

Why do the parties on my right wish to put Northern Ireland at further risk of insecurity? Recent history demonstrates the need to counter such activity through transnational policing arrangements. How can Members from Sinn Féin and the SDLP justify to their constituents making Northern Ireland more vulnerable to the activities of human traffickers, drug dealers, child abusers, fuel launderers and tax evaders? That is the society that you want for Northern Ireland.

Tomorrow, we will hear pious words about internet safety from the same people who want to tie our hands behind our backs when it comes to fighting those crimes. Weasel words.

We have got to consider the resource implications of this. Quite simply, we cannot reject the offer that is being made by the NCA, and we cannot afford to deliver this ourselves.

Mr Kelly and others in this Chamber are members of the Policing Board. They cannot seriously ask the PSNI to expend the amount the budget that would be required to deliver the sort of information that is necessary to deal with this. The type of criminals we are talking about operate in a cyberworld, a fast world and an internet world.

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

Mr Dickson: The way to deal with this is to use the expertise and resources of the NCA. This is too serious a matter. For the Members of this House and for the citizens of Northern Ireland to be defended from the heinous crimes I mentioned, the NCA should be allowed to operate here.

Mr Wells: I was not expecting to be called so early, Mr Speaker.

First, history has been made: I have never sat and listened to the honourable Member for East Antrim Mr Dickson for five minutes and agreed with every word that he said. That is unique, and I am re-examining my political position because I am so shocked that it has happened. We can make facetious comments, but this is very serious.

Many of us, particularly the older Members from my era, will have watched the movies where the posse are chasing the bandits through the American wild west. In those films, the posse come to a line in the sand and have to stop. The gang then gets away scot-free because the posse have no jurisdiction across the border in the next state. If we pursue what the SDLP and Sinn Féin want to do, that is the situation in which we are going to leave ourselves. We could have a situation in which members of a criminal gang — maybe a human trafficking group — have got on the boat at Stranraer and are heading towards Larne and the control exercised by those on the mainland —

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: I will, certainly.

Mr McDevitt: I do not mean to spike the guns, pardon the terrible pun, but that is just simply not true. We are not against people being able to operate across borders or across regional or jurisdictional areas. However, when they operate here, which is a devolved area, we should be united as an Assembly on the fact that they should be subject to the same accountability framework as anyone else who is upholding the law and has a warrant card in their hand operate within in this devolved area. Surely, that is something that should unite us. We should not be divided. Mr Wells is telling us what we all know to be the problem without addressing how we can come up with a solution.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Wells: We all had meetings today with the officers responsible for the NCA, and they have made it very clear that they are perfectly happy to answer to the Policing Board and to come forward and answer any questions put to them. They are prepared to be scrutinised to the nth degree, to a level that they would not be in the rest of the United Kingdom.

I am surprised by the SDLP, but I am not remotely surprised by Sinn Féin, because many of its erstwhile friends are involved in the very activities that the NCA is designed to stop; the diesel smuggling, the drugs and all

of the other sinister activities that they have been up to for many decades. Therefore, there is a vested interest here.

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the Member of his language in the House. He is an experienced parliamentarian and, on occasions, would want to be known as the Father of the House. He should behave as an experienced parliamentarian.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: Certainly, yes.

Mr Humphrey: We have listened to two Members who represent North Belfast, which is where 25% of the people murdered in the Troubles were killed — *[Interruption.]* This is obviously very funny for some. Does the Member agree that the people who represent that constituency should remember that every resource that can be used to bring people to book should be used?

Mr Maginness talked about there being 32 police services across the United Kingdom. That is all the more reason why there should be a joined-up approach and why the new organisation should be introduced, particularly here in Northern Ireland. You completely undermine your argument when you say that.

4.30 pm

Mr A Maginness: There is only one here.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us not debate it across the Chamber. Allow the Member to continue.

Mr Wells: I did not think that the phrase “vested interest” constituted unparliamentary language, but everyone in this Chamber and the dogs on the street know what I am talking about. I am not surprised that Sinn Féin opposes this, because it knows that, if there is good and adequate co-operation between the police forces in the United Kingdom, it is inevitable that some people whom they may well know will end up in prison. However, I am surprised about the SDLP.

Mr Allister: Does the Member agree that, if policing and justice had not been devolved, the very people he refers to would not have had the opportunity, in the words of Mr Givan, to hold us to ransom on this vital issue?

Mr Wells: I do not accept that. There was scaremongering in the lead-up to the devolution of policing and justice, but the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland, as some Members have said, are genuinely satisfied with the delivery of that. It has not been perfect, and, like everyone else, the Minister has his failings, but there has generally been satisfaction. That is not the issue here.

The issue is that so-called constitutional nationalists are prepared to undermine the fight against international drug trafficking, human trafficking, diesel laundering and all the other cross-border crimes that are so evident. They know, for instance, that, as far as human trafficking is concerned, none of this is home-grown. As far as we know, not a single woman who is being held in captivity in Northern Ireland is actually from Northern Ireland. They have been trafficked from China, from Ghana and from eastern Europe outside the EEC and are held in wretched conditions. We need the full authority of the NCA to track these people across international borders and to give intelligence.

Some nonsense has been talked about how we can develop our own intelligence. We are a little part of the world, part of the United Kingdom, with 1.8 million people. We do not have the resources to build up a vast international network of information. You know that that cannot happen. The NCA has been reasonable and is trying to accommodate moderate nationalism and to be as open and transparent as possible. However, the reality is that, if you proceed to oppose —

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

Mr Wells: — this motion, we will be seriously disadvantaged as far as international crime is concerned in Northern Ireland.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag labhairt in éadan an rúin. I will speak in opposition to the motion. Whatever I say today, I will give one guarantee: it will not be based on a cowboy movie that I saw when I was young but on facts and facts only.

There are a number of issues in relation to the establishment of the NCA and the impact that it will have on the policing structures in the North, and I want to explore some of those today. Gerry Kelly and Alban Maginness have already mentioned them. This is about police primacy and about accountability. Historically, the inability to have proper police primacy and proper accountability mechanisms led us to the situation that we found ourselves in. It is our task, as legislators and public representatives, never to allow that circumstance to happen again. That is why we stand, first of all, in opposition to an LCM. Even in this particular instance, taking it away from the issue of the NCA, the Assembly should legislate for itself. We do not need to follow Westminster legislation blindly without any scrutiny. We should scrutinise any —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: I will indeed.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member accept that SOCA and other organisations that are being brought together have already been operating in Northern Ireland for the benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland? Why is he now insisting, with their demise, that there will not be an effective system in place to address internet crime? Other forms of intelligence are available. Why is he putting the lives of the people of Northern Ireland at risk from these criminals?

Mr Speaker: The Member has a minute added on to his time.

Mr McCartney: There is a massive assumption in what you are saying that standing in opposition to SOCA or the NCA will put anybody's life at risk. The PSNI is the force that is tasked with law enforcement in this jurisdiction — nobody else. That is what we are arguing for. Are you saying that the PSNI is not up to it or has been irresponsible or has allowed people to die in the past?

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: I will not give way again.

The PSNI has a clear and defined role. Primacy of policing is at its core, and accountability is central. Last week, in response to a question for urgent answer, the Minister said that he was keen to see the NCA:

“operating in a way that is fully accountable, in line with the policing architecture which exists [here]” — [Official Report, This Bound Volume, p133, col 2].

The Minister will have an opportunity to say whether he believes that the NCA will be fully accountable in operating within the architecture. If it is not, he has a responsibility as Minister to ensure that it does not happen unless it lives up to what he said to the House last week.

Stewart Dickson was up, and it is grand to talk in all these grand terms about the fact that child abuse, diesel smuggling and so on will go unabated. Is he saying that that is happening at present? Is he saying that that is going unchecked because the PSNI is not doing its job? I do not think that he is. Missing from all of this —

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: No, I have already given way once, and I have limited time.

Missing from all of this is the word “co-operation”.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: No, I have already given way, and we have limited time.

Gerry Kelly said that the NCA exists. Why cannot the PSNI co-operate with it, as it does with other law enforcement agencies? Regarding the investigation into the death of the garda last week, is anyone suggesting that the gardaí should come up here and take over the PSNI? Co-operation will ensure that those responsible can be brought to book.

The NCA and the British Home Secretary make no apology for saying that the NCA will not be accountable. It is easier for whoever to come in front of you and say that they will go in front of the Policing Board, and the NCA may say, but, if it is not in legislation that it is fully accountable, as any other police constable who operates in this jurisdiction would be, such a protocol is not worth the paper that it is written on. Last week, it was said very clearly that, in the past, there were protocols the length of our arms on policing in the North that were sidestepped, undermined and circumvented by those who wanted to make political decisions. Under this legislation, the British Home Secretary has the power to extend the powers of the NCA at her whim. You have closed your eyes to that power. That should not be allowed to take place in any jurisdiction, particularly this one. We were mandated here to legislate, not to close our eyes to Westminster legislation.

The NCA said in the document that it released on 8 July 2012 that it will take a tasking co-ordination function, stepping in directly to task local police services. That is more or less saying that the PSNI will become secondary to the work of the NCA without accountability. We will not allow anyone or any single person to undermine public confidence in the strength of the accountability mechanisms.

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

Mr McCartney: That is why we oppose this and say that the watchwords will be primacy and accountability. That is why we put in a petition of concern.

Mr Humphrey: I have always supported the rule of law. I have always opposed — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to continue.

Mr Humphrey: I know that that will be a shock to some across the Chamber, who would not know what that meant if it were looking at them. I speak in support of the rule of law. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us not debate it across the Chamber. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Humphrey: I speak in support of law and order and the courts, because all those protect democracy, and I have always believed in democracy and the primacy of the ballot box. In Northern Ireland, organised crime, criminality and terrorism are interlinked, and that is why we have multimillion-pound business empires established by organisations that Mr Wells referred to earlier. I have always opposed criminality, violence, intimidation, racketeering, fraud, human trafficking, forced labour and robberies, including bank robberies. Frankly, in recent days, with the finding of yet more fuel laundering depots in south Armagh, we have heard clearly about the damage that this does to the Northern Ireland economy and to Northern Ireland plc.

If the SDLP is really about trying to get the issue of accountability sorted out, it should work on trying to address accountability and not simply oppose these issues. Mr Elliott was absolutely right: this is not about accountability; this is opposition from nationalists to laws that seem to come from London and the national Parliament at Westminster.

Mr G Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Humphrey: No. The sharing of information across this kingdom is vital. Mr Maginness made reference to Scotland. In Scotland, they are looking at merging police forces into one constabulary. So that, again, completely undermines the argument you made when you referred to Peter Hitchens. I am glad that you are reading Peter Hitchens: you just might learn something, and it might mean that you are a wee bit more exposed to ideas that actually will work. There is also just a remote chance that you might become a unionist, I guess.

Government is charged to promote and protect its citizens. What the SDLP and Sinn Féin are about here is undermining the protection of those citizens. *[Interruption.]* I have heard enough from you, to be honest.

As Mr Wells said, we are not surprised about Sinn Féin, but I am less surprised about the SDLP than I would have been a year ago. That party has changed its course so much. If it is campaigning to get terrorists out of prison, why is it opposed to legislation that will put people behind bars?

There is no denying that, when policing became an issue in political talks, the SDLP took a difficult decision to support the police and the Policing Board and took its places on the district policing partnerships without question. I commend it for that. However, surely it should have realised that that was the first step. There had to be other issues because policing is not something that is set in stone. It has to move forward; we have to have developments. As we have changes in technology and tactics, we have to have changes in how we deploy resources. I have to say that the SDLP has failed lamentably on that issue, and it is to that party's discredit. I am saddened that the SDLP is not prepared to stand

up and work with others to have something brought into place that will protect this part of the kingdom and protect national security in the rest of the United Kingdom and, indeed, in the Republic of Ireland.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Humphrey: Yes, I will give way.

Mr McDevitt: I think that this is about the fourth time that I have had the opportunity to make this point. The SDLP is happy to work with colleagues across the House to defend the policing arrangements from wherever, as long as they are subject to the accountability framework that has delivered us, for the first time in the history of this state, near-unanimous support for the institutions of criminal justice in this jurisdiction. We should be careful not to destroy that which we most need to defend, and I appeal to Mr Humphrey and his colleagues to join us in requiring that the NCA be subject to the same accountability framework as the PSNI.

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

Mr Humphrey: I thought that I was going to hear something new, and that was why I gave way. Obviously, I did not.

It is easy to use those words, but, when it comes to going into the Lobbies on these issues, just as you did on the Armed Forces and Veterans Bill, you will vote against this. You are one of the people who spoke in that debate. You were depriving soldiers in this part of the kingdom of the privileges enjoyed by other soldiers returning from fields of conflict after serving this kingdom and protecting its national security. The SDLP, on that occasion, went into the Lobbies with Sinn Féin to vote against the Armed Forces and Veterans Bill. And you, Mr McDevitt, are one of the people who did it. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Members must address their remarks through the Chair.

Mr Humphrey: The truth of the matter is this: when it comes to the protection of victims — whether it is those who are having their life destroyed by drug trafficking, human trafficking, forced labour, fuel laundering, terror or intimidation — we are not surprised at Sinn Féin. The SDLP is not even tough on the causes of crime. SDLP members cannot talk tough in the Chamber in trying to defend a policy that has, frankly, more holes than a Tetley teabag and is without credit or credibility.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time has almost gone.

Mr Humphrey: Shame on the SDLP.

4.45 pm

Mr Hussey: I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board.

My colleague, the Ulster Unionist Party's justice spokesperson, Tom Elliott, has set out the background to the creation of the National Crime Agency, including the current legislative processes and the important powers that the NCA would have, as well as the current position of some Members in this House. I will focus on three issues: first, the relationship that the PSNI enjoys with the current UK crime agency; secondly, how important those powers have been in tackling crime in Northern Ireland;

and, thirdly, the potential costs should a resolution not be forthcoming.

The PSNI and the Serious Organised Crime Agency, which is the current UK-wide organisation that deals with serious crime, have an excellent relationship, and I am aware of that at first hand through the Policing Board. SOCA has a duty of care to the whole of the United Kingdom. It works closely with the PSNI, and it has an enforcement team as part of its overall deployment here. SOCA also sits as a full member of the Organised Crime Task Force, which is chaired by the Justice Minister and brings together government, law enforcement and a range of agencies to set priorities for tackling organised crime in Northern Ireland. Those working relationships and the level of engagement that has been evident previously must be maintained. The stance of some in the House will undo much of that good work and lead to a gap in the provision of policing services that I will deal with later.

The results that the partnership approach has produced so far should not be underestimated, and that is why the powers of SOCA and now the NCA are so important. For example, the latest statistics show that 73 victims of human trafficking have been rescued by the PSNI since 2009. The OCTF annual report and threat assessment highlights the fact that 30 fuel laundering plants were dismantled and 863,000 litres of illegal fuel seized. As well as that, the Minister has been able to distribute £800,000 recovered from criminal assets to community projects across Northern Ireland in an attempt to reduce crime and the fear of crime. Tomorrow, the Assembly will deal with internet safety for children. That is an example of an area that will suffer if Sinn Féin and the SDLP have their way.

In short, although there is much work to be done, we cannot take the success that we have had in combating organised crime for granted. The potential costs of the legislative consent motion on the Crime and Courts Bill not being accepted by the House are huge.

Mr Craig: I thank the Member for giving way. According to the opposition Benches, this is all about accountability. Will the Member outline the differences between SOCA and the National Crime Agency that is proposed on the statute book? At present, SOCA reports to the head of serious crime in the PSNI and needs his authorisation to carry out operations in Northern Ireland. The same will be true of the National Crime Agency. When we talk about accountability, maybe the Member could explain to me the difference between the two. I see none.

Mr Speaker: The Member has a minute added on to his time.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Member for his comments. You and I are reading from the same sheet. You and I understand it. However, it seems that some people do not have the intelligence to understand it.

There is, of course, a public safety and confidence aspect to all this. Do we really want Northern Ireland to be or to be seen as a place that is soft on crime and lacking in powers to deal with crime? I certainly do not. It will also be virtually impossible to improve on the results that I have outlined — for instance, to ensure more convictions in the area of human trafficking and fuel laundering — if the NCA is not able to carry out its role fully in Northern Ireland. As well as that, it may result in Northern Ireland having an inferior response to organised crime to that in the rest of the UK,

and I note that the Justice Minister alluded to that in the press. The SDLP and Sinn Féin are bringing this totally unacceptable and avoidable situation on the public.

There will also be a real issue of clarity, as the NCA has a range of reserved and devolved powers. Should it be brought into force on the basis of being semi-operational in Northern Ireland, which looks likely, it will lead to confusion and, quite frankly, be an utter shambles in countering serious and organised crime.

There will also be a financial cost, and perhaps the Minister will deal with that issue in more detail. If the situation remains unresolved, there will be a vacuum in the workload of tackling crime that the PSNI will have to attempt to fill, and that will come at a cost.

I ask those who oppose the National Crime Agency to think again.

Mr McDevitt: The best way to fight serious crime is with community support, and the best way to build community support is through a police service, a security service or other arm of the law that enjoys the support of that community. In fact, it is the foundation of policing in these islands. It is policing by consent and is what makes these islands different from so many other parts of the world.

We have spent 10 years working hard to build community support and confidence in our police service. We have done so in the face of opposition, and we have often done so in the face of a great lack of understanding from the British Government and Secretaries of State.

It is regrettable, to say the least, that so many have come to the House ill informed. It is not true to say that the SDLP allowed SOCA to come into being because SOCA came into being in 2005 when, as we know, the House was in suspension. There was, therefore, no opportunity for a legislative consent motion. I can tell the Chair of the Justice Committee, a man who has the great privilege of holding high office in the House, that, if he studied his history, he would realise that. I can also tell him that in the Policing Board —

Mr Elliott: Will the Member give way?

Mr McDevitt: I will in a second, Mr Elliott.

I can also tell him that, in the House of Commons, we opposed the establishment of SOCA on two grounds: first, because it would not fall properly under the accountability framework that we had fought so hard to achieve, which is the Policing Board; and, secondly, because it would lie outside the framework of the Freedom of Information Act. I hate to disagree with a colleague on the Policing Board on the Floor, but Mr Hussey is simply not right to say that SOCA is accountable to the Policing Board. It is not.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. Even though SOCA was established before the devolution of policing and justice here, is it not a fact that he, his party and others here accepted SOCA as part of the devolution of policing and justice? He may not have accepted the establishment of SOCA, but he accepted it in principle, and he accepted its outworkings.

Mr Speaker: The Member has a minute added on to his time.

Mr McDevitt: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Mr Elliott poses a fair question. Our opposition to SOCA is well documented, and our track record on SOCA is absolutely clear.

We now have an opportunity to debate the son of SOCA, a body that is even less accountable than SOCA. Members may wish to know — I am sure that they do not know, or so it would appear from the quality of debate so far — that SOCA at least had a board that had independent people. The NCA's board will not have one independent member. At least SOCA was not under the direct control and authority of the Home Secretary. The NCA will operate under the direct direction of the Home Secretary.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr McDevitt: I will in a second, Mr Beggs.

Our new beginning to policing is built on a commitment to human rights: article 2 of the European Convention, as Mr Humphrey rightly pointed out. It is also built on the fundamental operational independence of the PSNI. It is built on the independent, non-political accountability of that service. SOCA is built on the absolute opposite, as is the National Crime Agency. The National Crime Agency does not and will not enjoy operational independence, for it is directly under the direction of the Home Secretary. Nor does it enjoy any independent accountability framework, as it is accountable solely to the Home Secretary. I pose this question to the House: why, in a devolved framework, would we want to allow the operation of an organisation that is at odds, in every possible sense of the word, with the accountability framework that has delivered us the new beginning to policing and allows our people to enjoy confidence in policing, irrespective of what community they come from?

Mr Beggs: The Member said that he opposed SOCA and how it operates. Does he accept that SOCA has had a considerable number of successes in helping to bring serious organised crime to book in Northern Ireland? Can he demonstrate, in any way, where it has abused anyone? Has it not been a force for good?

Mr McDevitt: There is no opposition here to good police officers or good investigators from wherever they may come doing the best they can do for us. What is your problem with it being accountable to an independent, non-political body? What have you against the idea of defending what we must cherish, which is our new beginning to policing? Where is the threat to the National Crime Agency to be accountable when it operates in the devolved framework to the Policing Board of Northern Ireland? There is none. It seems to me that the debate is more about some bygone political attitude to policing than it is about defending, cherishing and building on our new beginning to policing. I just want to say that, if we were in a different situation and the gardaí proposed to do what the NCA is doing, I would be just as opposed to an unaccountable entity operating here.

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

Mr McDevitt: The question is whether Members on the opposite side of the House would support the gardaí in that sense. The consistency of their argument says that they would.

Lord Morrow: The role and function of the National Crime Agency is to tackle the scourge of drugs, secure our borders, reduce fraud and cybercrime and stop the exploitation of children. The NCA's role is also to co-ordinate cross-force activity against serious crime. The Home Secretary Theresa May tells us that organised crime

is one of the greatest threats to our national security. The social and economic costs are estimated to be between £20 billion and £40 billion a year. The impact is seen on our streets and felt in our communities every day. Yet, here in the Assembly, Members from Sinn Féin and the SDLP have shown total disregard for all of that and put down a petition of concern to ensure that the motion will not be passed and that Northern Ireland will be seen as a backwater when it comes to tackling crime. That is a dangerous precedent.

It is obvious that Northern Ireland will be the poor relation if the NCA is not permitted to operate in conjunction with the PSNI, which does not have the resources to investigate crime organisations that operate into Northern Ireland from outside. Therefore, the Province will be at a disadvantage not having the NCA operate here. The attitude of Sinn Féin and the SDLP is just not credible and calls into question their commitment to support the agencies of law and order in their drive against organised crime. Their actions here are not only irresponsible but dangerous. It is one thing to say that they support policing; their actions demonstrate quite the opposite. There are tough decisions to be made in the drive against crime. There is a responsibility on every Member in the House to give their unqualified support to the PSNI in countering crime. Both Sinn Féin and the SDLP are less committed to tackling crime. Cherry-picking on such issues is just not acceptable. The drive against organised crime will be severely obstructed. It is on such issues that Sinn Féin and the SDLP must give leadership to their communities and show unambiguously that they are on the side of law and order and the agencies tasked with upholding it.

Members know that I am extremely concerned about human trafficking. By its very definition, the movement of persons for crime or exploitation does not begin and end in Northern Ireland. It is not only UK-wide; it is global. The NCA has a major role in countering child exploitation, human trafficking and drugs. I have tabled a question to the Minister of Justice asking him to state what he feels would be the benefits of the NCA in tackling the disturbing crime of human trafficking.

Tomorrow, the Chamber will debate a motion on internet safety for children, which has been signed by Members from all five parties, including Sinn Féin and the SDLP. This is a prime example of when the NCA could step in to prevent online grooming and cyberbullying, both of which have led to tragic consequences. There are documented cases of children being groomed online for sexual exploitation by adults who have travelled to and from Northern Ireland to meet a child whom they had tricked into forming an inappropriate relationship via the internet. Tracking down those individuals would be assisted greatly by the NCA and fulfil the remit laid down by the Home Secretary. Yet, today, Sinn Féin and the SDLP are poised to oppose measures that would counter those appalling crimes.

The SDLP's stance is surprising; Sinn Féin's is not, as it is possible that the NCA would investigate continuing PIRA activities, namely money laundering and the movement of assets. Both parties have a duty to inform the House what alternatives they have in mind to tackle such crime. So far, Members from those parties who have spoken have not told us that.

If Members of this Assembly fail to support the establishment of the NCA in Northern Ireland for the safety and well-being of all our citizens, I urge the London Government to press ahead, despite objections from small-minded MLAs who remain in a time warp and who are putting their constituents' lives at risk.

5.00 pm

Finally, I urge the Minister of Justice to seek an urgent meeting with the Home Secretary, Theresa May, and call on her to proceed with the implementation of the NCA in Northern Ireland.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that it is ironic that, through the embassy in Dublin, the National Crime Agency will have a representation in the Republic of Ireland, yet the parties on the opposite Benches are suggesting that there should not be NCA representatives in Northern Ireland?

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

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for making that very interesting point. When the Members on the opposite Benches consider the point that my colleague David McIlveen made this afternoon, they will see the nonsense of the position that they have taken.

Mr Ford: I think that the Assembly is well aware that I support a legislative consent motion on the Crime and Courts Bill to enable the proposed National Crime Agency to operate in Northern Ireland for the benefit of all in our society. I, therefore, support the motion today, although it is clear by the tabling of a petition of concern that we are not going to have any successful outcome to this matter.

I listened carefully to points that were made. I was going to say "during the debate", but it is actually since about last November, when certain people started to engage following engagement that I had with the Home Office about March or April last year. I think that it is important that we put on the record the facts of how that has been. That is why I was grateful that the director general designate of the NCA, Keith Bristow, and Assistant Chief Constable Drew Harris came to the House today and made themselves available to those parties that wished to talk to them about the NCA's role, how it would operate in Northern Ireland and how the Bill would relate to Northern Ireland.

As Members said, the background is quite simple. The National Crime Agency is the body that will replace the Serious Organised Crime Agency, which has operated here since 2007.

The point has been made fairly strenuously on the SDLP Benches that it did not accept the NCA, and although that is certainly the case, the reality is that nationalist parties accepted the devolution of justice with SOCA in place. They may not have supported SOCA and they may not support the NCA, but they accept the current system with SOCA in place. Under the NCA, there will be greater accountability in Northern Ireland than there currently is with SOCA.

As chairman of the Organised Crime Task Force, of which SOCA is, of course, an integral member —

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ford: — I can tell the House that I have absolutely no doubt of SOCA's contribution.

I will give way.

Mr A Maginness: The Minister says that there will be greater accountability under the new arrangements that will be put in place, but the reality is that the NCA will be directly accountable not to Parliament but to the Home Secretary, who can in fact direct the NCA. In other words, there would be political direction for the NCA. How can that be more accountable?

Mr Ford: I fear that Mr Maginness is trying to recreate the debate that is taking place in the House of Commons. My statement was that the NCA will be more accountable in Northern Ireland. That is my concern as a devolved Minister of Justice. Mr Maginness can leave it to his colleagues in the House of Commons to continue that debate generally.

Mr McCartney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ford: I would like to make a little bit of progress. I have no doubt that SOCA has had a significant positive effect in protecting the people of Northern Ireland from a variety of organised crime threats, many of which have been highlighted. However, we are talking particularly about trafficking and child exploitation. I will give way to Mr McCartney.

Mr McCartney: Will the NCA be fully accountable under the policing architecture? I am mindful of your statement last week when you said that you hoped that it would be.

Mr Ford: Three minutes into my speech, Mr Speaker, I will try to develop those arguments. I hope that Mr McCartney will hear the argument later.

I think that the point that has been made in the House has to be restated: as Minister of Justice for nearly three years, I am not aware of my Department having received any complaints whatsoever about the operation of SOCA in Northern Ireland. If SOCA were so bad, one would really have thought that these significant concerns would have been made clear to me before now, but they have not. We need to recognise that SOCA is a UK-wide organisation, as will be the NCA. The NCA will operate in the reserved field in Northern Ireland — alongside matters such as customs and immigration — no matter what the outcome of debates here, because it has powers to operate in the reserved field.

There will be no accountability mechanisms if we do not agree to an LCM, and there will be accountability mechanisms for all aspects of the NCA's work if we agree to an LCM. That has to be borne in mind when people talk about accountability and about where accountability is and is not.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ford: If he will allow me to go on a little bit further, because I have no doubt that Mr McDevitt will seek to interrupt me again, as he has done others. *[Laughter.]* Perhaps he can save up all his interventions and let me make a bit of progress.

The Home Secretary introduced the NCA to strengthen the arrangements against organised crime. It is the prerogative of the Westminster Parliament to decide how to do that, and the Crime and Courts Bill [HL] is before the

House of Commons, having been amended and passed in the House of Lords. However, what the Home Secretary set out as her ambition for the structures in England and Wales was not, in my view, in line with the arrangements that we need to have in Northern Ireland and that build on the arrangements for devolved policing and, indeed, the arrangements that flowed from the Good Friday Agreement.

Mr Kelly said that this is not London or Birmingham. Exactly, and that is why I sought changes from the Home Secretary at a very early stage last spring and long before there was engagement with other Ministers.

Mr G Kelly: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ford: Mr McCartney said that we should not follow blindly what is happening in England and Wales. Following blindly is exactly what we are not doing. I will give way to Mr Kelly.

Mr G Kelly: Would the Minister have preferred for the NCA to be accountable to the accountability mechanisms set up under the devolution of policing and justice? In other words, that it would be accountable to the Policing Board and the Ombudsman in the same way in which each individual police constable is at the moment.

Mr Ford: Mr Kelly has to recognise that we are talking about a UK-wide NCA and what we are doing is getting the maximum possible accountability within Northern Ireland, consistent with those structures and significantly more than will apply for the NCA elsewhere. That is why I sought at a very early stage a number of changes, and in subsequent exchanges with ministerial colleagues, I have obtained further concessions from the Home Secretary. Therefore, let us look at what we have done to ensure that the Bill is structured appropriately for Northern Ireland.

The NCA will be in a position to assist our crime-fighting while fitting within the policing architecture as applies. It will respect the primacy of the police, and operations will continue to be co-ordinated by a group of all relevant law enforcement agencies, which is in existence, is chaired by the PSNI and brings together SOCA, HMRC, UKBA and others.

To reflect the primacy of the PSNI, the NCA's director general will not have the powers of a constable in Northern Ireland. We also have local accountability arrangements; for example, the statutory obligation for the director general to attend the Policing Board at least once a year. He has agreed that he will meet the Committee for Justice if requested. Those examples are significant differences from what will be the position in England, Wales or Scotland.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ford: We have input into strategic and annual plans. The director general will have to take account of our local policing plan when he constructs his plan for Northern Ireland. I would consult the Policing Board on the annual and strategic plans.

I will give way to the member of the Policing Board.

Mr McDevitt: I thank the Minister of Justice. Perhaps he can tell me how all those so-called accountability concessions are consistent with the architecture that is in place that makes the PSNI, first, operationally independent and, secondly, beyond possible political influence in this

jurisdiction. He is the Minister of Justice in this jurisdiction. This is an area that is largely devolved, so perhaps he can point out to me exactly how all those so-called concessions will put the NCA on the same accountability footing as the PSNI is today in matters that are devolved.

Mr Ford: I never said that the accountability mechanisms for the NCA would put it in exactly the same place as the PSNI. What I did say was that the accountability mechanisms will be significantly stronger than they are for SOCA at present.

I referred to the annual and strategic plans. The director general's annual plan would also have to secure the prior consent of the Minister of Justice where it related to Northern Ireland.

The fundamental key issue about accountability is that, unlike the position in England and Wales, the director general will not be able to task the PSNI or direct the Chief Constable of the PSNI to undertake any particular action. That is a fundamental change from what would have happened had I not sought these changes.

Under section 75 of the 1998 Act, the NCA will be involved in making equality returns to reflect the Northern Ireland approach. The PSNI will retain primary responsibility for engagement with an Garda Síochána. Of course, I should remind Alban Maginness that the gardaí are the sole police service for the Republic of Ireland. The NCA may be an anti-British thing, but I would have thought that, for a Member of the SDLP, that was entirely in line with Irish policy and, therefore, a good thing.

I am not sure whether Hansard is reporting Mr Maginness's laughter, so I will refer to it. *[Laughter.]*

Mr A Maginness: Tell that to Mr Hitchens.

Mr Ford: The day a Member of the SDLP recommends 'The Daily Mail' to me for sensible advice is the day I really will start laughing. *[Laughter.]* Fundamentally, the Police Ombudsman will deal with complaints about the conduct of NCA officers on matters such as civil recovery when they operate within Northern Ireland.

I have a commitment from the Home Secretary that if she were to introduce the counterterrorism proposals, the powers that the NCA had in her draft and that were defeated in the House of Lords, they would not apply in Northern Ireland. That is another fundamental concession and another fundamental recognition of the difference in Northern Ireland. All those points were visible to the Executive and would have been discussed with the Justice Committee and the Assembly in due course. So, I think that we need to look at the reality of what has been achieved.

I will just summarise those points. It was in one of his many interventions that Mr McDevitt referred to issues that were not on the face of the Bill. Let us be clear. On the face of the Bill there are: no powers of a constable for the director general; a consultation with the Minister of Justice here on his appointment; no directed tasking by the director general in Northern Ireland; the Police Ombudsman to have full control of the operation of NCA officers; an input into the strategic and annual plans; and the director general to secure the consent of the Minister about aspects of the plan relating to Northern Ireland. All those are on the face of the Bill. So, let us not say that they are not there.

I believe that the Home Secretary has accommodated the requests that I put to her. I made it clear that I was prepared to consider and put to the Home Secretary any further changes that I thought would improve the NCA arrangements here, but I would not put forward proposals that were detrimental to combating organised crime here. There were requests from others Members —

Mr Elliott: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ford: Briefly.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for giving way. Very briefly on that last point, I am looking for an absolute commitment that he will not give so many concessions just to placate Sinn Féin and the SDLP that would deem the NCA almost unworkable in Northern Ireland.

Mr Ford: There was a suggestion that NCA staff should not have the powers of a constable or be able to carry out any operation without effectively being chaperoned by the PSNI. I was not prepared to put that proposal to the Home Secretary.

The simple issue was whether the changes were reasonable and workable or whether they were likely to undermine the role of the NCA. I was not prepared to put forward anything like that point.

I believe that the powers of a constable are needed for those on the ground who might have to arrest people in the course of operations. That is the way in which it applies to SOCA, and, of course, a multitude of other UK-wide agencies, be it the tax authorities or whoever.

So, I hope that Members will reflect on the steps that have been taken to ensure that the Bill respects our policing architecture while recognising that the NCA is a UK-wide body. I believe that we ought to be able to find agreement on this. We will be doing the public a disservice if we do not work together to put in place an effective way of countering operations run by some of the foulest criminals who work in Northern Ireland, across the UK, the Republic, and far wider afield. That is the fundamental issue that we have to face —

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Givan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ford: I will give way briefly to Mr Allister.

Mr Allister: I am obliged. Can the Minister help the House? If the veto presently being exercised persists, how does he see matters unfolding in Northern Ireland and how does he see the Westminster Government dealing with that situation?

Mr Ford: The simple answer is that I have not yet had the opportunity to discuss that with the Home Secretary, though clearly I may be faced with it at the conclusion of this debate.

5.15 pm

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for giving way. Does he have any indication of the financial implications for the PSNI should the NCA not be able to operate in Northern Ireland? Could he advise the House whether, even with a blank cheque, the PSNI would have the global network that currently exists to combat such activity?

Mr Ford: My Chair, as ever, was on the next page of my notes. Fundamentally, we need the support, expertise and resources that the NCA will have. The PSNI does not have the resources to replicate the work that the NCA will do. Since it covers only 1.8 million people, it does not have the expertise in some narrow specialist areas that will be available to an agency that covers 60 million. I have no idea of what the cost implications would be, but I know that they would be severe. That, frankly, may have to be worked through.

If we do not have support from the NCA on serious crimes, we are, effectively, asking the PSNI to tackle organised crime without the full range of tools to do so. The time is right for us to look at it. I have listened to the points about accountability and am prepared to have further discussions about that issue with the Chief Constable if Members wish. At the end of the day, however, the people of Northern Ireland will require the NCA to operate.

Mr Beggs: Criminals are highly organised in their dealings, should it be drugs, prostitution, people trafficking, money laundering or fraud, and they deal with huge sums of money. We, as a community, must ensure that we fight effectively against that, whether across the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland, Europe or the wider world.

It is, therefore, appropriate that there is a rethinking of how that range of activities is tackled. Criminals who are involved in one range of illegal activity are frequently involved in another. Therefore, there is a logic in bringing together that range of specialisms and national organisations to fight crime.

Illegal criminal enterprise frequently involves millions of pounds; however, when you include the Colombian cartels, it is rumoured to involve billions of pounds. If we want to have maximum impact on trying to tackle that and to protect our people, it is vital that we make the best use of the services that are on offer and the resources that we have in our engagement with them.

A number of Members mentioned child exploitation and human trafficking. Here in Northern Ireland we have experienced how ruthless gangs have brought in people from the Far East and eastern Europe and enslaved them in a modern form of slavery to grow cannabis or to provide prostitution for their profit.

Mr Wells: Does the Member accept that it is important that we are protected from gangsters and criminals coming into Northern Ireland and that the rest of the United Kingdom needs protection from gangsters who originate in this part of the UK? We need to have a legislative consent motion to protect them. Members of Sinn Féin said that they are opposed to legislative consent motions, but they have acquiesced and passed dozens of them since devolution with no difficulty whatsoever, so what is the problem with this?

Mr Beggs: The Member has rightly highlighted that there is great concern that Northern Ireland could become a weak spot or gateway for criminal activity; it could become a base for activity in the Republic of Ireland or a base for criminals to operate in other parts of the United Kingdom. That is why it is important that we network with the effective services that are being planned.

As has been said by a number of Members, a range of national organisations is being brought together. This is not completely new. The Minister highlighted that there will be greater accountability when the national crime agency looks at issues than there was with SOCA. Somehow, however, that becomes a problem. I have great concerns with what a number of Members said today. We must look to see how we improve the lot of everyone in Northern Ireland. That means addressing serious and organised crime.

Mr D McIlveen: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Later. I want to develop my argument a little bit. My colleague Tom Elliott rightly pointed out that no one should be in fear of these proposals. Again, the Minister pointed out that he is not aware of any complaints that there have been about the activities of SOCA, yet this has become a fundamental problem.

I have to say to those on the other side of the Room that the perception of the unionist community is that this is a serious green issue — super nationalism, raising nationalist issues above the interests of everyone in Northern Ireland and, indeed, the United Kingdom. It seems to be an emotional nationalist response, as my colleague Tom Elliott indicated. Moving on —

Mr Sheehan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: No; I want to move on.

Gerry Kelly indicated that policing has to be responsible and accountable, but there would be a greater level of accountability in what is being proposed than what went on in the past. If he seeks the perfect, he may get nothing. We are in danger of opening doors to criminals and criminal activity that will endanger the people of Northern Ireland.

The Minister indicated that he has fought for and rightly gained a number of concessions during the process. I will touch on those later on.

Mr McCartney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I will later on.

Alban Maginness indicated his concern that this is a breach of the Patten report. Policing is an evolving process. If you were to come back in a hundred years' time and say that you cannot do anything because of the Patten report, people will stare at you. Criminals have moved on, policing is moving on and it is right and proper that we, as a community, should move on and bring about improvements.

Minister Ford indicated how several concessions have been given that respect devolution in Northern Ireland. The director general will not have the powers of a chief constable in Northern Ireland; the PSNI will have primacy; there will be input into and respect for the Northern Ireland policing plan; and the Police Ombudsman will have an oversight role on this issue.

I really have to ask: what more do you want? This is a national UK organisation, and we are a small part of that national UK organisation. We have gained much more than anyone else has in terms of accountability. We should welcome what we have gained. It would be very foolish to think that we can dictate to everyone else the world as we see it. Therefore, before we vote, I ask Members to think

very carefully about what might come in the future. We must take great care.

Northern Ireland is in danger of becoming a laughing stock. You really need to stand back and think about what you are doing. Everyone should support the rule of law, oppose organised crime and empower our police and crime agencies to deal with it.

I go back to the point that no one has identified any problems with SOCA, and no one has identified any human rights breaches. Are we going to turn this down because of the lack of a data protection Act? Do you want to give criminals rights under a data protection Act so that they can find out what other people know about them? Do you want to tie that organisation up with lots of requests from journalists, criminals and politicians responding to freedom of information requests on issues around data protection? We must have a degree of common sense and allow our policing bodies and our specialist service to operate to protect our young children at home in their bedrooms on the internet — a number of Member referred to tomorrow's debate.

If we do not buy into a National Crime Agency, what will we be left with here? What input are we going to have? How are we going to be able to shape how that may operate and deal with issues that arise in Northern Ireland? It means debates such as will come tomorrow, which many Members — I hope all Members — will be supporting, and those defences for our children and young people, will be very shallow. To say that you want that defence, but vote against the very agency that will provide that protection —

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree with me that the issues he has mentioned, such as prostitution, drug dealing and all forms of organised crime, are every bit as important to nationalist voters as they are to unionist voters? Does he also agree with me that the Members on the opposite Benches have seriously misread the tone of their electorate?

Mr Beggs: I think that the ordinary person in Northern Ireland wants to live in peace. They want to live within the law. They want the best for themselves, their family and their community. I have yet to understand how nationalism or unionism comes into this. The opposition is endangering members of the entire community in Northern Ireland.

Talking about human rights and such things — where are the human rights for those who are abused from the serious organised crime organisations that exist? Again, we have not heard of complaints. I will give way.

Mr McDevitt: I just pose this question to Mr Beggs and the Members opposite: should the British Government have a change of mind and decide to make NCA operations in a devolved framework accountable to the Policing Board, will he and they support that?

Mr Beggs: I will support a National Crime Agency operating in Northern Ireland. I want it to be as effective as possible. If you dig in your heels, you may get nothing. So we really want to ensure that we have protection as much as possible here in Northern Ireland. Among other things, SOCA has some 165 employees —

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

Mr Beggs: — in some 80 countries throughout the world. We want to tie into that network to protect our people. I ask

everyone to support the motion establishing a National Crime Agency in Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that the vote on the motion will be on a cross-community basis.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 56; Noes 39.

AYES

Unionist:

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Other:

Mr Agnew, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dickson, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Hussey and Mr Kennedy.

NOES

Nationalist:

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

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McCartney and Mrs McKeivitt.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>95</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>56</i>	<i>[58.9%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>[0.0%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>47</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>47</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>

Question accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).

Adjourned at 5.41 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 5 February 2013

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Speaker's Business

Mr Speaker: Before we move to the first item of business, I advise Members that I will be absent from the Assembly next week due to official business.

Private Members' Business

Internet Safety for Children

Mr Speaker: The first item of business is a cross-party motion relating to internet safety for children. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to 1 hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mrs Overend: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the dangers for children associated with the internet; commits to building on the work which is already ongoing in this area at both Westminster and Stormont; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to take the lead on the publication of a cross-departmental internet safety strategy to help children enjoy the internet safely.

As children and young people spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party and, importantly, as a parent, I am delighted to open this debate on internet safety, which coincides with UK internet safety day. I hope that we, in this jurisdiction and this Assembly, can contribute something positive on this important issue. I thank colleagues from across the parties for agreeing to support the bringing of this motion to the House. I also thank one of the junior Ministers, Ms McCann, for agreeing to respond to the debate. It is heartening to know that the junior Minister considers it an important issue.

The internet and social networking is a wonderful tool. The digital revolution is as important as other periods of technological change in history. We cannot imagine life without Facebook, Twitter, e-mail and the internet, and the way in which it enriches our young people's lives and is so much part of day-to-day life. However, the internet and social media have a more sinister side. There are risks to our children and young people in the online world.

I am indebted to the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) for the briefing paper on the issue, which categorises some of the challenges into content harm, which is things that they see; conduct issues, which is the way that they behave; and contact harm, which is about people who they may meet. There are some things that we can do better to protect children, and I have no doubt that this debate will touch on those and that Members will highlight solutions and actions.

It is important to recognise some key facts about internet usage. Ofcom's recent figures show that three in four

five- to seven-year-olds use the internet, as do nearly all — 95% — eight- to 11-year-olds. All 12- to 15-year-olds use the internet. How long do they spend online in the average week? Five- to seven-year-olds spend about six hours online weekly. The figure is just over eight hours for eight- to 11-year-olds, and 12- to 15-year-olds spend just as much time online — over 17 hours a week — as they do watching television.

Worryingly, in 2011-12, the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Centre received an average of 1,300 reports a month. Thirteen per cent of UK nine- to 16-year-olds have been bothered or upset by something online in the past year. Dealing with peer pressure and bullying at school is very difficult at the best of times, but, with the additional aspect of contact through the internet and mobile phone exchanges, the problems that our young people experience can be frightening.

I am one of those stick-in-the-mud mums who refuse to allow her children to have a Facebook profile, yet 98% of eight- to 15-year-olds who have an active social networking site use Facebook despite the minimum age being 13. It is often a sign of getting older when your children show you how to work certain gadgets. Thankfully, I am not there yet, but it is often the case that our young people know more about how to work online than parents do, yet parents need to be responsible and find out more about how to protect our young people and provide help and guidance. I am thankful for contact from Ofcom, which today launched a new advice section on its ParentPort website to empower parents to take informed steps to protect their children in the way that they feel is most appropriate.

Government in London and Northern Ireland Departments have been proactive in dealing with internet safety. We have seen the establishment of the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS), on which Northern Ireland is represented by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The development of the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, which polices the internet supported by the work of the Internet Watch Foundation, has done much to promote the removal of illegal child-abusive images from internet providers. UKCCIS also works with UK internet and phone providers to introduce parental controls and filtering mechanisms combined with safety advice through large stores. There is no doubt that children in Northern Ireland have benefited from those developments.

Departments in Northern Ireland have also done much to develop internet safety. For example, the Department of Education has produced guidelines on acceptable use policies, signposting and controls through C2k. We have also seen moves to try to mainstream protections through the curriculum developments. There is also guidance available to the sports sector on good practice in relation to social media.

However, the pace of evolution is rapid and so must our response be. Part of the challenge is around co-ordination and strategic direction. Internet safety is not found as an issue in the 10-year children's strategy or action plan. Many of the levers, such as action through regulators, are excepted matters, and there is locus in Whitehall, meaning that oversight is diluted through diffusion of responsibility across Administrations and across Departments here.

We also do not have an overarching e-strategy, although I am grateful to the junior Ministers, following my meeting with them in October, for undertaking a gapping and mapping exercise. We agreed at that meeting to raise the issue on the Floor of the Assembly through an all-party motion, and I have kept my word on that agreement. We will, no doubt, hear more from junior Minister Ms McCann on developments and on some of the themes identified in their exercise. I welcome the fact that my colleague Michelle McLveen and her Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure have, as part of the Committee's focused inquiry, undertaken to look at the issue of new social media and cyberbullying. I look forward to hearing from the Committee Chair on the findings to date.

We are aware of the growing prevalence of cyberbullying and some of its very harmful consequences. It is important that parents and all those who work with children and young people gain a better understanding of the online world and how new technology can be used by children to bully and harm others. The NSPCC, in its paper to Members, has rightly highlighted the development of "sexting" as a phenomenon. I hope that the Minister of Justice will comment further on this. The exchange of sexual messages or images and creation of such images is at best inappropriate and often is breaking the law. Research has shown that the primary threat in this area comes from peers, not stranger danger. It is coercive, and, primarily, girls are the victims. This is one area in particular where we could collectively do something to raise awareness in line with the theme of Safer Internet Day, which has the slogan "Connect with Respect".

Internet safety affects us all, and, as politicians, we have responsibilities to find ways to co-ordinate our activities and to ensure a joined-up approach on this issue. I welcome recent developments here, but there is an urgent need for a co-ordinated approach. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is in the best possible place to lead this initiative, and I hope that, through this, we can identify where the gaps are and the best ways of filling these. I commend this motion to you, and I look forward to hearing contributions from Members on how we can take forward improved safety for our young people from this debate.

Miss M McLveen: I commend the proposer of the motion, and I was delighted to co-sign it. The issue of internet safety is not a new matter to the Chamber. Indeed, in the previous mandate, the Assembly unanimously backed a motion that I tabled calling on the then Education Minister to implement the recommendations of the Byron review. Needless to say, we are back here today to discuss the matter.

I am happy to inform the House that, as the proposer of the motion mentioned, the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee is examining the issues around cyberbullying and social media, including education on safe and effective use of the internet for children and young people and their parents. That is part of our investigation into consistency in child protection across the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's remit. As part of that investigation, we have heard evidence from Wayne Denner of BeattheCyberbully. In addition, I have met Jim Gamble, the former head of CEOP and now CEO at INEQE Safe and Secure.

As Mrs Overend highlighted, the internet is an amazing tool for all of us, and it is really for sharing information and learning. Society is rapidly changing in the way that many of us socialise. Many of us in this Chamber use Facebook and Twitter accounts, but there are also other social platforms out there such as Google+, Snapchat, You Tube and many others. The internet is also becoming much more accessible through tablets, smartphones and with the introduction of 3G.

This is all for the benefit of a faster and broader internet, and therein lies potential dangers. These dangers include not only grooming but access to inappropriate content and cyberbullying as well as the risks that are associated with "sexting" and the self-generation of images. This can have a devastating effect on the development of a child's attitudes and perceptions.

Only yesterday, it was reported that CEOP was warning of an alarming new trend of grooming children on the internet. The organisation had 1,145 cases reported to it in 2012. The NSPCC has also reported a significant rise in the numbers of reports that it has had through its ChildLine services on the issue of online approaches.

At the Committee, Wayne Denner gave an example of a young teenage couple in the United States. The boyfriend was sitting among his friends and asked the girl to take a photograph, which she did. The boy then shared the picture with his friends, and his friends shared it on Facebook.

He highlighted how the picture had been taken for a specific purpose but was then used for malicious enjoyment that ended in cyberbullying.

10.45 am

I would welcome a clear cross-departmental internet safety strategy. Sometimes the criticism is levelled that too many messages are delivered from a variety of sources, which can cause confusion for parents, carers and children. It is good that there is such activity in the field of internet safety, but clarity of the message is much better. The common message that I hear is that we need to talk to our children and young people with a clear message on internet safety, and we need to make parents, teachers and carers aware of the signs and symptoms of cyberbullying.

Besides the many children who benefit from internet use, there are those who are subjected to horrific cyberbullying and exploitation. An approach needs to be taken that empowers parents, carers and children to engage with confidence with the new media. I will take schools as an example. There is consensus among those to whom I have spoken that we need to provide more education on the responsible use of the technology. Jim Gamble advocates prioritising the aspects on which we focus resources and suggests that a curriculum is built around that for online conduct, content and contact. Does a child, parent or carer know how to block online, how to support a friend, how to report an ISP, how to report to a responsible adult, how to report to the police or CEOP or how to seek help?

I want to thank the NSPCC for its work on the issue. It carried out research in 2011 into what primary-school children in Northern Ireland were being taught about internet safety. It highlighted differences in practice across

the five boards, ranging from 80% of schools in the Belfast area to 60% of schools in the Western Board area.

I referred to spotting the signs of inappropriate internet contact, and INEQE advocates what it calls "SOS". Those are things that are related to school, such as not wanting to go; things you observe, such as changes in behaviour, depression or aggression; and things that children say, such as threatening to run away or to hurt themselves. INEQE and BeattheCyberbully stress the need for education on the signs and symptoms.

I support the call for a cross-departmental internet safety strategy, and I hope that the work being undertaken by the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee can help to inform that. Certainly, from what I have noted to date, there is a recognisable need for such a strategy to prioritise, educate and support parents, professionals and children so that the internet can be understood and safely enjoyed.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the motion, particularly as it is being debated on Safer Internet Day. I thank the Members for tabling it.

The world has become a very small place indeed, and, every day, global connections are made, just at the push of a button. This, combined with the rise of smartphones, means that almost any information can be discovered online at any time. All that has great advantages, but with those technological advances come inherent dangers, particularly to young and vulnerable people.

I welcome the fact that the motion calls for a cross-departmental approach to the internet safety strategy. Although OFMDFM takes the lead on issues for children and young people, it is important to remember that there is a responsibility on every Department for such issues.

As I said, the internet comes with serious concerns. Cyberbullying, in particular, has come to a head recently. Bullying has never gone away, but it has grown new legs with the rise of social networking and thus a rise in cyberbullying. As we know, it can have serious effects on a child's mental health. Unfortunately, that has been seen in too many instances. One example is the tragic events that unfolded recently in Donegal. It must be remembered that the internet is a public place and that homophobic, sectarian, racist or just nasty comments or threats need to be treated as seriously as if they had been said elsewhere. Cyberbullying is everywhere, and a child can be affected with or without a profile on social networking sites. Those without a profile can often unknowingly be the butt of cruel jokes. So, avoiding sites is not the solution to avoiding the problem anymore.

Of course, social networking sites and forums are dangerous not only because of bullying but because they present opportunities for predators to access young and vulnerable people online. Studies have shown that almost 30% of children have had contact online with someone they have never met before. Sexual grooming and sexual bullying is, therefore, a serious and hugely dangerous issue that is growing at an alarming rate. Children can be overexposed to explicit imagery that is harmful to their development and can affect how they see themselves. It can also affect their self-esteem. Again, there is a clear link with mental health issues for children.

Today, children are highly oversexualised, whether by images in shops, clothing, song lyrics or music videos,

and it is difficult to avoid. The internet makes this imagery more widely accessible. Practical measures can be taken to combat it. Often, parents are unable to monitor their children's online activity. It is essential that parents are well equipped with the skills and knowledge to deal with any issues that may arise. Parents and all those who play a significant role in a child's life must be empowered and have the capacity to protect their child.

It is vital that children are informed about internet safety, and they must be equipped with the contact details of sources of help. A great example of that is ChildLine. A close friend of mine works for ChildLine, and it constantly deals with calls relating particularly to social networking sites, bullying and online peer pressure. It also deals with more sinister sites such as pro-ana websites, which encourage young girls to become anorexic or to develop eating disorders. Again, those dangers show more links with the mental health of young and vulnerable people.

The internet is, obviously, a complex being. While we must ensure that young people are protected from online dangers, there is another angle to this. The internet can be hugely beneficial for young people, particularly in enhancing their education. However, not all young people have access to that resource. Coming from a rural background, I am aware that many areas still do not have broadband and that people often have to drive for miles to access it. Other than location, the prevalence of social deprivation in the North also means that some families and children do not have access to the internet at home, and that needs to be addressed.

The very real dangers that are posed online have been recognised, and it is clear that we are all aware of the extent of the problem and are prepared to play our part in dealing with the emerging issues. Therefore, I welcome the call for a cross-departmental strategy to help children to enjoy the internet safely. It is important that we continue to move forward with technology, but children must be taught to do so safely and with respect for others.

Mr Rogers: I am glad that Members have brought the motion to the House today.

It is obvious that the internet has brought many benefits to society in Northern Ireland. A recent report indicated that 69% of households in Northern Ireland had taken up broadband and over one third of adults now use their mobile phone to access the internet. People in Northern Ireland use the internet for a wide variety of purposes. However, as we are all aware, the internet also has a darker side. Violent and pornographic material can be found online in a couple of clicks. Social networking sites can be used to bully and abuse other people. That reminds me of a lady from Burren who walked from south Down to London recently to highlight the availability of suicide packs on the internet. The internet poses risks to children and young people in particular. It has made harmful content that was inaccessible a number of years ago readily available to children and young people.

There has been no Northern Ireland-specific research, but it is constructive to consider studies on the issue that have been done in the UK and beyond. A survey in the UK in 2005 indicated that 36% of those between the ages of nine and 19 had accessed a porn website by accident. It further found that 10% of those surveyed had intentionally accessed pornographic material. In 2008, a survey on

sex education found that 27% of boys under the age of 18 in the UK accessed pornography every week, with 5% accessing it every day.

In a 2009 article on a child abuse survey, Michael Flood wrote that children and young people's exposure to pornography:

"can lead to emotional disturbance, sexual knowledge and liberalised attitudes, shifts in sexual behaviour, and sexist and objectifying understandings. Particularly for boys and young men, the use of pornography can exacerbate violence-supportive social norms and encourage their participation in sexual abuse."

Cyberbullying can have serious detrimental effects on victims. It damages their sense of worth and self-esteem. As the report 'Virtual Violence II' states:

"Purposeful recurring attacks can easily overwhelm a young person being cyberbullied, leaving them feeling anxious, tormented and increasingly marginalised."

As Members will be aware, legislative responsibility for online regulation remains a reserved matter for the United Kingdom Government at Westminster. It is therefore pertinent to consider the major legislation that is being considered at Westminster; namely, Baroness Howe's Online Safety Bill. The central proposal in Baroness Howe's Bill is the introduction of an opt-in system for accessing pornography online. That system would require internet service providers to provide a filtering service to ensure that pornographic material could not be accessed on the internet unless the user had opted in to view it. The system would ensure that children and young people could not stumble across such material online by accident and would protect them from the consequences of such images.

At present, such material is one of the major issues in child protection. Last year, ChildLine had 4,000 counselling sessions that focused on internet and mobile phone images. Callers were aged between 12 and 15. Most schools already provide lessons on the topic, which can no longer be left to choice. It is important that it become an integral part of the pastoral care system in schools. It is something that many parents struggle with. In the past, they had some control. Their children were using the computer in the same room, and parents could see what was going on. However, the internet is now on their children's mobiles.

Young people experience all sorts of new forms of abuse on a scale never previously experienced. I commend Safer Internet Day. As the NSPCC says, we cannot put the genie back in the bottle, but we need to work with schools, parents and technology companies so that they all play their part in making this place safer for us all. I call on the Assembly to bring forward an internet safety strategy to ensure that all children are kept safe.

Mr McCarthy: I speak on behalf of my party colleague Chris Lyttle, who apologises for being unable to be with us this morning, and to confirm the Alliance Party's support for the motion, which recognises the potential dangers for children associated with the internet, acknowledges the work being done in the Assembly and, indeed, at Westminster to tackle the problem and, finally, calls on the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to begin

work on publishing a cross-departmental internet safety strategy to help children in our region use the internet safely. I believe that the House will unite in its support for the motion.

There is no doubt that the internet has delivered many benefits to society. It has almost become part of the fabric of life. It is used daily in most homes, schools and workplaces throughout the land. However, with the increased role of the internet come the increased risks associated with it. Those risks exist for all internet users, but of particular concern and, indeed, relevance to the debate, as Members have said, are the risks posed to young children.

Ninety-one per cent of five- to 15-year-olds in the UK live in a household with internet access. Nearly 50% of nine- to 13-year-olds in the UK have a Facebook account. With many children now accessing the internet, there is the risk of being exposed to such things as pornography, grooming and bullying online. It has become an increasingly worrying trend in recent times. Although the dangers are well documented in the media, we cannot allow complacency in the fight to defend our children against them. Therefore, I believe that all Members will join in endorsing Safer Internet Day 2013, which happens to be today. I ask all internet users to consider the campaign slogan, "Connect with Respect". I urge parents in particular to use this day to think about their children's use of the internet and about how they can ensure that their children are safeguarded from anything of a dangerous nature online. Ultimately, the person best placed to prevent something happening is a parent who monitors and liaises with their children about what they access when they are on the internet. That is not to undermine the role that we, as policymakers, can play in this battle, and there has been good work done here and at Westminster on the issue.

11.00 am

At Westminster, an Online Safety Bill was introduced in the House of Lords in 2012. It has three goals: first, to make provision for the promotion of online safety; secondly, to require internet service providers and mobile phone operators to provide a service that excludes pornographic images; and thirdly, to require electronic device manufacturers to provide a means of filtering content. It is good to know that this important issue is under review, and I believe that my esteemed colleague Naomi Long MP has written to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport about it.

In Northern Ireland, the Department of Health's ministerial subcommittee on children and young people has made child internet safety one of its main priorities, and DFP was previously involved in the makeITsecure campaign, which is aimed at promoting protection for internet users, including children. DENI has produced guidance for schools in relation to the acceptable use of internet and digital technologies in schools, and the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee recently launched a focused inquiry on safeguarding across the culture, arts and leisure sector, which we welcome.

Although there has been very good work done in this regard, more remains to be done. Alliance therefore supports the motion's call for the implementation of a cross-departmental internet safety strategy, which would seek to be as robust as possible in tackling the dangers

that children may face when using the internet. The cross-departmental aspects are very important, as the issue encompasses many areas, including health, justice and education.

The internet is now a huge part of people's lives, and my party and I fully support the motion.

Lord Morrow: I, too, welcome the opportunity to contribute to this morning's important debate on internet safety for children. I commend Members for tabling the motion for debate.

Child safety online is a critical subject in the 21st century. The internet clearly brings many benefits for children and young people. It has enriched their lives enormously, allowing them to communicate with their friends in new ways and to discover more about the world. It has opened up many new opportunities for them. However, as many Members have already alluded to, the internet also has a shadowy side. I do not want to go over what has already been said, but suffice it to say that we need to do more to protect children and young people as they use the internet.

In the short time available to me today, I would like to focus on the Bill introduced in the House of Lords by Baroness Howe of Idlicote on the subject of online safety. I will briefly outline what the Bill seeks to achieve before concluding by saying why it is thoroughly necessary for our society today. The Bill consists of four clauses, but, due to time constraints, I will focus on clause one, which requires internet service providers (ISPs) and mobile phone operators (MPOs) to provide an internet service that is free from pornography. Amendments have been tabled to widen the scope of the Bill to include violent material, but those have not been accepted to date. The Bill's aims would be achieved through the creation of an opt-in system for accessing pornography online. Such a system would mandate ISPs and MPOs to provide a filtering service to ensure that pornographic material could not be accessed on the internet unless the user has opted in to view it. The system would ensure that children and young people could not come across such material online accidentally and would protect them from the consequences of consuming such images, which, as I am sure Members are aware, can be deeply serious.

The introduction of an opt-in system would be hugely beneficial for Northern Ireland and the UK more generally for three reasons. First, Baroness Howe's Bill would place requirements for an online safety system on a statutory basis. That would ensure that every ISP would be compelled to offer the protection system in the future, which would ensure that children and young people are prevented from accessing material that may be detrimental to their well-being. Currently, the four main ISPs have only agreed to introduce an active choice system on a voluntary basis. Although a step in the right direction, that is a much weaker system than an opt-in system and nowhere near as effective. Furthermore, there is nothing to stop the ISPs ending that service as and when they see fit. Baroness Howe's Bill would mandate ISPs to provide effective filtering software, with age verification included, which would ensure that children and young people across the Province were protected.

Secondly, Baroness Howe's Bill would cover ISPs beyond the four major providers in the UK, that is TalkTalk, Sky, Virgin and BT, which control the lion's share of the

market at around 91%. That leaves 9% of the market not covered, which represents some two million people. That is a significant number of people who are not certain of being offered a filtering system. I suggest to honourable Members that Baroness Howe's Bill would remedy that problem.

Thirdly and finally, the Howe Bill covers mobile phone operators as well as ISPs. In Northern Ireland in 2012, Ofcom reported that 35% of adults access the internet through their mobile phone. I would not be at all surprised if the figure was similar, if not higher, for children and young people. At the current time, however, there is no statutory requirement for an online filter to be provided by mobile phone operators.

Fortunately, MPOs have been generally better than ISPs with regard to online safety, with many operating an opt-in system since 2004. However, there are still gaps. For example, the MPO 3 does not by default provide a filter for contract phones offered over its network. If Baroness Howe's Bill was passed, it would deal with that gap.

In conclusion, I urge honourable Members from all sides of the House to support Lady Howe's Bill as it makes its way through the House of Lords.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Lord Morrow: Yes.

Mr McCallister: Will Baroness Howe's Bill extend to Northern Ireland and cover the entire UK?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Lord Morrow: Yes, I can assure the Member that that would be the case. He has made an important point, and I am glad that he asked that question. It allowed me to clarify that.

I urge honourable Members from all sides of the House to support Lady Howe's Bill as it makes its way through the House of Lords. The Howe Bill is a much better way forward than the active choice compromise, which was advanced by the Prime Minister. I spoke in favour of it on 9 November at Second Reading in the House of Lords.

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

Lord Morrow: I strongly believe that, if the Bill is passed, the internet will be a much safer place for young people and children. I commend the motion to the House.

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As Chair of the Health Committee, I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. I also welcome the junior Minister here and look forward to hearing what she will say.

It is important to commend those who secured the debate. Your timing was spot on because this is internet safety day. So, fair play on that. I am delighted that the motion seems to be supported by all Members and parties in the House. It is useful with a motion such as this that party politics are left at the door. We want to move forward on this.

As other Members have said, internet safety is of great importance to us all. It is also of concern to the Health Committee, and I thought it was important that I updated Members on this. It requires cross-departmental working

and commitment, but there are key responsibilities for the Department of Health.

Other speakers mentioned that the Department of Health leads on the safeguarding subgroup of the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people. A key issue for the safeguarding subgroup is the promotion of child internet safety. The Health Department is also the parent Department for the Safeguarding Board, which was established in September last year. The Health Committee, in our scrutiny role, dealt with the legislation that underpins the Safeguarding Board as it passed through the Assembly, and we have a keen interest in ensuring that it is effective.

Given the dangers that the internet can pose to children and young people, of which we are all aware and which Members mentioned today, and the fact that technology is constantly changing, I as Committee Chair expect this issue to remain high on the Safeguarding Board's agenda. Parents obviously have a huge role to play in making sure that their children are aware of the potential pitfalls of the internet, including cyberbullying, accessing pornographic and violent sites, being lured into exploitive relationships by adults posing as other young people and so on. The reality is that parents need to be confident about how to control the sites that their children can access and talk to them about how they can keep themselves safe if they ever come across unwanted attention online.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Ms S Ramsey: Yes.

Mr Wells: The Member speaks through the prism of someone who is perhaps considerably younger than most parents. As a parent myself, I can say that, when this issue first arose, it was and still is a complete nightmare for the vast majority of over-50s. Parents are in no position to control their children's internet access, because they do not have the scientific or technological knowledge to do so. Therefore, it is incumbent on society to put in place restrictions at a more general level, so that parents are not forced into a situation where they have to take on something that they have not a clue what to do about.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Ms S Ramsey: I agree totally with the Member, and I thank him for his nice comments about me being young. I agree totally that this is a learning curve for all of us. Technology changes every day, and, no matter how young or old you are, we all need to learn how to use new technology for the best, rather than allowing people who make money to use the internet for their own reasons.

We as a Committee have called on the Safeguarding Board to look at the issue of parenting, and I think that it is useful to mention that today. As the Member said, supporting parents along that journey is a two-way process. We took the view that the Safeguarding Board should examine the issue of parenting in its work programme. We will discuss that in the near future, as it is one of the recommendations to come out of our recent report on health inequalities.

Another risk associated with the internet is suicide and self-harm, and it is important to mention that. Published studies have suggested that certain internet sites can influence the occurrence of suicide, be it as the result of a

copycat effect or, indeed, the glamorisation of suicide on tribute sites, and we need to look at that.

One issue that was recently brought to my attention as Committee Chair is that certain internet sites enable young people to access legal and lethal drugs. We dealt with that issue after being written to by a father whose son had taken his own life by ingesting tramadol, which he purchased from an offshore internet site. I know that the father has recently met the Minister. He wanted to highlight to the Committee the availability of prescription-only drugs online. He said that some sort of educative approach needs to be developed to alert parents and carers to the dangers of such sites and how vulnerable young people can be.

The internet is a great tool when used effectively, but the reality is that it can also be used to access drugs and to bully people. My colleague mentioned the recent incident in Donegal involving two young sisters. We have written to the Department on the issue, and we are glad to hear that it is actively working to prevent the misuse of medicines ordered online.

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

Ms S Ramsey: It is clear that internet safety for children and young people is a wide-ranging and complex issue, and as Committee Chair I am delighted to take part in this debate today. I commend the motion.

11.15 am

Mr McCallister: Like colleagues, I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate and to add my support to this very important issue. I support what Ms Ramsey said: we are all in agreement here that something has to be done. For instance, we could get support for Baroness Howe's Bill, as Lord Morrow suggested, and look at how that could add to the tools that we need to tackle this growing problem. I think that we all accept that it is a problem that is going to grow and grow as more people become even more familiar with the internet and as we do more things online. The opportunities and dangers for our children and young people increase as we go down that road.

In opening the debate, Mrs Overend talked about the various aspects from content harm to conduct. We have to look at all of those across the board. One of the biggest difficulties that we face is the international dimension of the internet. You can have sites set up anywhere in the world; they do not have to be local. So, you have to look at what Lord Morrow talked about: how do you prevent that coming into the home? How do you help to train and guide parents and warn them of the risks of the internet? Many parents might use the internet and have a passing knowledge of it, but they are in no way experts in how to prevent some of this. The Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland has a key role here, and I was part of the Health Committee when it looked at that legislation.

I also share with Ms Ramsey a real concern about suicide and self-harm. When we looked at that issue, we saw that the internet played a hugely harmful role across the board, whether that was around the availability of legal drugs that could be purchased for a dangerous purpose or cyberbullying, which others, including Mrs Overend, have spoken about, and the risk of that leading to suicide and self-harm. It also means that there is now no safe place for children who are being bullied at school. Home is not the

refuge that it once was. Children do not have the chance to close the door and be away from all of that, because the bullying is coming right into the home, be that through Facebook or text messaging, for instance. That is the real risk. Colleagues have spoken about photographs being placed and being used inappropriately. Once it is out on the web, there is virtually no getting it back. It is out there to stay, permanently.

There are all those dangers, and there is the international dimension of how you regulate it. We need to play our part here; we need to play our part nationally. I would be intrigued to hear more details of the Bill that Lord Morrow talked about, and, hopefully, I will encourage my colleagues in the House of Lords to support that Bill and to speak in favour of how you can make a change at the source and limit the content that goes into a huge percentage of people's houses.

Lord Morrow: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: Certainly.

Lord Morrow: I am interested in his interest in the Bill. If he feels that it would be useful, I can give an undertaking that I will provide him with a copy of the Bill that is going through the House of Lords, and he can talk to his colleagues about it. I would value their support.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to Lord Morrow for that. It would be quite useful. It might also be useful for the Safeguarding Board and the Health Committee to look at it to see if it will work and make a tangible difference to internet safety.

We all agree that it is a hugely difficult problem to tackle, but that should not deter the House, Westminster or, indeed, those at European Union level from doing what we can and must do, be that with internet and mobile phone providers across the board, to help protect our children — for instance, from the dangers of accessing even legal drugs for dangerous purposes — so that they cannot come to any harm through the internet. Let us try always to have the guiding principle that the internet can be and has been a remarkable force for good in all our lives, particularly for learning. Let us make sure, however, that we do whatever we can to protect our children and young people from that negative side of the internet. We need to make sure that we do all that we can to protect them and the most vulnerable in our society from the misuses that are out there on the internet.

Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I am conscious that, as I respond to the debate, we have a number of young people in the Gallery. A couple of Members referred to being a parent. I am a parent of three teenage children and know how difficult it is to try to take responsibility for making sure that our children are safe. I am one of those parents who came late to the internet and technical equipment, if you like.

Child internet safety is a real concern for all of us and more so for those who have children or are in a position of leadership with the responsibility to ensure that our children and young people are safe and protected from online dangers. Given that child internet safety cuts across a number of Departments, I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to this important motion. I thank the proposer of

the motion, Mrs Overend, and all the parties for showing cross-party support in the debate. I will respond to the debate and then go into some of the issues that Members raised. I hope that I will be able to answer any questions, if not today then in future meetings with Members.

It is a pressing issue for us all because so many gruesome stories are reported by the media about children or young people entering the cyberworld. Some Members referred to the fact that that can often end in tragic and devastating circumstances for those children and young people, their parents and their wider communities. How much do we really know about internet safety? The stories reported are often the extreme ones. In the everyday life of a child, the very real and present dangers of being online are usually much more subtle. Those dangers are also becoming increasingly prevalent as our children and young people grow up in a truly digital age. The internet is a significant part of all our children's lives. New technology brings new challenges and risks. Smartphones, BlackBerrys, iPads and tablets all represent new ways in which our children and young people communicate and socialise at home and outside the home. An entirely new vocabulary has developed to describe the challenges, and we have new terms such as sexting, cyberbullying, video messaging and SMS.

Today is Safer Internet Day, and this year's themes are online rights and responsibilities, and "Connect with respect". I had hoped to visit two schools this morning, along with Jonathan Bell, to promote Safer Internet Day and hear at first hand from primary- and secondary-school children about their internet experiences and their views on child internet safety. However, weather did not permit, and I was also concerned that I would not be here at this important debate. I had to ensure my attendance in the Chamber for the debate, but I wish the schools well and hope that the event went well.

Some of you had the opportunity to hear from Jeff Haslam on the survey results published today by the Safer Internet Centre. The survey was completed by over 24,000 children who reported their internet experiences. It is incumbent on all of us to consider their issues and concerns today and in coming months. Although the messages and feedback that we knew that pupils would give this morning were very encouraging, especially because of the way in which the schools had endorsed Safer Internet Day, there is no room for complacency when it comes to the protection of our children, especially given the speed of change. We have not had a chance to study any of the full details of that survey yet, but the headlines reveal that internet safety is every bit as important to children as it is to their parents and carers. Children recognise that there are two sides to the internet safety coin. They know that they are entitled to feel safe online, but they understand that they have a responsibility to treat others with respect. They want the tools to enable them and their friends to stay safe.

The EU Kids Online survey is based on direct interviews with children aged between nine and 16 from 25 countries across Europe. From that, we know that nearly half of all the children in Europe go online in their bedroom, where parents may not be able to monitor their safety. The same report indicates that going online is now thoroughly embedded in children's daily lives. On average, children spend 88 minutes a day online. Those aged 15 to 16 years

old spend 118 minutes online a day, which is twice as long as nine- to 10-year olds.

Closer to home, we have further evidence on internet use here by final year primary 7 schoolchildren, who are all aged 10 and 11 years old. The Kids' Life and Time survey, which was undertaken in 2009 by Paula Devine and Katrina Lloyd at ARK, showed that almost half of those schoolchildren — 48% — said that they were on social networking sites such as Bebo, Facebook and MySpace. That is despite the fact that the terms and conditions that those providers set out state that children using them must be aged 13 and over. Of those who said that they used those sites, 29% said that they used them a lot. That points to the reality that younger children want to use the communication tools that they see others using, including parents and older brothers and sisters. The study also showed that 14% of boys and 6% of girls who use the internet in their bedroom said that their parents or teachers had not talked to them about internet safety. The same local survey showed that one in eight respondents had experienced bullying either online or by text. That was slightly more prevalent among girls, with 15% having experienced such bullying as opposed to 11% of boys. Perhaps more disturbingly, the experience of cyberbullying was associated with poor psychological well-being for boys and girls.

The researchers who compiled those findings concluded that there is a need for a policy focus that raises awareness and involves support programmes to meet the needs of much younger internet users than previously envisaged. Given that those findings relate to this region, they help to reinforce the point that none of us — teachers, parents, elected representatives, policy officials and other stakeholders — can ever be complacent on the issue of child internet safety.

The motion recognises that work is ongoing in this area. In 2009, OFMDFM published 'Safeguarding Children', a cross-departmental policy statement on the protection of children and young people. It sets out a safeguarding policy framework across government, explains the Government's safeguarding agenda and identifies gaps and actions to close those gaps. There is real value to be gained from this debate, because it offers an opportunity to discuss gaps and potential approaches to address these issues.

Jonathan Bell and I met Sandra Overend last November, and we also met the NSPCC and the recently established Safeguarding Board. In each case, the need for cross-departmental co-ordination on child internet safety was identified. We tasked our officials with undertaking a scoping exercise to engage with other Departments and agencies as part of a stocktake of actions that are under way. Following that exercise, it is our intention to establish a round-table discussion group of relevant stakeholders to assist in identifying and co-ordinating future action.

We work closely with the Safeguarding Board, which the Department of Health established last autumn. It will play a key role in setting the strategic direction for the safeguarding of our children. Following our discussions with the Safeguarding Board, I anticipate that child internet safety will become a priority issue for it. Officials will continue to engage with the board on that and other matters relating to child protection and safety.

Much is already being done on child internet safety. The Department of Education has shown strong direction by delivering on a number of policies to ensure that our children are protected in the school environment. For example, C2k, which is a directorate of the Western Education and Library Board, provides a fully managed ICT service to approximately 19,000 teachers and 322,000 pupils in over 1,000 schools.

11.30 am

On 1 April 2012, a new five-year contract to the value of almost £170 million commenced to continue and enhance the C2k service to include, for example, an e-safety monitoring system that helps teachers to identify cyberbullying and other child protection concerns. The C2k e-safety strategy is kept under continuous review. The system operates a rigorous internet filtering policy that is updated daily to block access to sites that are classed as unsuitable across all schools.

The Department of Education has also issued guidance to schools to help them draw up policies on the safe and effective use of the internet and digital technologies in school. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is also taking positive action on protecting vulnerable children from exposure to potentially harmful content on the internet and in video games. The Department also participates in a cross-border child protection group of officials, which was established under the auspices of the North/South Ministerial Council. The group routinely keeps officials apprised of developments in internet safety on both sides of the border. Through its funding, commissioning and other relationships with partner bodies, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is in a strong position to influence positively those partners to adopt policies and practices that safeguard children. Those include promoting child internet safety.

In sport in particular, there is a growing awareness of the increased use by adults and young people of social networking sites. Sporting organisations see the benefits around the use of such media. However, there are very real risks for children and young people, such as text-bullying by peers, grooming for sexual abuse and the sending of offensive and inappropriate material. More specifically, Sport NI is working closely with the NSPCC's child protection in sport unit to provide advice and support and to recommend best practice to sports clubs and community and voluntary organisations.

The Arts Council will be developing guidelines to enable those in the arts sector to increase awareness and actions that they can take to support child internet safety. Libraries NI also has strategies in place, which include training programmes to encourage children to use the internet as an information tool.

I hope that that demonstrates that the Executive are committed to the promotion of child internet safety and that it remains a high priority for the First and deputy First Minister.

I am conscious of time, so I will comment on some of the issues that Members raised. In opening the debate, Mrs Overend gave the statistics for how many hours a week young children spend on the internet, and I also did that. She raised some important issues. As she pointed out, we do not have an overarching e-safety strategy.

However, I hope that today may be the start of a debate and discussion on how we can get and develop that co-ordinated response.

Miss McIlveen, who is the Chair of the all-party group on children and young people, gave us an example of the need to work in a curriculum-based way in schools. She mentioned Jim Gamble, and although Miss McIlveen is not in the Chamber at the moment, I can say to her that officials have met Jim Gamble and will be taking that forward also.

Megan Fearon highlighted the serious issue of cyberbullying and mentioned the recent tragic case of two young sisters taking their own life in County Donegal. She said that it was essential that parents are well-equipped to deal with the problems of internet bullying and internet safety.

Sean Rogers gave statistics that show how easy it is for boys and young men to access pornographic sites, and he illustrated the correlation between pornography and violent sexual crime. He said that we need to ensure that people do not have intentional or unintentional access to pornographic sites.

Kieran McCarthy pointed out, as did most Members, that there is a positive side to the internet as well as a very negative one.

Lord Morrow used his time to advocate introducing the opt-in system and said that the Bill to do that is currently going through the House of Lords. He urged Members to discuss having a system through which providers would have to install a filter to guard against children and young people in particular from accessing pornographic sites.

Sue Ramsey, Chairperson of the Health Committee, said that it was significant that all parties were supporting the motion, and she gave an update on the ministerial group that has responsibility for the safety of children and young people. She used her contribution to raise the serious issues of suicide and self-harm and the way in which young people can access legal and illegal drugs on the internet. We need to be conscious that that can happen and we need to do something to challenge it.

John McCallister referred to the key role of the Safeguarding Board and said that we need to work together to make sure that we protect our children and young people.

Mr Speaker: The Minister's time is gone.

Ms J McCann: Just let me finish by saying that we did have some suggestions for the future, and it is incumbent on all of us to take the issue very seriously. I hope that this will be the start of us coming together to look at issues around internet safety for our children and young people, because it is a very serious issue and we all need to do something around it.

Mr Durkan: First, I congratulate Mrs Overend for bringing forward this extremely important and extremely relevant motion. I apologise for missing the start of her introduction; it took me three hours to get here this morning. I also commend all parties that are supporting the motion and all Members who have spoken on it today, which is internet safety day.

There has been consensus today that the internet is a powerful tool. Miss McIlveen pointed to the fact that many

of us, as public representatives, use the internet, and social media in particular, as a quick and effective means of getting our messages across to, and interacting with, the public. Sometimes they are less than adoring, it must be said. Many use the internet to educate and many use it to learn, but the sad reality is that there are sick and evil people out there who use it for their own nefarious purposes. We as an Assembly must do all in our power to protect our children from those online predators.

Almost 50% of children aged 10 to 11 are currently on a social networking site. That is an alarming statistic, but not a surprising one. Junior Minister McCann referred to other worrying findings of that survey. My own son, Luke, is 11, and he got his first phone at Christmas. Thus far, we have had no problems with that, apart from having to top it up every turn around, but I had previously taken the time to speak to my son about the dangers of the internet, and, I must say, it was very heartening to hear him say that he had already been told about that in school. Indeed, yesterday I received a text message from his school informing parents that PSNI education officers would be in the school today to give more information to the children on internet safety.

That education is paramount in the promotion of internet safety, but educating children is much easier than educating parents. Efforts must be redoubled in this regard and must be a central aspect of any strategy. Parents must be informed of the simple measures they can take to minimise the risk to which their children are exposed but without restricting their children's development or being too overbearing. What software can they install? Is the cost prohibitive? If so, maybe we can help with it. PCs or laptops in a home should obviously be located in a living area rather than a bedroom. That is one measure, but, granted, with the advent of the smartphone, it has become much more difficult to achieve.

Parents should be made aware of signs to look out for and sites to avoid that might be particularly circumspect or attractive to predators. One such site could be moshimonsters.com — I am not sure whether Members are aware of it — on which the child adopts the persona of a cute wee gremlin-type monster, and those monsters in turn befriend one other.

Two years ago, a constituent of mine was horrified to learn that her nine-year-old daughter had been "befriended" by a 45-year-old man, who was asking all sorts of questions about her and, even more worryingly, about her whereabouts.

The dangers are not limited to social networking sites. Many games consoles have an online facility whereby people can pit their wits, playing all kinds of games, such as 'FIFA', 'Call of Duty' and many more, against other friends and against strangers. Last night, I used Facebook to highlight today's debate, and, via that medium, one lady informed me that the 'Xbox Live' online facility had been used by a man to pass explicit messages to her son.

Lord Morrow mentioned Baroness Howe's Bill, which is progressing through the House of Lords at present. Hopefully, that Bill will gain support and be passed, as it will make cyberspace a much safer place for our children.

Ms Ramsey, quite rightly, focused on the role of the Safeguarding Board. It is imperative that, in bringing forward a strategy, OFMDFM, as the lead Department,

draws on the experience and expertise of those who work in this field.

Junior Minister McCann is well aware, as are we all, that this issue cuts across many Departments. Nevertheless, it is very important that those Departments collaborate on this issue. Unfortunately, such collaboration has not always been evident. I am glad that the other junior Minister is out today highlighting this issue, and I appreciate that junior Minister McCann came here today to respond to the debate.

This Assembly must support parents and education providers by bringing forward an internet safety strategy aimed at eradicating the many problems and pitfalls that have been highlighted in the Chamber today. Although we stress the need for online safety, we must also ensure that parents are confident to allow their children to explore the web without worry or fear.

We live in a digital age, and, as a Government, we should support the increased digital ability and capability of our young people. However, in order to do so, we must ensure that there is a strong safety net in place for our young people's protection. I support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the dangers for children associated with the internet; commits to building on the work which is already ongoing in this area at both Westminster and Stormont; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to take the lead on the publication of a cross-departmental internet safety strategy to help children enjoy the internet safely.

Social Networking Websites

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 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 the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

I remind Members that, as there appear to be ongoing investigations into comments that have been made on social networking sites, they should be careful not to say anything that might impact on any cases that may come before the courts in future.

Ms McCorley: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the growing number of people and hate groups who use social networking websites to verbally abuse other users; further notes the use of these sites by sexual predators to groom victims; and calls on the Minister of Justice to explore the introduction of better regulation of these sites and tougher penalties for people who use the sites to commit crime.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Molaim an rún. It is appropriate that we are having this debate and, indeed, the previous debate on internet safety for children, on safer internet day. This debate is a natural follow-on to that debate.

Caithfidh teachtaireacht shoiléir a chur amach go bhfuil muid tiomanta an méid is mó a dhéanamh ar an ábhar seo. We in the Assembly need to set out a clear and unambiguous message that we are committed to doing all in our power to ensure that any possible regulation of the social media is put in place in order to prevent abuse, hate crime, sexual exploitation and, indeed, any other online crime.

11.45 am

I note the SDLP amendment, which we are keen to support, but we would seek to broaden it to include all online crime instead of limiting it to hate crime. I also stress that, in asking for additional police resources, we are absolutely clear that the PSNI is still obligated to tackle online crime within the limits of its current resources. We are in no way suggesting that, in the absence of additional resources, the issue will not be addressed with the same rigour as other crimes. I ask that, in the spirit of the debate, we are united on this important issue on Safer Internet Day.

The growth and spread of social networking websites is a phenomenon that would have been impossible to predict 20 years ago. Tá ár saolta laethúla athraithe acu ó thaobh teagmhála agus gnó de, idir cúrsaí pearsanta agus cúrsaí proifisiúnta. They have changed the way that people communicate and go about their daily lives, personally and professionally. Social networking has changed the world, and our lives have been enormously enriched as a result.

The internet has a particular relevance to how our children and young people communicate with one another. Ach tá gné dhorcha dhiúltach ag baint leis seo fosta. However, there is a dark and very negative aspect to that also. When children go out of their homes, their parents want to know

where they are going, who will be with them and who they will be meeting. We need therefore to view the internet and social websites in much the same way. When they go online, how do we know where they are going and who they are talking to? We need to think about crime online in the same way that we think about crime offline. It is wrong no matter where it happens, and we need to find ways to ensure that online perpetrators are brought to book.

The numbers of people using social networks are increasing dramatically on a daily basis, and there are now very few people who do not access them. An Ofcom study in 2011 told us that 91% of children live in a household with internet access. Tá fón cliste ag trí mhilliún páiste idir ocht mbliana agus cúig bliana déag d'aois. Three million 15- to 18-year-olds have a smartphone; 12- to 15-year-olds spend as much time on the internet as they do watching TV; seven and a half million Facebook users are under 13 and five million are under 10; and 43% of five- to 15-year-olds have a social network profile, which is a figure that rises to 80% for 12- to 15-year-olds. It is clear that the problem is one of scope when it comes to cyberbullying and sexual exploitation.

Looking at cyberbullying, certain statistics are worrying, as they flag up some serious gaps. Níl ach 50% de thuismitheoirí le páistí idir cúig bliana agus cúig bliana déag d'aois ag déanamh maoirseachta orthu agus iad ar líne. Only 50% of parents of five- to 15-year-olds supervise their children's use of the internet. Over 90% of victims of cyberbullying will not inform their parents or a trusted adult about the abuse, and 28% of 11- to 16-year-olds have been targeted, threatened or humiliated through the use of mobile phones or the internet. Bullying has always been a problem in the schoolyard and other places, but the internet takes it into a whole new arena where, apparently, there are no boundaries.

The extreme impact that cyberbullying can have was all too evident last year in the tragic case of Donegal sisters Erin and Shannon Gallagher. Thirteen-year-old Erin from Ballybofey killed herself after being taunted on a social networking website. I ndiaidh beagnach dhá mhí, ba chúis bróin é gur chuir Shannon — deirfiúr do Erin a bhí cúig bliana déag d'aois — lámh ina bás féin fosta. Almost two months later, Erin's 15-year-old sister Shannon sadly also took her own life. At her funeral, Father John Joe Duffy questioned the level of resources available to deal with bullying and the failure to monitor and ban websites.

Such concerns are nothing new when it comes to social networking, especially as children and young people are increasingly accessing websites, chat rooms and information forums that promote and/or incite risk-taking, dangerous behaviours, self-harm, suicide and eating disorders. Abusers can gain access to young people who are vulnerable and immature, and while there can be positive aspects of participating in social networking, such as having a place to express feelings and seek support, there are also serious downsides. Such websites, combined with a propensity among some children to engage in high-risk behaviour, can make it easy for the sexual predator to take advantage. That can result in serious exploitation, including exposure to pornography, engaging in sexually explicit conversations, being encouraged to pose in sexually provocative ways and posing naked via webcams.

Abusers can use public online interactive spaces to find and meet children and young people, which allows them to engage in a grooming process. As well as online sexual abuse, this has resulted in actual contact abuse in some cases. Whatever its guise, the grooming process can result in many young victims feeling guilty and responsible for inappropriate interactions, exploitation and actual abuse. They can find it extremely difficult to seek help or disclose their abuse because of their own personal feelings of culpability and shame. In some cases, they do not even identify it as abuse, as their feelings have been manipulated to such an extent that they perceive their abuser as a genuine partner.

Statistics for this aspect of online abuse are startling. In a 2006 Dutch survey, it was revealed that 47% of girls aged between 13 and 19 had received unwanted requests to do something sexual in front of a webcam, although thankfully the vast majority of them refused to do so. Some 88% of sexy images that young people upload to the internet to share with just their own friends are stolen and end up being used on parasite sites.

Education is key to tackling the problem. Wayne Denner provides some very valuable tips and ideas in his 'Beat the CyberBully' e-book. Parents and teachers have a clear responsibility to tackle cyberbullying and explain the dangers of sexual exploitation through education and awareness raising. It is crucial that children and young people fully understand what constitutes appropriate and, perhaps more importantly, inappropriate online behaviour if we are to prevent this spiralling problem from spinning totally out of control. Ach ní leor é sin. However, that is not enough. We need to look at all the possible ways in which we can make the internet a safer environment. That will require better regulation and tougher penalties for those who commit such crimes.

I turn now to hate crime via the internet. Social networking sites have created a space where those who perpetrate and encourage hatred and violent attacks feel that they can do so with impunity.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Ms McCorley: Yes.

Mr Allister: Would the Member care to comment on the fact that the exhortation "Boycott all Orange-owned businesses" has now appeared on a Sinn Féin website? Does she take the view that that is an attempt to direct people to discriminate in their business practices and is, in its own way, a propagation of hate? Does she defend that proposition?

Ms McCorley: As far as I am aware, that is not a Sinn Féin website.

Mr Allister: It bears your banner.

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to continue.

Ms McCorley: Social networking sites have created a space where those who perpetrate and encourage hatred and violent attacks feel that they can do so with impunity. That has been all too evident in the North over recent months after Belfast City Council's democratic decision in respect of the Union flag. The pages of Facebook and other sites have been littered with personal threats, incitement to commit sectarian murder and a litany of anti-Catholic and homophobic comments. We all know what the

repercussions of that have been: the burning of politicians' offices; the attempted murder of a police officer; massive disruption and inconvenience on our streets; and the devastation of parts of the economy.

Clearly, we cannot quantify the full extent of the cause and effect of what appears on social network sites and subsequent activity. However, what we do know is that they play some part. Therefore, we are duty-bound to try to regulate internet sites' activity and not just remain bystanders. Facebook has failed to satisfy many observers that they are taking this problem seriously enough.

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

Ms McCorley: Mar a dúirt mé cheana, tá oideachas antábhachtach de dhíth idir daoine óga agus seandaoine. Education is of the utmost importance. We need to ensure that we teach children how to —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is gone.

Ms McCorley: — avoid being drawn into the worlds of cyberbullying and hate crime. I commend the motion.

Mr McDevitt: I beg to move the following amendment:

“; and further calls for additional policing resources so that online internet hate crimes are able to be fully investigated”.

I thank those who tabled the motion for bringing this second motion on this important topic to the House this morning. As Members have noted, it is Safer Internet Day.

This motion deals with bullying. It took our society a few generations to come to terms with bullying in its old-fashioned, traditional form. Having come to terms with it in the schoolyard, society began to accept that bullying also takes place in the workplace. I suggest that we might want to reflect on that from time to time as we go about our business in this House. It is wrong, and it is not a sign of machismo to be able to cope with bullying. It is a sad reality of society that people have to cope with bullying.

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

I am a huge advocate of social media. It is one of the great revolutions of our time to be able to democratise communication, remove the barriers to free speech and allow people to interact with other people without any type of restriction. It is a very beautiful thing that we should protect and defend. However, with that right comes a responsibility to do so in a respectful manner that is consistent with the values and standards of modern society.

On Twitter, I have been told to go home when I was sitting at home. I have been told that I have a foreign accent when I am in Ireland. People have told me that I am nothing more than a — the word is not one that I can repeat in the House, but it is an expletive that begins with “c”. In fact, one well-known commentator who makes his living writing for a well-known newspaper told us on his Facebook page that my whole party is a bunch of — again, it is a word that begins with “c” but cannot be repeated in the House. Is that funny? Is that acceptable? Is that smart? Mr Humphrey seems to think so.

Mr Humphrey: Absolutely.

Mr McDevitt: You do think so? That is sad. I say that it is sad as a colleague, as a parent and as someone who is meant to hold a position of leadership in this society.

When people use their freedoms to abuse, bully and denigrate, they demonstrate two things: first, that they do not understand what freedom is; and secondly, that they do not have enough respect to have the right to exercise those freedoms without some restriction.

That is only the tip of the iceberg because kids in schools put up with a lot on Facebook. If you care to drop by some of the less-well-known social networking platforms, which are more frequented by teenagers, you will find abuse and comment that is not right in a civilised society in the 21st century. You will find young boys objectifying their female classmates, girls abusing other girls and people using a badge of identity — we have plenty of badges in this part of the world to use and abuse — to threaten, diminish and dehumanise people. That is a very sad indictment not only of that individual but of society. It is an indictment on us all.

Days such as this in a place such as this are important because, like charity, dealing with the problem starts with the individual. It starts with your personal conduct, your attitude towards life and your respect for rights. Unfortunately, some people will refuse to accept or appreciate their duty as citizens, and, for those people, there must be penalties and consequences. I entirely accept Ms McCorley's comments about the spirit of the amendment, but we tabled the amendment to point out that, unfortunately, we need to police the internet. Unfortunately, we need to prosecute internet abuse and crime, and we need to be big enough to understand that bullying in its extreme form is a crime that is not acceptable, and people will be held to account for it in the criminal justice system.

How do we make that possible? I am a member of the Policing Board, and other colleagues here who are on the board will probably concur with what I am about to say.

How do we support police services, be it our local police service — the PSNI — or CEOP or whatever other agency may be established, hopefully in an accountable manner, in this jurisdiction? How do we support them in successfully prosecuting individuals who step beyond what is legal when they are in the online environment?

12.00 noon

We can support them by standing behind the legislation. The statute book is not bare. There is some legislation that is worth reflecting on. The Digital Economy Act 2010 has provisions that allow websites to be closed down and injunctions to be brought. The Communications Act 2003 makes it illegal for electronic communications networks to be used "in an improper manner". Indeed, there is a famous case in Britain that is currently under appeal concerning a gentleman who made a threat to plant a bomb in an airport in Scotland. He then claimed in his defence that the threat was a joke. He found himself at the sharp end of the Communications Act 2003 for making what, I think, anyone would consider an exceptionally sick joke. As I said at the beginning of my remarks, it is not funny. Even that is not funny.

The Obscene Publications Act 1959 is worth noting and referring to. It is explicit about the publication of obscene material, including child pornography and extreme adult

pornography, as is the Human Rights Act 1998. Often cited in the House as a big problem, the Human Rights Act defends you from being abused online. It says that the freedom of expression that we all enjoy and cherish is not absolute and comes with specific duties and responsibilities:

"The exercise of these freedoms ... may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society, in the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the protection of the reputation or rights of others, for preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, or for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary."

It would be fantastic if that could be summarised into plain English and put on Facebook's home page, because that is the deal when you speak in public. You speak in public knowing that your right comes with responsibilities.

We thought that we would table the amendment because all the statutes that I talked about and the internet hate crime provisions that have existed in recent years need to be properly policed. When we talk about extra resources, we are talking not just about more man power, woman power and people power but about expertise. We are talking about people who have an interest in and the capacity to police this type of environment. That is absent in many police services around the world. CEOP is not a police service but an agency, and it is very expert at that work. Many senior officers will tell you that they wish that they had the capacity to police internet crime in a more serious manner and to interpret the law in a more sophisticated and effective manner. That is why we tabled the amendment and why we think that it is important to acknowledge in the motion —

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

Mr McDevitt: — that the PSNI needs to address those matters. I thank you for your time, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Givan: The motion is very timely, and, given that this is Safer Internet Day, it is important that we debate the issue. There is nothing that the Members who spoke previously said that I find myself in disagreement with.

Facebook and Twitter have been used to describe all of us in the House in pretty unpleasant terms, me included — some might say, "Understandably so". I support people's right to be grossly offensive and to express themselves. That is what a democracy is about. What I do not support is social media being used illegally. Prosecutions have been brought in cases relating to Members of the House because the line has been overstepped. It is in that respect that I support better regulation. Undoubtedly, Facebook is slow to respond to the way in which it is used by individuals. Whatever grievances people may have, Facebook has been slow to respond, and its forums have been used, in my view, to incite violence. That is wrong, and it makes better regulation necessary.

We live in a new age, in which people feel that, when they sit behind a computer, they are at liberty to say things that they normally would not say to your face. They have been

well described to me as “keyboard warriors”. They fight a battle as though they are unknown and have anonymity behind the screen. Therefore, they say things that they would not say to your face. They say things that they would not say in any normal public forum, yet they will say them on a computer. That type of thing needs to be challenged. Any form of democracy needs to balance the right to freedom of speech and the breaking of the law. Better regulation is necessary.

Mr McDevitt majored on how social networking is used for bullying. Undoubtedly, that should concern us all, but, primarily, my concern is the use of social networking by sexual predators who prey on children. The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) has said:

“individuals with a sexual interest in children can now access and engage directly with a pool of potential victims on an unprecedented scale.”

That should concern us all. It should require all of us to make sure that the decisions that we take put the interests of those vulnerable children first and foremost so that we protect them. CEOP provides intelligence and expertise that the police service here has been able to utilise. To deprive the police of that, which is what will happen if the NCA is not brought into being, would be hugely deplorable. The politicians who yesterday debated that issue should reflect on what they say today about the need to protect vulnerable children. They should make sure that, when it comes to looking at the issue in future, as the Westminster legislation progresses, they reflect on all of that. I will leave my comment at that, because I do not want to rehearse the argument about how people want, for political reasons, to handcuff the PSNI to stop it doing its job effectively.

There is also a need for better education and increased awareness. People who upload photographs even of their own children, as well as young people who upload their own photographs, should be aware of how those photographs remain online in perpetuity. Even if you try to remove them, it is too late, and they can often get into the hands of individuals who can use them to exploit and target children and young people.

The United States has looked at restricting Facebook and social networking sites in public places. We need to look at whether we have a duty to block social networking sites in our public places, in our libraries and in our schools. That needs to be given proper consideration, and we should be in a position to act on it. I accept that, for a lot of this, responsibility is still a reserved matter, and ultimately it is Westminster that needs to take this on and lead on it.

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

Mr Givan: It is important that we take all of this very seriously. I support the motion and the amendment. Those of us who are genuine will not seek to restrict the police when it comes to considering the NCA, which will be taking on CEOP's duties.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Members who tabled the motion and am happy to participate in the debate. It is the second of two motions of a similar nature, but it relates to something that is clearly very important to society.

We all need to recognise the growing trend in communications. Many of us appreciate the speedy

messages that you can get out now. When I played football at local level in my youth, I recall that I had to wait until the Wednesday following the Saturday match before I found out how all the other teams had fared. Now, you have instant results. That happens not only in football and sport but throughout the community. We know what is happening in the Chamber instantly not because it is on television but because it is either broadcast over the internet or people use Twitter or Facebook to get the message out. Clearly, there are great opportunities.

I do not always agree with Mr McDevitt, but I do so on this occasion. I empathise with what he said. Recently, I followed one of the conversations about him, if you can call them that. He is not the only person to come in for that type of abuse, as I would call it. I have come in for serious abuse in the social networking field, and some of it came from other MLAs. We are all in the cut and thrust of politics, but, when you are called a “clampit” over the social network by Mr Flanagan, it is not always the most appropriate thing. I am sure, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, that you would not allow that type of talk in the Chamber, therefore, I do not see why you should have it over the social network. To refer to a village in his community as a “black hole” is not entirely appropriate either. Therefore, we all need to reflect on what we say over the social network. Although that is the very moderate side of abuse, it gives a very bad example to those who can abuse it in a more systematic and devious manner. I refer to the bullying and abuse of young people and children.

In the Chamber, we have debated long and hard on many occasions suicide and mental health issues. There is serious abuse in many of our schools in Northern Ireland not only of children but, quite often, of teachers by their pupils. That must be curtailed and cut out.

I am concerned about some aspects of the legislation. I know that there is some cover in legislation, but I do not believe that there is enough.

I listened to Mr McDevitt, and I totally agree with him that we need more expertise and resources. However, I remind him and others on that side of the House that we had the opportunity yesterday to assist with that, just as Mr Givan highlighted. We had the opportunity to put more resources and more expertise into Northern Ireland to help with abuses on social networking sites. Did they accept them? No. They rejected them outright, simply because they are national and UK-based. That is my belief.

Mr McDevitt: I really appreciate Mr Elliott letting me in here. There is no question that we need the expertise that is currently in CEOP. In fact, the former director of CEOP said in the ‘Belfast Telegraph’ today that it should not be incorporated into the NCA and it would be better remaining as an independent agency. We wholeheartedly support that. However, we also need expertise in the PSNI for more routine online hate crime. CEOP deals with child abuse; it is very specialist. The NCA, in whatever form or accountability, will deal with a certain type of very high level abuse. We need resources and expertise in the PSNI to deal with the ordinary common or garden stuff that Mr Elliott has been talking about.

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

Mr Elliott: Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Of course, the PSNI needs that expertise, as do other agencies. It is not just the PSNI. We have a raft of agencies in the social care movement in particular that need that expertise. Nevertheless, when you are getting resources to deal with that wider aspect — the international criminal aspect — why do you not accept them? That is the question that needs to be answered. There are opportunities to have additional resources that will facilitate that not only in Northern Ireland but across a much broader spectrum. You have rejected them; you have turned your back on them. That is extremely disappointing.

12.15 pm

Mr Dickson: I, too, support the motion and the amendment.

There is no doubt that the internet and social media have many positive aspects. Indeed, they have totally changed how we communicate, as others have said, the sharing of information, and how we can and do express ourselves. However, they also have a dark and sinister side. A platform has been created on which abusive and threatening views can be voiced easily against individuals and groups. We have seen what that can lead to. Recently, we have seen a mix of what could be described as legal and illegal activities on social media in Northern Ireland that have whipped up a frenzy of hatred and distrust in the community. We have all heard stories about people taking their own life after sickening and horrible messages were left on their social media pages. Few of us in the Chamber are immune to such messages being sent to us and to being described in those terms. It is not just a matter of being fragile about those sorts of comments; many of them have been deeply offensive and, for most people, cross a serious line by any standard.

Bullies, of course, are always cowards. Nowadays, the internet allows them to hide not behind the poison pen letter but behind the screen and keyboard, while they torment people. Sadly, it is also a platform for hate speech motivated by prejudice based on ethnic origin, race, religion or belief, sexual orientation or disability. It also has serious social undertones. Messages of that type are designed to tell groups or individuals that they are not welcome in communities. With organisations' capabilities in social media, that can, as we know all too sadly, be used to incite violence, something about which we must have serious concern in Northern Ireland, given the events of recent days. We are not immune to racist attacks. In recent years, we have needed to be particularly alert to attempts to use social media to incite that particular type of hatred.

The internet and social media can be used in a positive way to stamp out racism and other types of hatred and prejudice. For example, there are various campaigns to combat racism. One of the most successful has been in the area of football and soccer. As far back as 2005, Criminal Justice Inspection identified hate crime as a major problem in Northern Ireland. At that time, it talked about the need for swift action to be taken to punish and deter people from hate crime. Sadly, its 2012 follow-up report found that very little has actually been done by PSNI, the Assembly or its agencies to deal with that problem. In 2012, the Institute for Conflict Research compiled figures which show that nearly 14,000 hate-motivated incidents were reported to police during the past five years.

The second part of the motion refers to the use of the sites by sexual predators. That can be linked to the first

point about bullying and harassment. For example, there have been incidents when women and girls have been cajoled into activities online by people who then blackmail them or circulate photographs across the internet. When such material enters schools, universities or workplaces, bullying often follows. Tragically, as we know, that can lead to loss of life by suicide.

Online sex offenders use gaming sites, social media and chat rooms to contact victims, particularly young people, to groom them with the intention of persuading them online or offline into sexual activities. That is psychological manipulation at its worst to gain the person's trust. That is why there needs to be protection from those dangers. Indeed, the fight against online sexual predators must be led by parents. Parental responsibility is vital. Parents should know what their children are doing on computers. They should know what they can do and seek guidance from schools and teachers if they do not have the appropriate technical expertise or knowledge themselves. It is important that we see a cross-cutting approach to this from the PSNI and the Department of Education, like many of the crimes we discussed yesterday afternoon —

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

Mr Dickson: Finally, it is somewhat rich that our colleagues in the SDLP have moved an amendment asking for additional resources for the PSNI when those resources are available from the NCA.

Mr D McIlveen: I, too, support the motion and the amendment.

At the outset, we have to be very clear about the fact that bullying in any form has to be condemned by the House. We have to send out that message loud and clear. I also think that it is refreshing in some respects to hear a motion coming forward from Sinn Féin asking for tougher penalties. In my time in the Assembly, this must be the first time that there has been a call from Sinn Féin for tougher penalties for anything, so we can take some heart from that. However, we have to accept that there are some inconsistencies given the events in the Assembly over the past 24 hours. This motion asks for greater monitoring of sexual predators, in particular, who use social networking websites to groom victims. Bearing in mind that CEOP is probably the most effective tool in combating that and given the decision taken in this place yesterday, we have effectively torn apart the relationship that the PSNI would have with CEOP, which would have been very clearly through the NCA.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr D McIlveen: Yes, I will.

Mr McDevitt: As a member of the Policing Board, Mr McIlveen will know three things about CEOP. The first thing is that there are no warranted CEOP officers in Northern Ireland. The PSNI does not need a CEOP officer to have a warrant in Northern Ireland to do its job. Secondly, the founder of CEOP, Jim Gamble, who is from this parish, as journalists would say, is in today's 'Belfast Telegraph' saying that the incorporation of CEOP into the NCA is a bad mistake and is politically motivated. He is arguing against the NCA operating outside the accountability frameworks and in favour of CEOP staying

the way it is, which is where we support it and absolutely agree it should remain.

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

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for his intervention. What I also know is that, at this moment in time, CEOP does operate in Northern Ireland. Therefore, by disassociating ourselves from the National Crime Agency, we will lose that tool. I respect what the Member says, but I have had conversations with members of the PSNI, and they have expressed deep concerns about the major loss of resource that this will represent. So, to some extent, we have to accept the inconsistencies.

I also agree with Mr Allister's point. Hatred through websites is not exclusive to Facebook, Twitter and other forms of social networking. Mr Allister made the point very well. I can also think of that well-known merchant of hatred, Éirígí, which regularly propagates on its website spurious comments about the British monarchy, the British Army, even around Israel and boycotting Israeli goods and about Members of the Assembly. We have been tarred by that brush as well. What is good for the goose must be good for the gander, and, if there is to be greater monitoring of these websites, I hope that it will extend to groups such as that, which bring nothing constructive to Northern Ireland and are unrepresentative of anybody.

We have to accept, though, that this will be a difficult nut to crack. I had a conversation very recently with a leading anti-bullying campaigner, and he was making a relevant point. Like, I suspect, most people in the Assembly, I visit the internet — some of us probably more confidently than others. We have to accept that children who are at school today have grown up with access to the internet, and, rather than visiting the internet, they live within the internet. In many ways, the internet is their social life. It is where they go to meet their friends and talk to them. In many ways, that is good and makes communication much easier, but it makes things very open to being manipulated and to being exploited for negative effect. So, more education is the key. I support the motion, but we have to accept that the issue will have to be dealt with primarily at home. There has to be greater parental responsibility around what children look at and what they do whenever they are on the internet. We also have to recognise that, as there are 901 million users on Facebook alone, regulation of such a vast empire will be exceptionally difficult. This can be only one of a number of ways that we can deal with this problem.

I support the motion and the amendment. A number of the other issues that were raised are relevant. I hope that, given the events of the past 24 hours, other Members may reflect on some of the issues that were raised today and, perhaps, be man or woman enough to admit it when a bad decision is made.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Príomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Molaim an rún seo fosta. As somebody who has resisted getting involved in the social networking on Facebook and Twitter — my younger colleagues tell me that you cannot survive without it, but I have survived the best without it — I say that maybe that is one of the best ways to prevent the abuse that Tom spoke about.

I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate on a subject that, we read in the newspapers

almost every day, is a growing phenomenon. We cannot ignore the sheer growth of social networking in recent years. As the last Member who spoke said, there are something like one billion people on Facebook. It is a generational thing. My small knowledge of the subject, positive and negative, comes from having a 15-year-old in the house.

The motion is not about preventing or closing down opportunities for social networking for positive purposes. As has been said throughout the two debates — I was in the Chamber for half of the previous one — there are many benefits, including, as was outlined, social, educational and information resources. I have a small story about that. A friend of mine was estranged from his family from the age of two or three. After 27 years, it was through Facebook that he got in contact with them, and he now has a good relationship and grandchildren as well. So, there are positive aspects such as that, but we are debating the negative and dark sides.

We have a responsibility to protect the most vulnerable in society. Internet hate crime is growing throughout these islands. There are examples of sports personalities being targeted because of some decision they made. We have witnessed similar dangerous and abusive statements made recently in relation to the flags issue. We are often told that offensive material of that nature cannot be tackled because it may not be illegal. We have the growing issue of cyberbullying, which was addressed —

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lynch: No, not this time, thank you — which was addressed by junior Minister McCann at the end of the last debate. Social networking sites have also been used by sexual predators to groom victims. I do not wish to cover that ground again.

To address those negative aspects, we need better monitoring and regulation in cyberspace so that offensive comments are removed faster and posters are held accountable as well as those who share and propagate those comments. Social networking sites cannot be trusted to self-regulate. They have failed many young and vulnerable people. I call on the Minister of Justice to explore the introduction of better regulation. I accept that this is a complex area. Many would argue that there is also the issue of free speech, but some form of regulation must be part of the solution. As most Members have said, we need better education and respectful and responsible use of the internet.

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

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.30 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Mr Deputy Speaker: I must tell Members that questions 9 and 10 have been withdrawn and require written answers.

Voluntary and Community Sector: Contracts

1. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether his Department provides training for groups in the voluntary and community sectors to help them to tender for contracts. (AQO 3313/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): My Department does not provide training courses in tendering for the voluntary and community sector. Last year, officials in the Department carried out a review of the barriers faced by that sector in seeking public funding opportunities. In following up the review, my Department found that there are a number of courses available in Northern Ireland. One such programme, supported by the Public Health Agency (PHA), delivers courses in finding opportunities and winning tenders in the health sector.

The voluntary and community sector plays an important role in delivering services to communities across Northern Ireland, particularly in the field of health and social care. I welcome any efforts made by organisations to try to become self-sustaining.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. How does the Department plan to provide training and support to local community groups and services that feel under threat by what is happening and want protection and guarantees for their future?

Mr Poots: The Department does not see that as one of its key roles. We wrote to the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) and Chief Officers 3rd Sector (CO3) asking a series of questions to assess the barriers faced by organisations. Respondents raised a number of issues such as the skills gap, cash flow and capital, perceptions of the sector, the process being prohibitive to smaller organisations, and proportionality.

The Possibilities programme, supported by the PHA, has been developed by the Ashton Community Trust and the Larne Enterprise Development Company. Workshops have been delivered to support social enterprises in finding and winning tenders in the public health sector. Business mentors have been recruited, and mentoring sessions have been facilitated with individual social economy enterprises. A number of best practice visits are arranged for this quarter.

Mr Weir: What assistance has the health estates investment group provided as a centre of procurement expertise?

Mr Poots: The health estates group, in its role as a centre of procurement expertise for construction works and design, does not have involvement in training voluntary and community groups. It did, however, issue procurement guidance to arm's-length bodies in December 2011, helping small and medium-sized enterprises and social economy enterprises to access public sector contracting opportunities. Social economy enterprises include the voluntary and community sector.

I would like to look at opening up capital investment for that area, because organisations such as the Northern Ireland Hospice, the Northlands drug addiction unit, Mencap and other bodies have been seeking to develop capital programmes, and I can see public benefit being derived from such an investment.

Mr Kinahan: Does the Minister recognise that the community and voluntary sector can often access the most disadvantaged? Is that advantage recognised in the tender process?

Mr Poots: Well, it can be. Again, in the Health and Social Care sector, the South Eastern Trust has engaged with the Colin community, a social economy business that provides domiciliary care in that community. That has enabled close to 70 people who were previously unemployed to come into permanent employment, and many of those people have moved on through that social economy business to permanent employment elsewhere. That has been a very successful programme. We can build in procurement measures to give those communities a better opportunity to win contracts.

Health: Early Intervention

2. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given the evidence from the Scottish Government on early intervention and the savings to the economy, to outline the steps he is taking to ensure cross-departmental commitment to early intervention. (AQO 3314/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department is actively engaging with other Departments on a number of early intervention initiatives. For example, discussions are under way with Departments with a key interest in children and young people about the establishment of an interdepartmental early intervention fund. Also, I recently secured £5 million of funding through the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's (OFMDFM) Delivering Social Change framework to deliver increased direct family support and support for parents' projects, both of which have strong early intervention elements.

I firmly believe that by adopting early intervention approaches to policy development and service development, we can deliver improved outcomes for children, young people and families. I also recognise that intervening earlier in the lives of children and families has the potential to deliver economic gains, as evidenced in Scotland. I have a strong personal interest in early intervention and the benefits that it can bring. I am fully committed to ensuring that early intervention remains a key priority for my Department, and I will continue to work with other Departments in areas of common interest.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. I welcome

the fact that the Minister has secured some funding, but is he looking for any other funding to help the Public Health Agency to develop more intervention programmes?

Mr Poots: We only recently received the £5 million of funding from OFMDFM, so we have to roll that out. At present, I am not seeking additional funding. Investing in early intervention in families, young people and children has proven to be cost-effective, and that is why I was very keen to get the kind of support that we have received from OFMDFM. I put on record my appreciation for that funding.

Mr Dunne: What does the draft Fit and Well strategy propose on early intervention?

Mr Poots: The draft, which was developed through engagement with all Departments and endorsed for public consultation by the Executive, aims to improve health and well-being and reduce inequalities in health. It takes account of research showing that a shift in emphasis towards co-ordinated support for children in their early years will bring benefits, not only to children but to society as a whole, and is the most likely route to breaking the cycle of disadvantage and reducing inequalities in health. Giving every child the best start is, therefore, identified as a strategic priority.

It also proposes support for families and children as a priority area for collaboration across Departments and sectors, with the aim of enhancing support through the incremental development of targeted and universal programmes. If endorsed, it would provide strategic direction to reinforcing action to tackle inequalities. The social gradient in early years and cross-departmental commitment to and collaboration in early intervention are already evidenced through, for example, the work that my Department and its agencies are taking forward under the Delivering Social Change framework.

Mr Rogers: I acknowledge the Health Department's work on early intervention. Will the Minister give me some examples of savings made through early intervention?

Mr Poots: Savings can be delivered very strongly through early intervention. We have families who are heavily dependent on support, such as income support, and so on. In such families, there is little prospect of employment, educational outcomes are poor and, very often, the young people end up in the criminal justice system. It is much cheaper to invest in supporting children in the 0-3 age group than it is to support them in the juvenile justice system at the age of 15. There is a chance that children who receive early support will go on to make a success of their life. Unfortunately, far too many of those who end up in the juvenile justice system end up in and out of our prisons for the rest of their life.

Older People: Health and Social Services

3. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the actions that have been taken to improve services for older people. (AQO 3315/11-15)

Mr Poots: Longer life expectancy is something to celebrate, and I am determined that improvement in services for older people will continue to have prominence. This includes the further promotion of independence; re-ablement; multiagency working; maintaining people well in the community; and enhancing the provision of

services closer to home. The approach builds on current policies and strategies, such as those outlined in care management, safeguarding, the dementia strategy, direct payments, GP contracts, medicines management, the carers' strategy and the life-course approach in the recently published draft public health framework, which supports healthy ageing and early intervention.

A single assessment framework has been introduced to promote more effective integrated working and information-sharing among Health and Social Care staff working to meet the needs of older people. The new integrated care partnerships, proposed under Transforming Your Care, are intended to have an initial focus on the needs of frail elderly people and those with long-term conditions, such as stroke, diabetes and certain respiratory conditions, as well as those in need of palliative and end-of-life care. Where appropriate, I also want to continue the progress made on remote telemonitoring.

Other issues being progressed include the development of an older people's service framework, a review of current nursing home standards and the development of an adult safeguarding policy framework. I am also consulting on 'Who Cares? The Future of Adult Care and Support in Northern Ireland'.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he provide an update on his efforts to promote Northern Ireland internationally as a leader in Connected Health?

Mr Poots: Last week, I was in Brussels, as were the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Northern Ireland is officially recognised as a reference region for innovation in Connected Health. That is very positive, and we are giving a lead. Recently, representatives from Chile visited the Basque region and Northern Ireland because we are the two leading centres in the world for Connected Health.

The Connected Health programme is rolling out. I would like it to be rolled out faster than is currently happening. We need a better buy-in from our GPs in particular to ensure that that is the case. I hope that they will step up to the mark.

We are also working with the European innovation partnership on active and healthy ageing, which aims to identify and remove the persisting barriers to innovation across the health and care delivery chain through interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral approaches. The overall aim of the partnership is to increase by two the average number of healthy life years in the EU by 2020. That is a priority area, and the pillars have been defined as prevention, screening and early diagnosis, care and cure, and active ageing and independent living.

Ms Lo: In the context of Transforming Your Care, with its stronger emphasis on care in the community, what additional measures will the Minister put in place to combat isolation for older people?

Mr Poots: The Member asks a very relevant question. Often, in engaging in Connected Health and so forth, fewer people call with older people in those instances. If we roll out primary care clinics successfully, we need to create an opportunity for more older people's events to take place in those clinics. They will have the potential to see a podiatrist, an occupational therapist or various experts. That goes alongside their coming to that facility for a day

event at which they can engage with other older people in their community. That important element can enhance their mental health and well-being as well as their physical health.

Mr Cree: Minister, given that we have an ageing population with more demands on the elderly, will you explain why the out-turn expenditure for 2011-12 shows that less is being spent on care for the elderly than the previous year?

Mr Poots: The out-turn that was spent in 2011-12 was £739 million. I will break that down: £218 million was spent on nursing homes; £157.5 million was spent on domiciliary care; £110.3 million was spent on hospital care; £96.1 million was spent on residential care; £14.5 million was spent on day care; and £24.7 million was spent on social work. I want the hospital figure to come down because I do not want our elderly people to be in hospital. I also want the residential care figure to come down and the domiciliary care figure to go up to enable people to live and have care in their homes.

Mr A Maginness: I congratulate the Minister on Connected Health and its achievements. In order to build on that, is there any further discrete line of funding that can be used to assist the elderly in that area?

Mr Poots: We are getting recognition for our work in Europe. The First Minister and deputy First Minister met Commissioner Geoghegan-Quinn last week, and I met Commissioner Borg. We are getting connections right at the centre of Europe. Although I want to give something back to Europe by showing leadership and demonstrating that Northern Ireland is not just a taker and has something positive to give, I think that we can give more if we get a little. That is the argument that we will be making. If Northern Ireland gets a little support, we can set examples that other larger regions can use in the future. I think that Northern Ireland could be very well recognised in that respect.

2.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Fra McCann is not in his place.

Neurology: Private Provision

5. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether funding for the private provision of neurological services has risen or fallen in the past two years. (AQO 3317/11-15)

Mr Poots: The two most recent years for which completed funding information is available are 2010-11, in which there was no independent sector provision for neurological services, and 2011-12, in which 2,548 new outpatients were referred to the independent sector at a cost of £1.33 million. A further £1.4 million has been made available to refer an estimated 2,874 new outpatients to the independent sector during the current year, 2012-13.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be aware that his predecessor turned down an offer from the former Parkinson's Disease Society to provide a specialist nurse, which is a position that is badly needed in Northern Ireland. The society was going to cost that position and pay for it for two years. Is there any prospect of the Minister reconsidering that decision?

Mr Poots: I would be very happy to talk to the society. I think that Parkinson's disease is a very traumatic illness for

anybody to contract and for any family to have to deal with. If the society has indicated that it can assist us in caring for people with Parkinson's disease and in making life better for them, I will very happily meet it and talk to it about its proposals.

Mrs D Kelly: Is the Minister aware of the waiting lists for therapeutic treatment from allied health professionals? They will know and appreciate the contribution that such therapy makes to interventions and recovery in neurological illnesses. Will the Minister give any commitment for funding to reduce the waiting lists in these specialities?

Mr Poots: The funding that went to the private sector has been used to reduce waiting lists, which have been reduced by some 6%. Nonetheless, we need to do further work on that, and we have set targets to reduce waiting lists further. It is a challenging area and one that got really badly behind. Therefore, it is important that we use whatever tools we can to drive those figures down. On some occasions, that will mean using the private sector, because there is a bit more flexibility there. People with neurological conditions need our help and support. Those conditions can be very debilitating. Therefore, it is important that we continue to do that.

Ms P Bradley: Following on from that, will the Minister give us an update on the implementation of the stroke strategy?

Mr Poots: I am pleased that there is now greater awareness of the symptoms of stroke following the success of the FAST campaign, which was launched in June 2012. There was a 25% increase in 999 calls for possible stroke in the two months following the launch of the campaign. I would say to the public that it is better to be safe than sorry. If they suspect a stroke, they should call 999 and allow the experts to decide.

A Northern Ireland stroke dataset register is being developed. That will support patient care, improve communication between primary and secondary care and assist in monitoring the quality and level of care that is provided to stroke patients. It will collect information on stroke and transient ischaemic attack (TIA) patients, and it will follow up patients for up to one year after a stroke. My Department's policy framework 'Living with Long Term Conditions' provides a strategic direction to help commissioners and providers to plan, design and develop more effective services to support adults living with long-term conditions, including stroke and neurological disorders.

Organ Donation

6. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what actions he has taken as a result of the Assembly debate on organ donation on 22 February 2012. (AQO 3318/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am pleased to inform the Member that the recent NHS blood and transplant activity data for Northern Ireland indicate that transplants for Northern Ireland residents have increased in recent years, while the number of people on the active transplant waiting list is falling. It is also noteworthy that 30% of the Northern Ireland population have now added their names to the organ donor register. Although that is a huge achievement, I recognise

that more needs to be done, as around 200 people are awaiting an organ transplant.

In June 2012, to ensure that the momentum of progress in the field of organ donation is maintained and built on, I established the Northern Ireland Committee for Organ Donation and Transplantation, which is made up of commissioners, clinicians, NHS Blood and Transplant (NHSBT) representatives and the voluntary sector. My Department has also been working with NHSBT, in conjunction with the other UK health administrations, on the development of a new UK organ donation and transplantation strategy that is designed to build on the momentum and success of the original Organ Donation Task Force (ODTF). I expect to have a draft of the strategy for approval within the next few weeks, and NHSBT aims to publish the final version in the spring.

There is sustained interest in the introduction of an opt-out system for organ donation in Northern Ireland, so I propose to conduct a public survey on attitudes towards such a system, and the views of transplant-related charities, donor families and those on waiting lists in the health service community will also be sought.

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the fact that the Health Minister, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister recognised this morning — conveniently enough — the need for change. As the Minister will be aware, I will be bringing a private Member's Bill to the House. Today is a very personal day for me because it is the fourth anniversary of my son's transplant.

Does the Minister support the broad policy intent of my Bill and believe that a soft opt-out system is the best solution to help save lives in Northern Ireland?

Mr Poots: This is not something in which my interest has been aroused only recently. A relative of mine is one of the longest surviving donor transplant recipients in Northern Ireland. Indeed, last year, my best man's sister was buried because she did not get a liver transplant in time.

We have grave concerns about all these things. That is why, when David Cameron visited here for the only time, I raised the issue of introducing an opt-out scheme right across the UK. That would be the most successful scheme, given the numbers of potential participants across the UK. I further raised it with the Health Minister in England, and he indicated that Westminster was not prepared to move forward at that time.

Therefore, we have been having conversations with our Welsh counterparts on how to move this forward. Indeed, Joe Brolly has also been actively pursuing the issue in recent days. Through all of that, I believe that we can continue to drive organ donation upwards. I believe that an opt-out scheme can help maximise that, and I believe that an opt-out scheme with a strong educational emphasis will fully maximise the number of organ donations that we have in Northern Ireland.

We had a fantastic experience this morning with one lady who is donating her kidney. She does not know to whom it is going to go. It is being checked to see who it will be suitable for, but she wants to help someone else have life so is offering her kidney, and not to a relative or anybody else whom she knows.

Dr McDonnell: I congratulate the Minister on this very good news today. He is to be commended by the whole House —

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Dr McDonnell: — for the effort that he has made. I also congratulate our good friend Joe Brolly for the tremendous effort that he has made through campaigning recently and for his own tremendous generosity. He is like the lady today, the only difference being that he knew the acceptor and was motivated by that.

The Minister mentioned dialogue with the Minister in England. What opportunities are there for efficiency, effectiveness and cohesion with London, with Wales, as you mentioned, and perhaps Scotland? As well as to change the system, there is a great need to increase coherence right across these islands. Perhaps the Minister will tell us what developments he has had with Britain and Dublin on whether there is some way in which to create greater efficiency in matching donors with organs?

Mr Poots: We work very closely with the UK authorities in particular, but the UK authorities work with the ROI, and we help each other on these issues.

We have a good success story in Northern Ireland, particularly on live organ donation. Pauline Haslett, who won the Nurse of the Year award, has been leading on that and has been doing some brilliant work. Last year there were over 50 live donor kidney transplants. This year, until this point, there have been 46, and obviously that will continue until the end of March. So, great opportunities have been identified and have really brought the list down. That is significant work, which has been doing really well, and Joe Brolly will have assisted it with the altruistic step that he took.

Also, in terms of deceased donors, we are at 30%, which is higher than any part of the UK. But, we are not satisfied with being the best in the UK. We want to be even better and to continue to drive that up. We will work very closely with others, but we will not allow ourselves to be held back by others.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This is a good day for the House and for the Health Department. It is not that often that the Health Department gets good days, but we need to commend all who are involved in the campaign, and, more recently, some personalities who have been involved in the campaign.

Minister, I am aware of it, and I think that it shows the power of local Ministers and local accountability. In your previous answer, you mentioned the issue of a strong education campaign or strategy around that, and I think that that is vital. Is there going to be a strong publicity campaign parallel to that? When we make good decisions, we need to ensure that our people are aware of them and want to get involved in the campaign for organ donation.

Mr Poots: Public awareness and education are vital, because when the Spanish introduced the opt-out rule they did not see a significant rise until they engaged in public information and education. Then, they saw the real benefits of the opt-out. Without providing public awareness, we will not be using this to maximum effect. That is why public awareness is essential.

Ministerial Subgroup on Suicide

Mr Maskey: Ceist uimhir a seacht.

7. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the agenda for the next meeting of the ministerial subgroup on suicide. (AQO 3319/11-15)

Mr Poots: Is that seven? A meeting of the ministerial co-ordination group on suicide prevention was held on 30 January. The next meeting of the group will be in August. The agenda for the meeting held last week covered: departmental progress on reporting on actions to tackle suicide and promote mental well-being; Public Health Agency (PHA) progress reporting on implementation of the Protect Life action plan; the recently published report on the evaluation of Protect Life; the Health Committee's Youth Talks report; and mental well-being within the undergraduate teacher training programme.

Mr Maskey: I thank the Minister for that report about the last meeting and the forthcoming meeting in August. Will suicide issues be included in the training of all teachers and social workers?

Mr Poots: A course of work is being done and has been done on training. The Department of Education (DE) will take a key role on that. The Health Committee asked whether mental well-being promotion and suicide awareness is included in the training of new teachers, and the DE is to report on that position. It was not able to do so at the last meeting. At present, the PHA is working with relevant bodies to enhance mental health promotion education in undergraduate health training.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister for his reply. I note that the recent 2011-12 out-turn figures show that spending on mental health, health promotion and disease prevention have gone down, despite inflationary pressures. Can the Minister assure me that efforts and expenditure on suicide prevention have not suffered because of that?

Mr Poots: Last year was the first year for around six years in which there was actually a drop in the number of suicides; so, we are looking at how we do things and how we can do them better. That will continue to be the case. It is not an issue that we can be complacent about. Traditionally, mental health has been the poor relation in the health service, and it is something that we cannot afford to not spend money on.

Our interventions can be done better in that people who go to a GP for help will often need to be referred more quickly to psychiatric facilities. Psychiatric facilities need to be able to discharge people much more quickly so that GPs can take up more of a role thereafter. Earlier interventions can deliver considerable value for money.

2.30 pm

Justice

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Samuel Gardiner is not in his place to ask question 1. I call Mr Stephen Moutray.

Community Safety Strategy: Crime Against Elderly People

2. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the effectiveness of the community safety strategy in tackling crime against elderly people. (AQO 3329/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): The community safety strategy, which was published last July, sets the framework for building safer, shared and confident communities. An important part of the strategy is to help older and vulnerable people to feel safer by reducing crime and the fear of crime. The Committee for Justice recently agreed action plans to set the priorities for delivery over the next two years. In ensuring the safety of older people, the focus will be on a number of issues, including engaging directly with older people to improve our understanding of the fear of crime and its impact and effective responses, and promoting intergenerational practice to build trust and confidence. The action plans will also help to promote and support regional and local initiatives, including home security schemes to prevent burglary; information days for seniors; support for the Quick Check scheme to prevent bogus callers; and the promotion of Crimestoppers and neighbourhood watch schemes to reduce crime and the fear of crime. Policing and community safety partnerships (PCSPs) play a key role in building confidence locally through engaging and consulting with communities on the issues that matter to them. PCSPs across Northern Ireland are delivering a range of projects and initiatives with local communities to tackle crime and improve the safety of older and vulnerable people. The effectiveness of the strategy will be measured by how well it delivers on these outcomes, and it includes a range of indicators on levels of crime and perceptions of safety of older people.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for his response. One area of concern is that the police have not been successful in pursuing those responsible for crimes against the elderly. Indeed, figures last year suggested that, for every 18 offences, only one person was charged. Does the Minister agree that there needs to be a greater clear-up rate in that regard?

Mr Ford: I certainly agree with the Member that we would all wish to see a higher clear-up rate across all crime. The reality is that crimes against older people are still extremely rare in this society. Only two in 1,000 people aged 65-plus were the victim of violent crime last year. That said, if you happen to be one of those two individuals, it is still a serious crime. I certainly wish to see PCSPs continuing to do the good work that they are doing to follow on from previous work by community safety partnerships (CSPs) and district policing partnerships (DPPs) alongside the police so that we can provide that confidence for older people.

Legal Aid

3. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the reasons for the shortfall in the legal aid allocation for 2012-13. (AQO 3330/11-15)

Mr Ford: The main cause of the legal aid funding pressure relates to civil legal aid, as the changes that I have made to criminal legal aid are now beginning to take effect. Expenditure on criminal legal aid has reduced from £60 million in 2009-2010 to £48.3 million in 2011-12 and is

further forecast to reduce to £35 million by 2014-15. However, civil legal aid expenditure has continued to increase, contributing to the shortfall in the legal aid allocation for this year. Prior to devolution, net expenditure on civil legal aid increased from £11.4 million in 1999-2000 to £36.9 million in 2009-2010 and has further continued to rise to £53.3 million in 2011-12. In particular, forecast expenditure relating to Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 cases in the High Court increased by £7 million or 68% throughout 2012-13. There has also been a higher than anticipated rate of processing of claims by the Taxing Master. This underlines the importance of the civil legal aid reforms that I am now bringing forward. With regard to the 2012-13 pressure, additional budget cover of £16 million has already been provided to fund part of the current shortfall. My officials continue to work to identify further funding.

Miss M McIlveen: I appreciate the Minister's answer on the issue. It is obvious that he is taking it seriously, but, given the fact that we are in a strapped economic climate and job losses are inevitable, when will he be able to bring forward substantive proposals in order to alleviate future problems?

Mr Ford: I appreciate Miss McIlveen's point. She talks about substantive proposals, and there are substantive proposals under way to deal with civil legal aid expenditure. As far as this year is concerned, we have effectively ensured 94% of the anticipated costs, which, given the very significant increase in unanticipated in-year costs, shows that good work is being done by my officials. There is clearly more work to be done.

The substantive issue, however, is to tackle the burgeoning cost of civil legal aid. We have shown over the past two years that the efforts made to tackle criminal legal aid have resulted in reduced expenditure. With the support of the Justice Committee and the Assembly, we will be able to ensure that we also tackle the civil side.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister ensure that legal aid is structured in such a way that access to justice is not curtailed to the degree that only those who can afford it will receive it?

Mr Ford: It is my intention to ensure that we maintain the ability of those who require legal aid to access it, whether it is for civil matters or criminal matters, as far as possible. That is why the reductions in expenditure, which have happened so far on the criminal side, have been reducing the amounts paid in individual cases and not taking issues out of scope. I believe it would be the wish of the House, as we proceed with the civil legal aid reforms, to either find a suitable alternative way of dealing with issues that come to the civil courts or ensure that we fund them in a way that gives people access to justice but does not necessarily continue paying barristers and solicitors at the current unsustainable rates.

Mr Allister: I declare the interest that, in the past, I have been a recipient of legal aid fees. I have no current interest to declare.

There has been a substantial backlog in payments to practitioners. As a consequence, the Legal Services Commission has advised that some of that backlog will not be cleared up until the new financial year on cheque runs which begin then. Will legal aid then be subject to late payment commercial debt facilities? Are those obtainable

from the legal aid services in respect of late payments? Will that add to the cost?

Mr Ford: Mr Allister correctly declared a former interest, which shows that he is better informed on the mechanics of receiving legal aid than I am. As I highlighted, having obtained an additional £16 million against an unforeseen pressure of £22 million, a very small sum of money will not be paid. I am also well aware that, in many cases, lawyers do not submit their bill for legal aid for some months or, on occasion, years after the event. So, I am not sure whether lawyers who have their payments delayed by a week or two would necessarily have any justified case for seeking additional payments.

Mr A Maginness: I listened with interest to what the Minister said about legal aid for family cases. Has he conducted an equality impact assessment of the substantial and severe reduction in representation for those involved in family proceedings? What repercussions has that assessment shown?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Maginness for his question, which highlights the fact that we are seeking to ensure that we maintain an appropriate level of legal aid expenditure. The question about the appropriate level of representation is, however, different. There has been a significant increase, particularly in family cases, in recent years in the number of lawyers funded for a variety of parties in cases. Although the question about the EQIA is a legitimate one — an EQIA will be carried out as part of a policy review — we also need to recognise that, not so many years ago, significantly fewer lawyers were funded for the average children order case than are currently funded. I must declare my former professional interest and say that I do not necessarily believe that funding lawyers when things go wrong is the best way of dealing with difficult cases involving children. I would prefer to fund social workers and health visitors to get things right in the first place.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Mr Adrian McQuillan is not in his place, I call Mr John McCallister.

Stalking

5. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Justice whether he has any plans to introduce legislation to make stalking a criminal offence. (AQO 3332/11-15)

Mr Ford: Stalking, as it is called, is an invidious behaviour. While it appears to be targeted particularly against women, it can be directed against anyone. Current legislation in Northern Ireland already allows for prosecutions in relation to what is known as stalking. Prosecutions can be brought under harassment legislation for a number of offences. The Protection from Harassment (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 allows for the general offence of harassment and the offence of putting someone in fear of violence. Penalties can be up to seven years' imprisonment. I am aware that both England and Wales and Scotland have recently created offences specifically called "stalking". I will keep the developments in Great Britain under review to assess the need to strengthen the powers in Northern Ireland.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister for his reply. Are there any means of recording complaints of stalking in Northern Ireland according to physical and/or psychological harm?

Mr Ford: In recording offences, it is for the police to record complaints made to them, as well as to record successful prosecutions and unsuccessful court cases. In a debate earlier today, we highlighted stalking, cyberstalking and other offences that go beyond the traditional assumption of physically following someone. At the moment, we see that our legal system is capable of dealing with that, but we will also need to learn the lessons that come from other jurisdictions.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a chuid freagraí. In light of the Minister's previous answer, is the Department doing or has it done any work with the PSNI to ensure that members of the PSNI are properly trained to ascertain, establish and recognise the particularly difficult and, at times, very sensitive offence of harassment, including stalking?

Mr Ford: As ever, I need to be cautious when talking about what the Department should do by way of training in conjunction with the PSNI. That is very much an operational issue for the police. However, there are a number of issues for which the Department is involved in ensuring suitable training. Examples include the training of prison officers dealing with sex offender programmes in prison and work that is done jointly through the multiagency risk management arrangements. The Department has a role to play in all those issues. However, as ever, the Department cannot direct individual agencies on how they operate their own training procedures.

COBRA Civil Contingencies Committee

6. **Mr D McIlveen** asked the Minister of Justice what input he or his Executive colleagues have to COBRA civil contingencies committee meetings. (AQO 3333/11-15)

Mr Ford: I have had no occasion to input to COBRA civil contingencies committee meetings. There are, of course, strategic co-ordination arrangements in place to deal with a major emergency in Northern Ireland through the Northern Ireland central crisis management arrangements.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister will be aware that, in light of the Algerian crisis, the Prime Minister indicated that the United Kingdom might be a potential target for north African terrorism. Given the inglorious tradition of north African terrorism being connected with Irish republican terrorism, is the Minister satisfied that dissident republicans will not be used by north African terrorists as a means of attack on the United Kingdom, as they have been in the past?

Mr Ford: I fear that Mr McIlveen is trying to take me into matters of national security and international arrangements that are not for the devolved Department. However, I can assure him, in case anybody in the House needs assurance, that the Department is committed to playing its part in supporting the PSNI in the work that it and other agencies do against terrorism and other serious crimes of the kind that we discussed yesterday. We will continue to do that as best we can.

Mr Kinahan: Are we right to assume that COBRA has not requested any help on this matter from the Executive?

2.45 pm

Mr Ford: There have been no requests from COBRA to the Department of Justice. I understand that there have been occasions in the past, for example in the case of swine flu, which involved the former Health Minister, and ash dieback, which has apparently featured some of my ministerial colleagues. They have not involved the DOJ.

Mr McDevitt: The Minister will be aware that we have a legislative gap in Northern Ireland in civil contingency and emergency planning. Does the Minister agree that we are now 10 years out of date with the rest of the UK and it is now time to introduce a contingency planning Bill, so that emergency services and other organisations can operate within a clear statutory framework at times of civil crisis?

Mr Ford: I am very reluctant to agree that Northern Ireland is 10 years behind other UK regions in any respect. There are clearly issues, and we need to ensure that the arrangements through NICCMA are the best possible arrangements for Northern Ireland. I have not had any representations from any services with which I deal to suggest that there is a need at this stage for further legislation, much of which, I believe, would lie with OFMDFM rather than with my Department.

Personal Protection Weapons

7. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Justice, in light of the present dissident republican threat and the murder of Prison Officer Black, what direction he has given regarding the issuing of personal protection weapons. (AQO 3334/11-15)

Mr Ford: I have not issued any direction on the issuing of personal protection weapons. I have no power to do so.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer. I kind of knew that anyway. Has he had any discussions with the Secretary of State to ensure that the Northern Ireland Office provides the home security scheme and that the criteria are not over-restrictive?

Mr Ford: I have had a number of discussions, particularly since the tragic murder of David Black, with the Northern Ireland Office, the Prison Service and the police about some of those arrangements, but the home protection scheme and the rules for the issuing of personal protection weapons are entirely for the NIO and not for the Department. I have been assured that cases, particularly for prison officers who had not seen themselves as needing that sort of protection, will be expedited, and I understand that that is the current position. If she has specific concerns, the Member needs to go directly to the NIO.

Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust: Grafton Recruitment

8. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister of Justice whether the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust has received sponsorship, donations or other unspecified assistance from Grafton Recruitment during the lifetime of that company's private contract with the PSNI. (AQO 3335/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust has not received any sponsorship, donations or any other form of unspecified assistance from Grafton Recruitment

during the lifetime of that company's private contract with the PSNI.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister share my concern that there is a history of that company offering advice to retired policemen so that they can come back into the police force?

Mr Ford: I am really sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I do not know how I can answer a question about a private company having dealings with private citizens. The specific question was around sponsorship or unspecified assistance, and I have answered that.

Magilligan Prison

9. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the plans to rebuild HMP Magilligan. (AQO 3336/11-15)

Mr Ford: As I have stressed on a number of occasions, further work is needed before a definitive decision can be made on the future of Magilligan prison. That decision will be based primarily on enhancing public protection and public safety through providing opportunities for prisoners to address their offending behaviour and preparation for release back into the community. I have committed to returning to the Assembly to update Members on emerging decisions following publication and subsequent consultation on the Prison Service estate strategy, including the future of Magilligan, by the end of March.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister assure those who depend on Magilligan for their livelihood that a decision will be made as soon as possible to ensure no loss of quality staff?

Mr Ford: As I have outlined, I can assure Mr Robinson that I will be back to the Assembly by the end of March to give that detail. Given the amount of discussion that is needed on the whole issue of the prison estate, that is an appropriate and reasonable timescale so as not to rush it but to give it full consideration.

The issue of those who are dependent on Magilligan for their livelihood is of course, in most cases, for staff of the Prison Service. The key thing is to ensure that we use the staff in the best way possible to meet the needs of prisoners from all parts of Northern Ireland.

Mr Elliott: In an earlier statement, the Minister indicated that Magilligan might have a partial rebuild and a partial refurbishment. Is that still the view, and, if so, how will he identify which part will be a partial rebuild and which a partial refurbishment?

Mr Ford: Mr Elliott's question is definitely inventive, but, having said that I will come here by the end of March to give the results of the consultation and the outcome of the decision-making process, I do not believe that I am in a position to give the answers that Mr Elliott seeks in the first week of February.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Anne Owers's report identified a gap in the links between Magilligan prison and the community in facilitating the rehabilitation process. Given the stay of decision on Magilligan, will the Minister outline what steps have been taken to build up those community links so that

we can be assured that there will be a proper rehabilitation process if the newbuild is at Magilligan?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr McCartney for that question, which puts its finger on the key issue of the future possible use of Magilligan. In the past, we have highlighted the difficulties of Magilligan's location. Whatever some people may wish to do to replicate Robben Island in Northern Ireland, that is not the way in which you provide an atmosphere in which it is possible to rehabilitate prisoners towards the end of their sentence. The key issue for me was the discussions that I had personally with, for example, representatives of local business and local councils. The ongoing discussions being engaged in by my officials and the local councils are looking at the opportunities that will be present for rehabilitation. I am glad that those discussions, which started off with three councils, now include four: Derry, Limavady, Coleraine and Ballymoney councils are all involved in looking at the possible ways in which they could contribute to rehabilitation. Obviously, there is an element of that that might benefit their citizens, if their focus is geographically on Magilligan. I cannot give the detail of that. The next meeting with the councils will be next week. I am satisfied that progress is being made.

Prisons: Strategic Efficiency and Effectiveness Programme

10. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the strategic efficiency and effectiveness programme. (AQO 3337/11-15)

Mr Ford: Following each meeting of the prison review oversight group, which I established to scrutinise progress on the prison review team (PRT) recommendations, the group provides a summary report to the Justice Committee. To date, three reports have been provided to the Committee, and a copy of each has been deposited in the Assembly Library. The oversight group will publish its first annual report shortly, and it will also be deposited in the Library.

The strategic efficiency and effectiveness (SEE) programme, which sits within the wider PRT reform programme, will realise a fundamental end-to-end transformation of the Prison Service and deliver over half of the recommendations in the PRT report. We should not underestimate the achievements so far. They include the introduction of the new prison custody officer grade, the amalgamation of support grades into the new grade and the development of a new training programme for these members of staff. To facilitate these reforms, 175 new recruits have been appointed, and 287 staff have been released under the voluntary early retirement scheme. The introduction of a new target operating model and core working day in October last year provided a first step towards delivering the most efficient and effective staffing model for the three establishments in the future. These steps are the foundations of change that will be built on by the SEE programme over the next two years.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his answer. One of the visions of the SEE programme is the rewarding of staff. Will the Minister give us a bit more detail on what the programme will encompass for the reward of staff?

Mr Ford: One of the key points about rewarding staff was the voluntary early retirement scheme for those who had served in difficult times. There is the opportunity to provide

a much more rewarding job than was previously the case, with much more significant professional work to be done in engaging with and rehabilitating prisoners and maximising the work that can be done by uniformed staff alongside other staff in, for example, teaching and skills training. That is the kind of thing that will provide a much greater opportunity for prison officers to gain job satisfaction. It will also contribute to making society safer.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Is the Minister satisfied that there is a rigorous implementation plan to see through the necessary reform?

Mr Ford: Yes, I am satisfied of that. Like any significant programme, it took some time to get under way. However, if Members take the opportunity to go to the Library and read the three quarterly reports that have been published, they will see the amount of work that has been done and continues to be done.

Prison Service: Voluntary Early Retirement Scheme

11. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the Northern Ireland Prison Service voluntary early retirement scheme. (AQO 3338/11-15)

Mr Ford: Deputy Speaker, I was going to say that, with your permission, I would take questions 11 and 12 together, but I shall not.

Some 544 members of staff applied to leave NIPS under the terms of the voluntary early retirement scheme. As I have just said, 287 individuals have left the service to date. Business case approval has been given for a total of 360 staff to leave. A business case seeking approval to extend the scheme to cover all those who initially applied will be submitted to DFP shortly.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for his response. He is racing through the questions, but I hope that I will get a substantive reply to my supplementary question. Many officers who applied for the early severance scheme are still waiting, as you say, to leave the service. Are you aware that that puts undue stress on them and their families, and will you outline precisely the £10 million resource recently announced in the February monitoring round for the exit scheme? Will that be used to ensure that those officers are released without delay?

Mr Ford: I am certainly aware that those who wished to leave but have so far been unable to do so are, in many cases, anxiously awaiting news. That is why we advanced the business case and obtained the additional funding from DFP in the latest monitoring round, which Mr Anderson has just highlighted. We continue to develop the business case to allow all those who wish to leave to do so within the broad terms of the scheme. Clearly, we do not want to retain staff who have served for long years and now feel that the time is right for them to go, but nor can we do that without a proper business case being accepted by DFP.

Prisons: Contingency/Emergency Facility

13. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Justice what progress has been made in identifying and deciding on the location for a contingency/emergency prison facility. (AQO 3340/11-15)

Mr Ford: During the compilation of the estate strategy, consideration was given to the need for contingency accommodation to deal with population pressures and associated overcrowding. Following consideration of the viable options, it has been decided that the provision of contingency accommodation is best served by increasing the capacity of the accommodation in the three existing prisons. To that end, the recent opening of a new accommodation block at Maghaberry has allowed the opportunity to vacate, for the short term at least, one of the square houses. Plans for an additional accommodation block at Maghaberry are being developed, and proposals have been made to add an additional storey onto that new building to cater for any foreseeable capacity pressures.

Mr Deputy Speaker: For the record, I should have said that Ross Hussey was not in his place for question 12. I can now call Peter Weir for his supplementary question.

Mr Weir: In light of the fact that the Minister has ruled out any additional facilities other than in the existing prisons, what plans does he have for the site at Millisle?

Mr Ford: I am not sure whether Mr Weir was in the Chamber when I answered his colleague Mr Robinson's question about Magilligan. The entire issue of the estate strategy will be reported on at the end of March and, I am afraid, not in the first week in February.

Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust: Funding

14. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Justice whether the annual allocation of funding by his Department to the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust is subject to scrutiny by the Equality Commission and the Audit Office. (AQO 3341/11-15)

Mr Ford: Neither the Equality Commission nor the Audit Office has a role in the allocation of funding to the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust.

Mr McAleer: The Minister has answered my question. Go raibh maith agat.

Office of the Police Ombudsman

15. **Mrs Hale** asked the Minister of Justice what assurances he can give that the Police Ombudsman's office will not be diverted from its central purpose of overseeing current policing activity. (AQO 3342/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland provides an independent means of handling all complaints against the police. The office remains absolutely committed to the thorough and impartial investigation of matters that fall within its remit.

In March 2012, my Department announced an additional £10 million to enable OPONI's history directorate to conclude investigations within six years, with a fully resourced dedicated directorate in the office to look at historical investigations. I am assured that the additional resources made available specifically for historical investigations will enable the office to carry out both historical and, just as important, current works to the highest investigative standards.

3.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: We do not have time for a supplementary question, but I think that it is in order to congratulate the Minister and Members for managing to get to question 15, which is a record.

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Horse Meat

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Joe Byrne has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Before he asks his question, I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary question. I will then call other Members who are on their feet to ask a supplementary question, taking account of the same issues that I do at Question Time.

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given the news regarding horse meat being found in meat production, what investigations his Department will conduct in relation to horse meat found in Northern Ireland.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): This is a matter for the Food Standards Agency (FSA) and district councils. Investigations are already under way on products stored at the cold store in County Down that tested positive for horse DNA. This is part of a wider investigation that is taking place in both jurisdictions. I am not in a position to provide any further details on that investigation so as not to prejudice any further enforcement action and possible legal proceedings. The Food Standards Agency has advised me that, based on current information, this is not a food safety issue.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his answer. Obviously, the issue is causing grave concern in the wider community. Will he state when the FSA in Northern Ireland was alerted to the possible concerns regarding DNA horse meat in Northern Ireland? Will he reassure the House that his Department and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) are doing everything to make sure that the authenticity of meat products going through Northern Ireland is properly certified and up to the required standards?

Mr Poots: The FSA was informed on 4 February at 6.15 pm by the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) that samples taken by the Republic of Ireland's Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine from a company called Rangeland Foods showed levels of equine DNA of up to 75%. On 4 February 2013, the FSA received results of samples that were taken from a consignment of 12 samples taken: two tested positive for equine DNA at levels between 60% and 100%. So, the information has been coming forward, and the FSA has been investigating as indicated.

It is clear, and this must be made clear to the public, that the scientists who work in the FSA have no food safety concerns at this point. This is more a matter of labelling and of the information that has been put forward to the public. It is also a matter of consumer confidence. However, this is not a food safety issue.

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for giving us that information.

Although he said that this is not a food safety issue, and I appreciate that, there is a high level of public concern, which the Minister acknowledges. The Committee had an update last week from the Food Standards Agency when it teased out some of the issues. Although this might not be an issue for food safety, are there any implications for public health in the discovery of horse meat in these and other products? It is important to stress that point. I appeal to the Minister and the relevant authorities to try to get as much of this information out as quickly as possible so that we can alleviate people's fears.

Mr Poots: At this minute, there are no issues of concern for public health. Horse meat is commonly used in other parts of Europe, although it is not used so commonly here. There is some slaughter of horses in Northern Ireland. However, none of the companies in the Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association (NIMEA) is involved in the slaughter of horses. There is some slaughter of horses in the Republic of Ireland. In other parts of Europe, it is much more common.

If people buy a beefburger, they expect it to be a beefburger. If it contains horse meat, the label should say that it contains horse meat, and people can then make their own choice. That is the issue here: at this time, what it says on the label is not exactly what people are buying. Therefore, consumers have an issue with confidence, and that needs to be addressed. I am making it clear that, at this stage, there is no evidence of any kind that this is a food safety issue.

Mr Frew: Can the Minister reassure the House that the meat that is being investigated at present is not from animals that were born and bred and whose meat was processed in Northern Ireland and that it was, indeed, imported from elsewhere in the world?

Mr Poots: That investigation is taking place. At this stage, I cannot state clearly from where that latest consignment of meat, which has been identified to contain a high level of horse DNA, has come. We will seek to ascertain the facts. I should say that the meat has been tested and there are no veterinary substances, for example, in it. The problem was that some of the meat may have come from illicit sources where the animals may have received injections of antibiotics. There is no case of that at this stage. The meat is fit for human consumption. The issue is that people were buying something that they did not actually anticipate it to be.

Mrs Dobson: Does the Minister recognise the vulnerable state of the agrifood industry and agree with me that the vast majority of producers operate perfectly legitimately? Will he give a commitment to the House that his officials will not take any action that would cause long-term damage to the industry?

Mr Poots: Officials have acted reasonably and responsibly thus far. They have given the public information about an issue that is of concern to them. The public are rightly concerned that they are buying a product that may contain something that they did not believe would be in it when they bought it. If people want to buy burgers that contain horse meat, they can make that choice. When it is not labelled as such, they cannot make that choice.

A further issue is that thousands of people are involved in the production of good-quality meat in Northern Ireland. I know that there is huge anger and resentment

among those individuals, who do their job very well and get a limited income for doing so, that some fly-by-night merchants think that they can grab an easy euro and damage the entire industry in the process. I will give assurances that I want the Food Standards Agency and, indeed, the PSNI, in conjunction with the FSAI and an Garda Síochána, to pursue rigorously whoever is involved and ensure that they are punished appropriately for that involvement.

Dr McDonnell: I think that the Minister is saying that the cowboys need to be rooted out. We all agree with him on that.

He referred to a storage facility in County Down. I am concerned that the owner of a storage facility could be the focus of blame or contamination. My understanding is that when someone rents out a storage facility, it is the responsibility of the person or company who puts in the meat in it, rather than that of the owner of the storage facility. It is important that we clarify that the owner of the cold store is not to blame for what goes into it.

Mr Poots: It is obviously not the responsibility of the owner of the building but that of whoever handles the foodstuff. Twelve consignments were tested. Ten of them were clear and two contained horse meat. That indicates that perhaps there has been an attempt by some people to filter something that they got at lower cost into the food chain, thus increasing their profit. The individual who bought the meat may be innocent, because it could have gone through a number of companies before it arrived with that particular company. However, companies in the business must ensure that due diligence is applied when they acquire foodstuffs, so that they can stand over what they are selling to others.

Mr Allister: I think that the House understands that the Minister's focus of responsibility relates primarily to food safety, but this is an issue that, undoubtedly, has cross-departmental ramifications. In that regard, will the Minister agree that government, as a whole, needs to be active in any investigation? That needs to include the allegation that the Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has put on record of its belief that organised crime is involved in the provision of these carcasses. Will the Minister support a cross-departmental investigation that will embrace the possibility of the involvement of organised crime and the exploration of that?

Mr Poots: I am very happy to work with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, which are the key Departments with responsibility, to identify the source of the horse meat and, if there is fraud involved, to work with the PSNI in pursuing those individuals.

It is incumbent on us that we work together to ensure that the good name that has been built up in Northern Ireland since the BSE crisis of 1996, and the quality product that is supplied and recognised across Europe, is maintained and that we do not allow individuals who are prepared to take short cuts to damage an entire industry. The industry is too important and too valuable to us. My role, first and foremost, is to ensure that public health is not impacted. At this stage, we have no indication whatsoever that this is a public safety issue.

Mr Givan: I welcome the Minister's assurance that, based on scientific evidence, the food safety aspect is

not something to be concerned about. However, it is something that consumers will be very concerned about and that when they go into our supermarkets and buy something that says that it is a beefburger that that is exactly what they are buying. There is a responsibility on the large stores and multinationals to ensure that they are having due diligence and are sourcing all their products from reputable organisations.

Mr Poots: At the outset, I will say that not all supermarkets have been stocking burgers that contain horse meat, but a number of the large companies have. I referred to meat companies having due diligence in identifying the source of the food to ensure that they are getting exactly what it says and that it is the quality that they would expect, and the same applies to the supermarkets. It is not good enough for supermarkets to go for price alone and not to ensure that what they are selling to the public is bona fide. Unfortunately, in this case, their credibility has been damaged over the past few days. I trust that, in future, they will ensure that more effort and application is put into the companies that they acquire their food from and that they will ensure that they acquire their food based not on price alone but on quality, safety of supply and a whole range of criteria in which the public can have confidence.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I rise as a Newry and Armagh MLA based in Newry. There was some publicity on the radio this morning when I was travelling down about a company in Newry where horse meat was found in its storage facility. The company issued a statement saying that it was storing a parcel of raw material that it never purchased. It was not purchased by the company, and it never reached the food chain through the company. It went on to say that all tests are being carried out routinely on their own finished products, that is, burgers —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Brady, do you have a question?

Mr Brady: That company received adverse publicity this morning, and I think that needs to be addressed.

3.15 pm

Mr Poots: Mr Brady has, obviously, read out a statement from the company, and I have no issue with that. An investigation will take place to identify who did own the meat and where they sourced it. I hope that the individuals who own it will co-operate fully with the investigation and assist us in identifying the source so that those involved in this can be punished.

The people involved in this have the potential to do huge damage to a key industry in Northern Ireland. Although, again, this is not a public health issue, it has huge potential to damage consumer confidence. Therefore, those people need to be identified, found and punished.

Mr Beggs: Food standards and accurate labelling of products are devolved matters. I understand that there has not been random DNA testing on meat products in Northern Ireland in recent years to give consumers a higher degree of reassurance. Why has that not been happening in recent years?

Mr Poots: The ability to achieve the sensitivity of the DNA testing that is now taking place has been quite recent. However, the testing that was carried out in Newry would indicate that this is not a trace element. Certainly there

were traces in some of the earlier tests, which could come about from just having animals killed in the same plant without it being horse meat. That is a completely different scenario. What we are talking about this morning is a situation where there was a significantly higher DNA content, which would indicate that there was quite a lot of horse meat in that consignment.

Private Members' Business

Social Networking Websites

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly notes the growing number of people and hate groups who use social networking websites to verbally abuse other users; further notes the use of these sites by sexual predators to groom victims; and calls on the Minister of Justice to explore the introduction of better regulation of these sites and tougher penalties for people who use the sites to commit crime. — [Ms McCorley]

Which amendment was:

“; and further calls for additional policing resources so that online internet hate crimes are able to be fully investigated”.— [Mr McDevitt]

Mr Easton: The internet is one of the most influential inventions for this generation. The immediate access to any information you can imagine has changed our society. People now have access to information whenever and wherever they want. With the advent of the smartphone, tablets and laptops we really are the most accessible we have ever been in our generation.

Social networks make up a vast proportion of our accessibility. As an elected representative, social media allows me to be in close contact with my electorate. They can post on my walls any concerns that they have or ask questions, and I am able to update them on what I am doing in their interests. That is a positive and important role of social media.

Sadly, as technology has marched ahead, our legislation has not quite kept pace with the changes. There appears to be a large amount of confusion as to what comments risk prosecution and what is simply the right to freedom of speech. That confusion is before we enter the world where people are intentionally using such sites for illegal reasons such as sexual grooming of our children.

When I was growing up, home was a sanctuary, where a child could go and feel safe. A person could lock their door and leave the world outside. The rise in technology means that children and younger people no longer have that sanctuary. If they are being bullied at school, that bullying can continue in the home through social media.

Although many sites have age restrictions, many young people are well-trained in how to get around them. I know of a six-year-old who has social media accounts and whose parents are not the most knowledgeable about technology. Obviously, that is a major safety risk. Nobody would leave a 10-year-old in the centre of Bangor and tell them to talk to anyone they want, but with social media there is a risk that they will be doing just that.

Just because they are physically in their bedrooms or the living room does not mean that they are not conversing with strangers, giving potential identifying information such as school names or how they get home from school to people, the majority of whom I would hope to be upstanding citizens. However, it takes only one to pose a real danger. I know of one headmaster of a secondary school who claims that 90% of the incidents around bullying now occur through the use of technology and who

advises the parents of children entering year 8 that if their children have Facebook or Twitter accounts they should delete them, as they cause more trouble in the school than anything else.

If schools are noticing that, so should our society, so that we can adequately protect our young, vulnerable people. Nasty comments, hate sites and people telling other young people to kill themselves on sites such as Twitter or Facebook are all too common. Just as victims of traditional bullying often are fearful of telling an adult about such bullying, the same is true of internet bullying.

Added into the mix are apps such as ask my penguin, where people get to leave anonymous comments about a person, encouraging people to maybe say something that they would think twice about saying to someone's face. It is easy to forget that there is a real human behind the screen reading comments, and so-called keyboard warriors may not always realise the impact that some of their words will have on the person at whom they are directed.

Predators have always seen the potential of using the internet to commit their crimes. Again, they can see a young person who is lonely, has low self-esteem and appears to have a high level of reliance. They then exploit the information that that young person places on their social media website to build a relationship with them and to distance them from the people in their real life. There is little risk to the predator as many young people access such sites in their bedrooms, away from their parents' eyes. Also, parents are not always up to date with technology, which leaves young people vulnerable and at risk.

Over the past number of weeks and months, we have seen the positive effects of social media in raising awareness of issues, but we have also seen the downside, with two young sisters taking their lives over alleged remarks made on social media.

Without clear legislation and strong punishment for those who transgress these laws, we will continue to have this grey uncertainty over what can and cannot be typed. Some of the videos that go viral on Facebook, for example, have bestiality implied in them, which young people can watch. We have sites where young girls aged 14 and 15 are wearing very little — less than what you would see on a beach — while sites that promote and give advice on issues such as breastfeeding are closed down and pictures are deleted.

We need to end this confusion now and make people understand that the premise that sticks and stones may break our bones but words can never hurt us is no longer correct when it comes to the world of social media.

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

Mr Easton: Thank you.

Mr Wells: Last August, I made a comment known on a particular moral issue that I felt strongly about. That obviously touched a raw nerve with many hundreds of people throughout Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom. I was relatively new to social media and the internet, though I have a member of staff who is much younger than me and is an authority on the issue. So, I have come to Twitter and Facebook only within the past 18 months.

The torrent of abuse, bad language and offensive comments that I received over the web in those few weeks

was very disturbing. There were abusive phrases thrown at me but, on a lighter note, the one I found most offensive was the accusation that I was wearing a wig, which is not true. The rest of them were a wee bit more serious than that. I had been given an insight into the malicious power of social media.

Someone showed me a facility on Twitter where you can follow what people are saying about you but they do not know you can see that. You put your name in, and you can see what is going on behind your back. If what was coming to me publicly was offensive, what was being said behind my back was absolutely appalling.

I am a politician, and I have been in this business 31 years. Therefore, to my mind, me complaining about that is like the captain of a P&O ferry complaining about rough seas; it comes with the territory, and I have to accept it. However, I had read enough that, had I been someone considerably younger or someone with mental health problems, I certainly would have been pushed over the edge.

There is something about Twitter, Facebook and the internet that takes normal, rational human beings and turns them into, as someone said, internet warriors — people who lose all sense of responsibility, who believe that they are anonymous and can say what they like and who can issue desperately offensive and downright insulting comments.

I have learned my lesson. I have blocked an awful lot of people. I had people writing to me on Facebook saying that they would never, ever vote for me again whom I traced to Brighton, east Croydon and Suffolk. I wrote to them and asked how they could vote for me, if they lived in Suffolk, and they went quiet. Another gentleman came on to me, very offensively, and said that he had voted for me for all his life and that he would never vote for me again, following my comment on the moral issue. I checked the electoral register for South Down; he was not on it. I went back and asked him how he could say that he would never vote for me again, when he was not on the register. He went silent as well. It transpires that many of those people do not live in Northern Ireland, but they can be deeply offensive to those of us who do.

The lesson is that, although the internet can be tremendously advantageous and can bring many wonderful benefits, it is a very, very dangerous place. If it is dangerous for an obscure Back-Bencher from south Down, aged 55, how much worse is it for a young person who does not have the experience of life to deal with these insults?

I believe that we need to take the media a lot more seriously, and I think that the solution is simple. The solution is that you opt in. If you want to have offensive material, violence or very graphic sexual imagery, you opt in to receive it, and the rest of us throughout the country can simply go along and have normal access to the multimedia, which will enable us to carry out all the functions we want to, such as e-mails, etc, and to carry on our business. Those who wish to go the step further should have to opt in to something more serious. That means that a 14-year-old will find great difficulty in logging on to perverted sexual activity or graphic violence on the media. That is not going to restrict the rights of any individual in Northern Ireland, because those who wish to move up to a higher tier, as it were, for whatever reason, would be able to do so.

We simply cannot allow a free-for-all in the media, regardless of whether it is Facebook, Bebo, Twitter, etc. We cannot allow a free-for-all that exposes our children and those who are, perhaps, depressed or have mental health difficulties to the awful world out there of people who, frankly, are out to cause the maximum hurt and offence.

I will leave my comments at that. That is from my bitter experience. I am a lot older, wiser and more knowledgeable, and I will certainly be a lot more cautious in my use of the media in the future.

Mr Allister: Mr Deputy Speaker, anyone reading the motion would find it difficult to disagree with anything that it says, because it outlines a number of issues. I will pick up a few words in it. It asks that the Assembly:

“notes the use of these sites by sexual predators to groom victims”.

That is an obvious reference to the hideous practice of paedophilia. Anyone reading that would think, “Yes. Someone putting that forward is obviously exercised about that and wants to do all that can be done about it.” Yet, the staggering thing about this debate, for me, is that those who tabled the motion are the very people who stand in the way of something being done about organised paedophilia across the United Kingdom and wider afield. We saw that no later than yesterday, when they took the stand of blockading the route to the establishment of the National Crime Agency (NCA), designed to deal with those very issues.

Therefore, when you factor that in, it is very hard to escape the conclusion that the motion is an exercise in cynical populism by those who stand exposed as being shallow in their views and, indeed, fraudulent in that view, because they are the very people who want to stop anything effective, realistic or meaningful being done about it at a national level. That is what strikes me most particularly about the motion.

Then we had the proposer of the motion speak. When she was challenged by my intervention to deplore the current use of the internet to promote a campaign to boycott all Orange-owned businesses, she tried to tell us that it was not a Sinn Féin site. It bears the Sinn Féin banner. She did not tell us that Sinn Féin has taken steps with the hosts to have the Sinn Féin banner removed. She did not tell us why it carries so many likes from Sinn Féin branches and organisations.

We should be very slow to listen to those who speak with double tongues on these issues. That is a low-down, scurrilous attempt to put people out of business on the most base of sectarian grounds and to vilify, harass and pursue them and to use social networking sites towards that end. The site boasts that it will publish a list of those who are to be boycotted. The proposer of the motion could not even bring herself to denounce or deplore such a misuse of the website. That speaks volumes about what those who peddle the motion today really think and what they are really doing.

3.30 pm

I support the motion because the words are right, but I challenge fundamentally the motivations and actions of those who tabled the motion. I have to say the same to the SDLP about its amendment. It is a very sound amendment,

but for one thing: yesterday they joined forces with those who want to make sure that there is not effective policing of matters such as paedophilia and the gangs that operate across the nation. It was of great sadness to me that the SDLP took that standpoint. I have a simple question: how would the crime organisers have wished you to vote yesterday? How would the victims of crime have wished you to vote? The manner in which some people voted is indicative of a very sorry state of affairs.

Mr McDevitt: I thank Mr Allister for giving way. He poses a simple question. I pose a simple question back: why do those who know most about tackling paedophilia — the people who established CEOP, which is a fantastic agency that did not require one single warranted officer to be operational in Northern Ireland to defend our children from the worst excesses of online abuse — think that the National Crime Agency is a bad idea? That is a simple question that we all, if we are honest, should reflect on. It is not about the need to do it; it is about doing it in the right way. We do not believe that the right way has been found yet.

Mr Allister: The reality is that we have legislation that will provide for the National Crime Agency. You either have it or you do not. Those who say that they will not have it are saying that they will give free writ to the paedophiles and the organised crime gangs because they have some theological, ideological —

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

Mr Allister: — and precious principle that they cannot sacrifice. Therefore, they will sacrifice —

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

Mr Allister: — the pursuit of paedophiles and all the rest on that altar. That is shameful.

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): I welcome the fact that the Assembly has such interest in these important issues that it has managed to have two very similar debates today.

There is absolutely no doubt that the phenomenon and the growth of social networking sites and social media generally have changed the way in which we communicate and interact with one another. Members have highlighted the positive and negative aspects of that. Some negatives are fairly trifling, such as Jim Wells's wig or a picture of me falling asleep after Christmas dinner, which was posted on Facebook by a daughter. However, other aspects are extremely serious.

Mr Wells: I am not wearing a wig.

Mr Ford: I accept Mr Wells's correction: his alleged wig.

Having pointed out the relatively jokey aspect of that offence, we need to take into serious consideration those who exploit these sites for some foul activity. It can involve bullying or harassing others; circulating unfounded allegations, which may or may not be fair game against a politician; or making grossly offensive comments. Sometimes, as has been highlighted, that has tragic consequences.

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

It is clearly important that people, especially the most vulnerable, are protected through both civil and criminal law from serious harassment. There is no doubt that

children require protection from exploitation by those who wish them harm, in whatever way they wish it. The fact that, as so many Members highlighted, children and young people can access the internet free from parental supervision is clearly an issue of concern.

There is also no doubt about the speed with which modern technology with instant communication has enabled people to be mobilised onto the streets. We saw that during the riots in London and other English cities in 2011, and we have seen its impact in recent weeks in Northern Ireland. Social networking websites have played a major role in street protests since early December. Although I certainly recognise that everyone has the right to peaceful, lawful protest, there is a real need to ensure that it is balanced by mutual respect and tolerance for a variety of opinions. Social networks are clearly being used for a variety of criminal activities and to publicise protests that go way beyond any legitimate protest.

The motion calls, in part, for improved regulation. Regulation of the internet is not an issue that falls within my responsibility or, indeed, that of any part of our devolved Executive. Under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, it is specifically a reserved issue, which no doubt reflects the global nature of telecommunications generally. Decisions on regulation are for the UK Government to make through the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in London. However, those who misuse these sites can be subject to sanctions. When people post or send messages that are judged to be grossly offensive or of an obscene or menacing nature, they are guilty of an offence under the Communications Act 2003. One Member said that it was OK to be grossly offensive about politicians, but it is not. It is OK to be offensive, but to be grossly offensive is a criminal offence. People should acknowledge that. That is the difference between joking about people allegedly wearing wigs and the other stuff that we see at times, particularly some of the vile and hateful stuff directed against vulnerable young people.

As stated in the recent interim guidelines from the Crown Prosecution Service for England and Wales, the volume of communications that we see on Facebook, Twitter or YouTube means that the threshold for prosecution is necessarily high. Otherwise, there is:

"a chilling effect on free speech",

Free speech is a right that we should all hold dear. The PSNI has advised that it is reviewing a number of comments by individuals in relation to recent protests. As I said, many comments that have been posted on some websites are undoubtedly distasteful, but that does not mean that they are unlawful. However, action should be taken against those that are unlawful —

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Minister giving way. I think that I am the one who referred to the comments being grossly offensive. That was taken from a Police Service briefing on 23 January, which stated:

"comments ... may be distasteful or grossly offensive but that does not mean that they are unlawful".

So I welcome the Minister's clarification of what was said at a PSNI briefing on 23 January.

Mr Ford: I fear that I have been placed in a difficult position with my legal advice differing from the advice

given by the Police Service. However, I think that we could all agree, as a matter of common sense, that boundaries are being overstepped constantly in social media at the present time. Certainly, where the police believe that offences have been committed under the Communications Act, they will pursue charges, as they have a responsibility to do.

Any changes to the legislation are not for my Department, but there are issues on which there are roles for us in the Assembly and where the Northern Ireland legislative framework has other effective penalties for a variety of offences.

Mr Wells: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ford: Certainly.

Mr Wells: I accept that it is absolutely right that it does not fall within his powers, but he is a man of very considerable influence. Will he support calls for Westminster to legislate so that only those who opt in to sites that portray violence or graphic sexual activity will be entitled and enabled to access that material and the rest of the community, including our young people, will not be able to do so? Will he at least support calls in London for that?

Mr Ford: Mr Wells has caught me on a particular point. I am certainly aware that, for example, YouTube will, in a number of cases, indicate the particular content of a specific video. There are issues with how exactly that is managed. I will discuss that issue, among others, when I meet the Lord Chancellor this week. I am certainly prepared to discuss it, but we would need to be sure exactly what the implications are before I could give a firm commitment to support what Mr Wells is saying. If he has any more specific information that he wishes to give me before I meet the Lord Chancellor, I will happily look at it.

The current position in Northern Ireland legislation is that, where comments constitute threats to kill, the maximum penalty available is 10 years' imprisonment or, where an assessment of dangerousness is made, indefinite imprisonment with release at the discretion of the Parole Commissioners. Where comments target specific individuals and constitute an offence under harassment legislation, penalties of up to seven years' imprisonment are available, subject to the nature and seriousness of the offence. Those are significant penalties for significant offences. Where comments breach hate crime legislation, penalties of up to seven years are also available, and there is a range of offences for which maximum penalties available are increased where they are shown to be motivated by hate on the grounds of race, religion, sexual orientation or disability. That is our existing legislation as it applies to hate crimes, and it can be used against modern telecommunications.

The motion also asks us to note the use of social networking sites by sexual predators seeking to groom young victims. We all recognise the harm that can be done by those who use the internet to seek out vulnerable victims for sexual abuse, and many Members spoke about that during the debate. There are, of course, real issues for us in a small region. The internet has no boundaries. No distances are too great to forge. For that reason alone, the task of closing down the opportunity for abusers is also a global one and not one that can be regulated by my Department or the Assembly. However, I fully support the work that is being done by the PSNI in conjunction

with its colleagues in an Garda Síochána and the range of agencies across the UK, including, as Members particularly highlighted, the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, to jointly target offenders, from wherever the source, and protect children from abuse.

The criminal law in Northern Ireland also makes it very clear that this type of offending will not be tolerated. Grooming a child by whatever means is an offence if the person then makes arrangements and travels with the intention of meeting the child to sexually abuse him or her. The maximum penalty is a 10-year prison sentence. Causing or inciting a child to engage in sexual activity is also an offence that applies either online or offline, as is causing a child to watch a sexual act. So the behaviour is already criminalised, but, as acknowledged today, the hard part is obtaining the evidence in the way that such activity can occur across space and time. Therefore, although the police, CEOP and the criminal law will continue to challenge the global and internal aspects of this type of offending, it would be wrong to think that all risk from such abusers could be eliminated. However, much can be done to address the risks through education and good practice in schools and homes, which will make children safer and less likely to fall victim to sexual abuse via the internet. A number of Members talked about the way in which young children could be better supervised. Indeed, it was a comment that Mark Durkan referred to in his speech winding up the previous debate. I also want to highlight the fact that sentencing guidelines have been or are being developed for many of the offences for which people who post comments on internet sites or use the internet for criminal purposes can be convicted. That is part of the work being led by the Lord Chief Justice in his programme of action, which will enhance the guidance available to other members of the judiciary in making their sentencing decisions.

So let me say again that this has been a useful debate. I welcome the opportunity to debate this important issue and support the thrust of the motion, although I make the technical reservation as to exactly what my powers are. However, given that regulation of the internet is a reserved matter and there is little that I can do, as I have just said to Mr Wells, I will use the opportunity of my meeting the Secretary of State for Justice this week to highlight the issues that Members have raised. I believe that that will be a practical demonstration of the work that my Department proposes to do to implement the spirit of the motion. I am committed to ensuring that an appropriate range of penalties exists in criminal law to deal with serious harassment and hate crime, whatever form it takes, because that is my direct responsibility to the Assembly. Should specific proposals arise from the debate, they will certainly be examined seriously by the Department.

I will say a few words on the amendment. Naturally, the deployment of resources in any assessment of the adequacy of the number of police officers in the PSNI is a matter for the Chief Constable. In this specific context, I am aware that the Chief Constable has stated that he considers that sufficient resources are being directed to allow police to take forward their investigative obligations in respect of online hate crime. He is following up other matters related to recent street disturbances, but on the specific issues that are highlighted, such as the sexual grooming of young people, he is also relying on the expertise available in CEOP to the PSNI and other police

services across the UK. Other Members highlighted yesterday's irony that, in the context of CEOP being absorbed into the National Crime Agency, regardless of whatever the opinions in this Chamber might be, it is unfortunate that we will lose that aspect of CEOP's work if we do not get the NCA in place as its successor.

3.45 pm

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ford: Yes.

Mr Wells: Does the Member accept from me that, as a result of yesterday's decision, children in Northern Ireland will be more vulnerable to this type of nefarious activity without the strength of an organisation covering all the United Kingdom or having the resources of 60 million people at its beck and call? Does he agree that, as far as our children are concerned, that was a very serious decision that was taken yesterday?

Mr Ford: Certainly, the evidence that has been put to me is that we rely significantly on the specialist expertise of agencies such as CEOP to support the Police Service's work. The Police Service would simply not be capable of developing the expertise required to deal with that level of exploitation if it had to develop matters on its own. So, that is an issue on which I have concerns arising from this debate. However, I also note that there has largely been agreement around the Chamber about the work that we seek to do to eliminate hate crime from the internet where we can, where we have responsibilities and where there is local action to be taken. There is certainly unanimity about the need to protect vulnerable people in Northern Ireland, including vulnerable children and young people. When moving the amendment, Conall McDevitt seemed to dwell very little on resources and a lot on the need to stand up against harassment and bullying, whether online or offline. That view attracted unanimous support around the Chamber, as it deserved to.

Mr A Maginness: I thank all those who contributed to the debate.

The amendment that we in the SDLP tabled would enrich the motion. I do not think that there has been much opposition to it. The amendment is intended, first, to call for additional police resources. We are calling for additional police resources, which does not necessarily mean policemen or women but resources at large, because we believe that online hate crimes have become a persistent and chronic problem and, therefore, one that requires such additional resources. That has been exemplified in recent days and weeks in the use of social network sites in the dispute over flags. It is clear that there is a requirement for additional resources, and I hope that the whole House will support that and that the PSNI will take it into consideration in its operational activities.

There has been some criticism levelled at the SDLP in particular about our attitude to the NCA. We had the debate about that yesterday. I am not going to repeat the arguments that we made yesterday on accountability. They are well-established arguments under the Patten architecture for policing. I believe that, in today's 'Belfast Telegraph', we have an article by Mr Jim Gamble, who was head of CEOP. In fact, he set it up. In that article, he is critical of the fact that CEOP will go into the NCA. He makes legitimate criticisms. If that man, who is a very

distinguished police officer and did a good job at CEOP, is regarded as a legitimate commentator on the National Crime Agency, surely we, who are politicians and have been given the job of legitimately scrutinising legislation, not perhaps in this House but in another place, should equally be respected for our views. You may disagree with them, but you should respect the fact that we have legitimate criticisms to make. The criticisms that we have made should be taken on board. The Westminster Government should be sensitive to those criticisms and therefore take action. I will not go further than that, but Mr Gamble has made a very strong argument, and it behoves Members to take that argument seriously.

I am no expert on anything in this field, but the points have been well made by all the contributors that we are against cyberbullying; that we require parents to be more vigilant; that the grooming of young people in particular is a vile offence; and that we are concerned about the penalties that can be imposed and the actions that can be taken against people. It is important for us to make those points publicly, to emphasise them and to get that message across. I am slightly disappointed —

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

Mr A Maginness: I was going to go further, because I thought that I had another minute. I was slightly disappointed by the Minister's response, in so far as I think that he has a very important job to inform Westminster about the gaps that exist in the law here. More could, in fact, be done.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag labhairt ar son an rúin seo agus ag tacú leis an leasmholadh. I speak in favour of the motion, and we will support the amendment.

It is appropriate, with today being internet safety day, that this is the second debate on two aspects of the internet. The first debate was on child safety, while this debate focused more on regulation of the internet and abuses of it. I thank everyone who contributed to the debate, particularly the Minister of Justice. I will address his comments later on. It is important that there was, I think, unanimity in support of the motion.

Jim Allister nearly supported the motion. I think that he felt that it was the right motion but perhaps questioned the fact that Sinn Féin had proposed it. That maybe left him with some reservations. I want to address one of the points that he made. I want to state publicly that Sinn Féin stands in total and absolute opposition to any campaign that purports to boycott any shops — I think that they were named here as Orange shops. Indeed, if Mr Allister will take up the opportunity, through the auspices of the Speaker's office, to supply us with a copy of the printout from the internet, we will certainly examine any issue pertaining to Sinn Féin as a party.

I want to make another point that is relevant to the discussion about the internet. We have all had experiences of bogus sites. You hear about teenagers swapping addresses, about bogus IDs and so on. Someone who told us earlier today that he once had the gift of legal aid and is a senior counsel would know that any person in their right mind would never start a prosecution or a defence by saying, "I read it on the internet". Mr Allister should perhaps caution himself —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: Yes, I will.

Mr Allister: The Member says that his party disowns any boycott of Orange-owned businesses. If he and his party check out the site — with their vast coterie of press agents, I would have thought that they would have already done so — they would see that several branches of Sinn Féin have indicated support for and “liked” the proposition of boycotting Orange-owned businesses. Is he prepared today to rebuke those parts of Sinn Féin that have publicly endorsed that campaign on Facebook? Is he prepared to undertake that the Sinn Féin banner, if it is being misused, will be removed from that site and state that he utterly repudiates the site and all its content, which includes somebody’s posted photographs of the leader of Sinn Féin?

Mr McCartney: First, I repudiate any person using the Sinn Féin logo in the manner in which it was. I have asked Mr Allister to supply the document to the Speaker’s office so that we can examine it. I think that, even though we had the Diplock courts for a long time in the North, Mr Allister would support everybody’s right to a fair hearing. I cannot examine or give a disposition on a document that I have not seen, so, if he wants to take up that invitation, I am sure that the Speaker’s office will accommodate him.

There were recurring themes in the debate. Most people who spoke accepted that the internet has had a very positive impact on society across the spectrum from the economy to democracy to its social use by children and adults. Local businesspeople might not see this as a positive, but we have seen an increase in the online economy, with people buying more online. However, we have also seen — this was the purpose of today’s debate — an increase in the use of the internet for things such as hate crime, racism, sectarianism, bullying, homophobia and many other forms of intimidation. Indeed, in recent times, I am sure that we have all read about and seen on television how that has manifested itself in many societies. We are not free from that here in the North. That is one of the points we make about regulation: there are many instances where people feel that the internet has been abused, but we do not seem to see internet sites or their suppliers and engine drivers go after those who abuse a very positive tool.

I do not want to name any companies, but a number of times I have found that, even when your e-mail is hacked, there is no facility to inform the company so that it can take steps to close down the account. It is nearly as if they do not see such things as important, whereas we all know that, if your site is hacked and someone has control of it, even if it is just for a number of hours, you may end up in the type of scenario that Mr Allister majored on earlier. We need some sort of regulation on that.

People talked about the role of education in teaching us all, not just children, how not to abuse the internet and how to use it in a positive and constructive way. Unfortunately, there are those who abuse it. The Minister and other Members mentioned a number of pieces of legislation that protect citizens from that abuse, but I would have liked the Minister to say how many people have been charged, prosecuted or even visited and cautioned in relation to their use of the internet. That would inform the debate. If you asked most people, they would struggle to name

cases, apart from one or two notable instances in the recent past, in which someone faced charges for abuse of the internet, despite all of us accepting that it happens on a daily and continuing basis. If people feel that they are relatively free from being pursued when they go on the internet, that will only encourage them. If you think there is no sanction, why would you stop doing it?

That is the part of regulation under which, as the Minister correctly said, it might be difficult to prove what is grossly offensive as distinct from offensive. However, at least a person can be asked why they have chosen to say a, b, c and d, and it can be done in a way that is not an investigation or something that goes in front of the Public Prosecution Service. The person is then held to some sort of account for their comments.

4.00 pm

A number of Members — some of them are not present now — touched on the issue of the NCA. Yesterday’s debate gave us all an opportunity to speak about the impact of the NCA. The main plank of our position, and indeed that of the SDLP, is around accountability and primacy of policing. No one is arguing against co-operation. What we are arguing against is subordination.

Without going into the detail of it, a major investigation is being conducted into match fixing right across Europe. No one is against the many police services co-operating with one another to ensure that the people who are responsible for that are brought to book. However, what I can say — and I make an assumption when I say this — is that the French police will not try to circumvent the processes that lie within German borders and vice versa. That co-operation will happen right across Europe. So, there should be co-operation but not subordination.

The Minister has said that he would like the NCA to be fully accountable, but that position has not been reached. Therefore, people should not be in any doubt as to why we are not in support of it at this time. That should not and will not prevent, and nor has it ever prevented, any police service on this island, North or South, nor I am sure any police service in England, Scotland and Wales or across Europe, from co-operating with one another if there are any internet abuses that cross borders. That is how we have to go forward.

The Minister commented on the resources. We initially had a reservation about the amendment before Conall McDevitt and Alban Maginness explained it. The PSNI says that it has enough resources to deal with hate crime and abuse of the internet. We say that it should perhaps be more proactive. If that activity is going to become increasingly prevalent here, it is up to us to ensure that we do not create the space in which people think that they can do this with impunity.

I appreciate the Minister’s comments about his limitations, but —

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

Mr McCartney: — we are reassured that he is willing to take forward the views that have been expressed here today about the need for better regulation. Today’s debates were healthy and good. They promote the idea that we are interested in ensuring that there is no abuse of the internet.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the growing number of people and hate groups who use social networking websites to verbally abuse other users; further notes the use of these sites by sexual predators to groom victims; and calls on the Minister of Justice to explore the introduction of better regulation of these sites and tougher penalties for people who use the sites to commit crime; and further calls for additional policing resources so that online internet hate crimes are able to be fully investigated.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Strangford Lough Fishery

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes. The Minister will have 10 minutes to respond. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately seven minutes.

Mr Hamilton: I am sure that the Minister is on her way. We are a wee bit ahead of schedule. I thank the Minister, in advance, for her response. I hope that she gets here.

To be honest, I do not think that, a year ago, I had a good understanding of the intricacies of the issues pertaining to fishing in Strangford lough. Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, you and I have become familiar with those intricacies as members of the Environment Committee. As a result of our work on that Committee over the past year, I have become very familiar with the issue in the —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I thank the Member for allowing me to intervene. I draw the House's attention to the visit to the Assembly of the president of Kurdistan and his delegation. You are very welcome, Mr President.

Mr Hamilton: I extend my welcome as well. He is in good company. Many from the fishing community in Strangford lough are here today, and I take the liberty of extending a welcome to them as well.

Over the past year, in developing my understanding of the issues surrounding fishing in Strangford lough, I have developed a real sympathy for what the fishermen have had to go through, particularly over the past few months. I have a general sympathy regardless of their difficulties over the past number of months, and I will come to those issues in a moment. I appreciate their good work and fight in trying to protect their livelihoods.

The Assembly has debated, in the Chamber and in Committee, the issue of horse mussels, modiolus and the exclusion zone that has been put in place. I do not want to dwell too much on those issues other than to say that the exclusion zone that has been debated before is now a reality. Over a third — nearly 40% — of the lough has been zoned as a no fishing zone for the fishermen in the lough. That came into place on 8 January and is having a real effect here and now for the fishermen in Strangford lough.

It is not just 40%, and, because of the way that fishing seasons work — I am probably using the wrong terminology — the northern part of the lough, where the prawn beds are, is not in season. Therefore, fishermen are more or less confined to the bottom third of the lough, and that means that, although it is a small fishery, the boats are fishing on top of one another. That is obviously causing some issues and concerns and has significantly reduced opportunities for the small fishing fleet in Strangford lough.

I do not want to dwell on that issue. I dare say that, over the months and, indeed, years from now, it will continue to be discussed and debated and that there may even be disagreement on several aspects of it, not least because we have yet to pin down the precise cause of

the degeneration of the modiolus beds in Strangford lough. There is a pretty fierce dispute about the impact of pot fishing on the modiolus beds, and that debate will continue. There are concerns about the mapping of other special areas of conservation (SAC) features and giving those maps to fishermen so that they know where they should and should not go. That is what is happening with the exclusion zone, and there will continue to be debate and discussion on whether the exclusion zone was the right way to go.

I want to, as the topic title suggests, look at the future of the Strangford lough fishery. I put it to the Minister that her Department is responsible for fisheries, but I must point out that some of the issues that I will mention are probably not exclusively in the domain of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). As the Minister and others will know, fishing cross-cuts a lot of Departments, but, principally, there is a duty of care on the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development as the Ministry responsible for fishing. Given the circumstances, including, as I outlined, the exclusion zone, that Department has a duty of care to the fishermen in Strangford lough to ensure that they have a future.

There are many, including many in the fishing community in Strangford lough, who question whether there is a viable, sustainable future for the industry in Strangford lough. I think that there can be, and the argument that I want to progress with the Minister today is that, with a little help, encouragement and backing, there can be a future for the fishing industry in Strangford lough.

When looking at the evidence, everybody comes to the conclusion that there is no easy fix or single solution to the issue of the future of fishing in Strangford lough. So, the question has to be asked: what can and should be done? I will go through what I think needs to be done to get to a position where we can all say that there is a viable, sustainable future for fishing in Strangford lough.

The first thing we need to do is ascertain what constitutes a sustainable fishery in Strangford lough. We have to look at the evidence and ask, in light of what has happened with the exclusion zone, what sustainable fishing means in the future in Strangford lough. Once we decide that, we can take other steps allied to that. After we look at the evidence and agree on what a sustainable fishery is in Strangford lough, we can then turn our attention to right-sizing the fleet in Strangford lough. It is a small fleet. I see Mr Rogers, who will be acquainted very well with Kilkeel port. It is not a fishery like Kilkeel; the boats are a fraction of the size of those that are in Kilkeel or Portavogie. It is a small number of boats. There are about half a dozen full-time fishermen and maybe another 15 who do it part time. So, in total, there are around 20 boats fishing up and down the lough.

Objectively, given that there are reduced opportunities and that about 40% of the lough has been closed off to them, that is probably still too big a fleet. That leads into the question of whether a decommissioning scheme could be brought in. I know that there has been criticism of decommissioning schemes in the past, but it is worth — indeed, it may be necessary — examining whether we can have a decommissioning or, indeed, a tie-up scheme for that fleet once we have ascertained what a sustainable size of a fleet is.

We then need to move to having a management plan for fishing in the lough. I know that some work has been undertaken on that already. The plan needs to be underpinned by a proper permit scheme so that we can better regulate in numbers what fishing goes on in the lough. This is all very much focused on the numbers and the size of the fleet.

There is one positive step that the Department can take. One of the parts of the plan coming off the issue of the horse mussels was that the Department of the Environment (DOE) would put a ranger in place, and the Department would have a fisheries officer for the lough in place. Given the size of the lough, the size of the fleet in the lough and the fact that all the fishermen are using pretty advanced technology through which you can ascertain on a computer where they are at any given point in time, the issue of enforcement and ensuring that they do not go into the exclusion zone will not, in my opinion, take up all of the new fisheries officer's time.

So, a positive step forward by the Department would be to adapt the role of a fisheries officer from one that almost exclusively looks at enforcement, which is what we were informed would be the case at the outset, to one that is about developing the fishery in the lough and working with fishermen to develop a knowledge and to understand the ways of the fishermen and the community in the lough and see how they could develop the fishery into the future.

I now want to turn to talk about a positive package of measures that could be put in place that would greatly assist the fishery in the lough. It is widely recognised that the fishermen are catching, landing and selling produce of the highest possible standard. This is stuff that is consumed not only in pubs, restaurants and hotels around Strangford lough but far beyond that in Northern Ireland. It is also being exported to top-class restaurants in London, Paris and beyond. It is good stuff that is coming out of Strangford lough, and we should be celebrating that, yet I do not think that there is the consciousness of just how good the produce really is in Strangford lough. It is part and parcel of our local tourism and hospitality sector in Strangford lough.

I have cited the example in the House before of the renowned hotelier Bill Wolsey, who has developed a hotel in the centre of Belfast that is recognised as one of the best in the world. One of the reasons he chooses to invest in the Portaferry Hotel is that he knows that his chefs can prepare, cook and sell seafood that is caught in Strangford lough and landed in boats that you can see from the window of his hotel. He knows that there is a great benefit in having local produce caught in the lough and sold in his establishment, as do other hoteliers, restaurateurs and publicans around the area. It benefits the local tourism sector. People who come from Belfast and further afield know that, when they go to the restaurants around Strangford lough, they can eat seafood that is caught there and which is of the highest possible standard. Any negative impact on the fishery in Strangford lough does damage to our local tourism and hospitality sector and, therefore, to the local economy.

The first thing that we need to do is tied in with examining the sustainability of the fishery in the lough. We need to get a figure that is as precise as possible on the contribution of the fishery to the economy of that part of Northern Ireland. I do not think that I am speaking out

of turn when I say that it is not a massive fishery, but, as everyone knows, even if the value of what they are landing is not big, the value that is being added to that down the line is substantial. Money is being pumped into the economy elsewhere, whether into engineering or the upkeep of boats. There is a broad impact on the economy that is far beyond some of the estimates that we have heard in the past. It does have an impact on the economy, and we need to assess that.

I pestered the Minister and her predecessor time and time again about European protected geographical indication (PGI) for the Comber potato, which, I am glad to say, we have now got.

4.15 pm

I think that there is real potential for doing something like that with seafood from Strangford lough. I know that that, in itself, does not make the difference. That does not suddenly lift a product that is not that well known, or that well used, to something that everybody is consuming, but it gives it a seal of approval. It is something that they can market, and it says that there is a value there — that there is some added value to it. We are already seeing in Comber, with the designation of the potato, that companies, growers and producers are adapting to having this and selling the product as a Comber potato, rather than just as a variety of potato. So I think that there is huge potential to do that.

In a weird way, having had a threat from Europe to the fishery which has led to the establishment of the exclusion zone, we can actually use Europe in a positive way, by pursuing protected geographical indication for seafood and shellfish from Strangford lough. Perhaps we need to look at how we can better market and promote the seafood and shellfish from Strangford lough that is sold in local hotels and restaurants to make it more accessible and more attractive to purchase.

I think that there is also potential to look at how we can use the fishermen of Strangford Lough, and their boats and infrastructure, for things other than simply fishing. That might be training, through tourism, to develop it for people to go out on day trips, and things like that. That is only small; it does not change their livelihood, but it might, at certain times of the year, add another string to their bow and make their business much more viable.

That is where I appreciate that there is some cross-cutting between the Minister's responsibilities with DARD, and perhaps those of my colleague, Arlene Foster, in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). Given that the Department of Agriculture is the lead Department in this respect, these are the sorts of positive measures that it should work up and work, in conjunction with other Departments, to deliver that difference and that change that will have a positive impact on the industry and give it a future.

In terms of funding, there has been an examination of a European Fisheries Fund bid for Strangford lough, tailored around environmentally friendly gear. That is great evidence of the fishermen of the lough actually trying to be progressive. The use of more environmentally friendly pots and the introduction of a voluntary code of conduct show that the fishermen, who are sometimes portrayed, unfairly,

as the bad guys of the piece, are trying to make a positive contribution.

In the minute or so that is left to me, I want to stress to the Minister that there is a positive future for fishing in Strangford lough, but it needs a bit of encouragement and help. The fishermen of the lough have sustained a lot, particularly over the last year, and have seen that conclude with the exclusion zone being put in place in the last number of days. They are already seeing the real impact of that on their ability to do their jobs. They need to engage in positive, constructive dialogue with DARD, and I hope that DARD does that and starts to engage with how it can positively take forward the fishery in Strangford lough.

If I am permitted, I would like to invite the Minister and her officials to come down to Strangford lough to see for themselves. They will be well looked after if they do — they will certainly be well fed, anyway. They should come down to Strangford lough to see for themselves not just what has happened and the negative impact of the exclusion zone, but what I am talking about in the positive potential that is there.

They will see individuals, families and a community that wants to ensure that, just as they learned it from a generation before them, they can pass on to the next generation the skills and the art that they have of fishing in Strangford lough. That is so that people like me, like you, Deputy Speaker, and like everyone here — and those further afield — can enjoy the great produce that comes out of Strangford lough.

I think that there is a viable, sustainable future for fishing in Strangford lough, but not if it does not get the sort of encouragement that I have outlined. I do not profess to have all the answers. Other things will come forward through that positive dialogue with DARD. I encourage the Minister, and her Department and officials, to engage in that positive dialogue and to give the fishermen and the fishing communities of Strangford lough the hope that there is a sustainable future for them.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for Strangford for bringing the issue before us this evening. The future sustainability and prosperity of the Strangford lough fishery, like that of the entire County Down fishing community, is vitally important not just to the fishermen directly involved but to the wider local community, and, indeed, our future generations.

I was fortunate enough to have grown up on the outskirts of a small rural village in County Down, surrounded by spectacular views of the Kingdom of Mourne to the south, Slieve Croob to the west and, snuggled at the foot of the drumlins to the east, the stunning Strangford lough. As a young child, I spent many days walking along the shore of the lough and learning all about the great history that accompanies its inlets and islands. It is a part of the county that I visited again recently, and, as I looked out across the lough, it was clear to see exactly why the area remains one of the most spectacular locations in Ireland. At my feet were the islands that once welcomed the arrival of St Patrick before the arrival of the Vikings in later years. On the lough, a group of children was being taught the skills of kayaking as the Strangford ferry crossed the lough in the distance. What caught my eye, however, was a solitary boat sitting on the lough as one or two men went about

their job of checking pots. It is a sight that has greeted onlookers for generations, and I hope that it is one that will be seen for generations to come.

The beauty and environmental delicacy of the lough's environment is wrapped up in special designations of conservation and protection, and, to all intents and purposes, rightly so. However, we must ensure that the balance is right. The coastline communities who grew up around the lough over the centuries have been fine custodians of their valuable area, so it is pertinent that we defend the viability of this relationship as we consider the steps required to protect and promote the lough for years to come.

As we are all aware, the prolonged destruction suffered by the delicate modiolus horse mussel beds in Strangford lough led to a total ban on trawl and dredge fishing from 2003. In subsequent years, we have seen the prohibition of mobile fishing gear and the creation of fishing exclusion zones. Set against that backdrop, we have also witnessed the commencement of consultation on a fisheries management plan for the lough.

The decision of the Ulster Wildlife Trust to lobby the European authorities in recent years has again refocused attention on the management of Strangford lough fisheries and raised several concerns that were examined in the subsequent revised modiolus restoration plan, which, I believe, has general approval from stakeholders. I believe that it represents a fair, proportionate and reckonable response to the situation, balancing environmental concerns with the need to protect and promote a sustainable fishery and recreational sector on Strangford lough.

It is crucial that we engage with local fishermen to maintain this equilibrium and successfully manage the needs of all involved. It is fit and proper that we recognise the decades of effort and dedication that local fishermen have given as first-class custodians of the lough. We should also recognise their co-operation and engagement to date in the process concerning its management.

I am sure that the Minister will direct her Department to continue to engage with the local fishermen as we move forward. It is critical that stakeholders have their voice heard. We saw recently, with the proposed designation of the Mourne as a national park, the reaction that there can be if you do not involve the stakeholders in such engagements.

We need to examine the issue of compensation for fishermen who have been affected to date, or are likely to be affected, by the restoration plan. Perhaps the Minister will touch on that in her reply because it deserves adequate attention, or at least on diversification, as the Member outlined, and on the idea of an international standard for Strangford products. All deserve attention as we move forward.

I support the Member's call to support our local fishermen. Indeed, I am confident that we will continue to work with all involved to ensure the sustainability of the lough and that the indigenous fishing communities continue to be proud custodians of the lough in the years ahead.

Mr Rogers: I thank Mr Hamilton for securing the Adjournment debate and bringing the matter to the Chamber. I welcome the opportunity to debate the future

of the Strangford lough fisheries in County Down. The lough has a rich and varied marine life, containing over 2,000 marine animal and plant species, including 72% of all species recorded around the Northern Ireland coast. Of those, 28% are found only in the lough. Therefore, it is vital that the area is given the appropriate level of protection to preserve the rich diversity of species that contribute to the lough's vitality.

As the largest sea lough in these islands, Strangford lough is a precious part of our sea and landscape. Its importance has already been recognised: it is a special area of conservation, a special protection area, an area of special scientific interest and a marine nature reserve.

In October last year, the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development agreed to commit to a new restoration plan, which aims to restore the unique horse mussel reefs that once covered the seabed. It is essential that DOE and DARD adopt a collaborative approach to restore Strangford lough to the condition that it should be in.

It is deeply regrettable that, despite the lough's special international status, its unique habitat has been depleted over the past two decades. It is imperative that the Departments do everything in their power to rectify that and give Strangford lough the protection that it deserves. In particular, horse mussel reefs are crucial to the lough because they provide vital spawning and nursery grounds for hundreds of creatures, including commercially fished species.

Both the DOE and DARD were prompted to protect the reefs or face infraction fines following a complaint by the Ulster Wildlife Trust to the European Commission. The new restoration plan provides a blueprint for reform, which ensures the protection of the unique species that the lough possesses. Any plan must, however, take into account the livelihood of fishermen, many of whom reside in my constituency. Many are here today, and I welcome them. Those people rely on the lough as a source of income.

A sustainable long-term future for the lough and its users must be put forward in the plan. I come from Kilkeel and am only too aware of fishermen's contribution to the economy. It does not matter whether someone's boat is 20 feet long or 200 feet long, that person still makes a great contribution.

The plan proposes a total protection zone to restrict any potentially damaging activity such as fishing, diving, anchoring and mooring in a defined area. That also includes a permit and tracking system for pot fishing along with potential physical intervention measures such as the movement of horse mussels to speed up the restoration process. A range of monitoring and education activities should also be put in place.

The fishery is an important part of the local economy of Strangford lough. It is important that any protection programme must be sustainable in the long term to the benefit of all those who use and admire the lough. Just as I often emphasise to the Minister, the views of fishermen, who have spent their lifetimes on the lough, need to be given due consideration as well as the views of scientists.

DARD, the DOE and the Committee for the Environment must balance the need to protect the lough against the needs of those who use the lough for fishing and leisure

activities. We possess a beautiful natural asset. We must ensure that we use it responsibly and take full advantage.

The challenge for Departments is to implement a cohesive restoration plan to remedy the damage that has been done to the marine ecosystem over the past number of years. Strangford lough is too precious a part of our sea and landscape. It is vital that we put in place a robust plan to protect it in the coming years.

Mr McCarthy: I support the Adjournment topic and express gratitude to my Strangford colleague Simon Hamilton for bringing it to the Floor. I very much welcome the two or three Members who are in the Chamber who are not Strangford representatives. I am disappointed that only 50% of the Strangford MLAs are here. Anyway, there we go. We will soldier on.

As a resident of the edge of Strangford lough who greatly acknowledges the absolute beauty of the lough and its environs, I certainly wish to see it being enjoyed by everyone, be that through leisure and recreation, and by fishermen, for pleasure or as a means to earn a living. For years and years, Strangford lough was a source of local fishermen's livelihoods. I hope that that can continue.

We are all too aware of the serious damage that was done to the lough bed some time ago, which resulted, we are told, in the decimation of the horse mussel population. Despite the honest endeavours of local fishermen to accept restrictions for fishing in the lough to allow horse mussels to regroup, unfortunately, their voluntary endeavours did not placate the needs of Brussels. Further restrictions were imposed on the fishermen, which were agreed with Brussels by the DOE and DARD. The last reports that I have indicate that little or no fishing takes place on the lough, which is sad. Have those few fishermen been thrown onto the ever-growing list of Northern Ireland's unemployed?

As I said, I pride Strangford lough as being a wonderful asset for us all. I hope that the lough's rich diversity of aquatic life will return soon, that it will once again be a real source of pleasure and, perhaps, income, and that it will continue to be the home of wonderful fish species.

4.30 pm

I see that the Minister is with us today, so, in conclusion, I acknowledge her efforts to support the lough's environment and the fishermen throughout the recent crisis. However, given the extreme pressures from many quarters over the past year, we were forced to accept what we now have. We have to make the best of it. I asked this question of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee on more than one occasion, and I will ask it again: in the interests of fair play and justice, can some form of compensation be awarded to those few fishermen who officialdom has deprived of a livelihood? I hope that the Minister can give us some answer or some hope in that direction.

I support the invitation that my colleague Simon Hamilton gave to the Minister to visit Strangford lough. We look forward to a bright sunny day when we can spend the afternoon visiting Newtownards, Kircubbin, Greyabbey, Portaferry, Killyleagh and the areas all around the lough.

Mr Bell: First, I place on record our thanks in Strangford to my colleague Simon Hamilton for securing this debate.

Compared to wider fishing in Northern Ireland, fishing in Strangford is small, but it is no less important to the people whose livelihoods depend on it.

Simon covered many of the viability and sustainability issues very comprehensively. I do not want to repeat what he put so well just for the sake of repeating it, but the essence of it was the very judicious use of title for the debate — "The future of the Strangford Lough fishery." I think that Simon called that absolutely correctly. This is a debate about how we in Northern Ireland ensure that Strangford lough has a future for fishing.

In the little bit of research that I have done, I can tell you that we can go right back to the 8th and 9th centuries to find mention in the historical record of the original wooden fish traps on Strangford lough. For a continuous period between the 8th and 9th centuries, there were wooden traps. In the last figures that I looked at for 2009, I saw that the vessels caught prawn, velvet crab, brown crab and lobster. Those vessels support about 20 people. That is the reason why we are in this House; we can concentrate on the livelihoods of some 20 people, even if they work on a part-time basis, because it is important for them.

In response to an Assembly question, we heard that there were about seven vessels fishing for more than seven months of the year. However, importantly, the fishing on Strangford lough was valued in 2009 at £140,000. As Simon and I both know, that is a huge shot in the arm locally for the industry in Strangford. We want to ensure that we can develop what we have. We want to make sure that we can measure it in such a way that means that long-term fishing on the lough can continue.

Strangford lough has enormous tourism potential. All of us in the House who represent Strangford, including Kieran, Simon and I, are very clear that we have the largest inland waterway in the British Isles. We have somewhere in the region of 150 square kilometres of absolute natural beauty. We want to develop the ecosystem, tourism, and fishing. Unfortunately, and as has been outlined, in many cases exclusion has put a pressure on the fishing side of that equation. However, I think that we can go forward on a joint, integrated basis for conservation, fishing and tourism.

I welcome that the Minister is here, and I welcome the interest that she has shown in the matter. I know that she was down in April last year speaking with some of the fishing community in Strangford. I have spent many early hours with the Minister — I should clarify that we were in Brussels. In December, we went really late into the night and met with many of the fishermen. On that occasion, we met in the Scottish office to talk with them to see what we could do to ensure that the fishing industry is viable into the future.

We have something that is small. Simon Hamilton looked objectively to the future. We need to measure what can be achieved in the longer term. That may lead to some people needing to have a look at alternative employment. I was encouraged when the Department said last April that the Minister would help look at finding alternative employment, even on the conservation side of the equation that I mentioned earlier, to allow fishing to go on, and to go on sustainably.

I spent several hours talking to fishermen in Brussels in December as we awaited the outcome of the

negotiations, and not a single fisherman told me that night that he wanted to fish beyond sustainability. The fishermen's vested interest is in ensuring that there is sustainable fishing. We just need to get the equation right for them. However, there is a view out there that if we leave fishermen and the fishing community to their own devices, they will just deplete the stocks and we will have a catastrophic situation. I spent several hours that night talking to folk from fishing communities in Portavogie and right across the British Isles, and everyone is committed to ensuring that the fishing industry is sustainable.

Therefore, in the road map that Mr Hamilton outlined, I would like to see definitive evidence of a direction in which the goal is sustainable fishing in Strangford lough and how we get there. If that means hard choices, we will look at those hard choices but also at where we might alleviate those hard choices through alternative employment and allow them to be made successfully.

That will require a partnership between the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the fishing community. We want to encourage that partnership to be taken forward sustainably. The fishing industry is under pressure. We have, I think, the second largest fishing community in Portavogie in our constituency, while Mr Rogers has the largest in his constituency of South Down. Many in the fishing community say to me that their children are starting to turn away from fishing for their livelihoods. That is the real fear that I have.

Those people have fishing in their DNA through generations. However, their children are looking at the pressures that the fishing community is undoubtedly under and asking themselves whether they should look at alternatives. Therefore, let us look at what we can do going into the future. However, let us state from the outset, as Mr Hamilton did, that this is a sustainable future, and let us set the road map for how we will get there.

Mr Kinahan: I am pleased to be able to speak on this topic, particularly so having left the Environment Committee six months ago. I am intrigued and appalled by some of what I have read about what is going on in Strangford lough. I am pleased to be involved, though, even as a County Antrim man who occasionally graces County Down with his presence, when they let me in.

I am speaking on behalf of my party leader, who cannot be here today. He gives the fishermen his absolute full support. When I last spoke in a personal capacity, I called for an action group to include the range of stakeholders to take forward the management of the lough, especially then over the horse mussel matter. It was clear that that was the right way forward. Indeed, when we had the two-day symposium on Lough Neagh, the point that everyone wanted to make was that all the work on Lough Neagh should be done as a partnership and that we should be making the most of all the stakeholders, users and other people who enjoy Lough Neagh. You have an absolute gem in Strangford lough, which, in many ways, puts Lough Neagh to shame with its wildlife and beauty.

The papers that I have from the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation (NIFPO) highlight a lack of fisherman involvement in the process and poor uptake of using their knowledge to inform the strategy. I do not want to be negative, because I would like the debate to show everyone that we all want to see the future of Strangford

lough and its fishermen being assured and improving. However, I feel that we should be making much more of their skills and knowledge, initially on modiolus, and then on all the other matters. It is their future, but it is also our future and Northern Ireland's future, because, as I said, this is one of Northern Ireland's gems.

In the documentation, we saw the proposed Northern Ireland brown crab strategy for the fishing associations, DARD, the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute and Seafish, and the suggestion of an Irish pot-fishing council. That is exactly what we should be seeing, but working with the fisherman and using their skills and knowledge.

It shocks me to read that, when the by-laws come in, between 60% and 70% of fishing will be lost. I think it is fair to ask for compensation. That needs to be worked in by linking it with how we build that future and how we work with the fishermen on Strangford lough to find a way of ensuring that their livelihood exists into the future. Part of that is about looking at how and why modiolus has suffered in the past, because we still need clarity on many different things. I am sure that the fishermen have much more knowledge on that than many others.

It is great to see in the documentation, particularly under the heading "Intervention", that a good restoration working group is working together. That is brilliant to see. It is also good to see, in the monitoring section, that the group will establish channels of communication with the Strangford Lough Fishermen's Association. I would love to know a bit more about what that means. We do not just want good communication; we want to include everyone, really pick their brains, work with them and develop Strangford lough together.

Simon Hamilton, who I congratulate for bringing forward the topic, set out a really good, well-structured and balanced way of how we can develop the lough into the future, be that through tourism, biodiversity or good food produce, which, as you can see, I have enjoyed many a time. We just need a bit more of that in County Antrim.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Like Simon, he mentioned the potential for tourism around Strangford lough. Does he agree that, at the very tip of the lough in Portaferry, we have one of the most important visitor attractions in Northern Ireland, the Exploris aquarium, which in itself is a showcase on dry land for all the fish life in Strangford lough? Will he encourage people to make their way down to visit that?

Mr Kinahan: I certainly agree with that. You have many more attractions than just the aquarium. There are many other beautiful places and houses to see, if you could just get the roads sorted out, which I know is one of your favourite points.

I will end by saying that you have absolute and full support to build a sustained future for all the fishermen on Strangford lough, with everyone working together in partnership to find a balance.

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I thank Simon Hamilton for securing the debate, which I think has been worthwhile, and I thank all the Members who contributed.

There is no doubt about it: there has been a long-established fishery in Strangford lough for many years,

and it has provided income for residents around the lough on a full-time, part-time and even seasonal basis. The most recent indications are that up to eight full-time, and 14 part-time, fishing vessels operate on the lough, harvesting mainly velvet crab, brown crab, lobsters, shrimp and nephrops. In 2011, the estimated value of the fishery at first point of sale was £208,000. So, without doubt, Strangford lough has been, and is, an important asset for the County Down fishing community, and I fully acknowledge that.

Initially, I would like to take a few minutes to put in place the context that has led to the changes in the fisheries management regime in the lough over recent years. As everyone will know, Strangford lough is designated as an area of special scientific interest, as a special area of conservation and as a special protection area, as a result of its features. It is the responsibility of the competent authority to protect those features and to ensure that they aspire to good environmental status. The competent authority role for Strangford lough rests jointly with the Department of the Environment and, in respect of fisheries matters, my Department.

Unfortunately, early last decade, concerns began to arise that there had been a serious decline in modiolus modiolus, or horse mussels, in Strangford lough. That required the competent authorities to take remedial action to restore that important designated feature, and a modiolus restoration plan was prepared.

4.45 pm

In order to protect the remaining modiolus biogenic reefs, a total ban on the use of trawl- and dredge-fishing gear was introduced in September 2003. That ban has remained in place since then. In addition to prohibiting mobile gear, the Department, in 2011, created two fishing exclusion zones within the lough, including pot fishing, and progressed to consultation regarding the introduction of a fisheries management plan for Strangford lough.

However, since the first restoration plan was introduced in 2006, the Ulster Wildlife Trust has lobbied the European Commission, expressing its view that the competent authorities were not making sufficient or timely progress in addressing the deterioration of the modiolus reef features within Strangford lough SAC. The most recent complaint, in November 2011, resulted in an EC pilot case being opened, and, until resolved, a threat of infraction proceedings and potentially substantial financial penalties remain against the competent authorities.

In April 2012, after discussions with the European Commission, I met with fisheries interests to advise them of that position. As a result, my ministerial colleague the Environment Minister, Alex Attwood, and I agreed to a revised modiolus restoration plan, which was forwarded to the Commission for consideration and approval. The measures outlined in that revised plan were informed by a comprehensive scientific research project that was conducted by Queen's University, which also reported to both Departments in July 2011. It recommended a series of actions to enhance the protection and monitoring of existing modiolus reefs and options for intervention to support the restoration of damaged modiolus beds.

I believe that that revised plan reflects the consensus agreed during an Assembly debate that took place last

January, when Members called for a proportionate response to the threat of infraction from the EC that would satisfy our obligations under the habitats directive whilst maintaining the economic benefits that are associated with a sustainable fishery in Strangford lough. We are awaiting the Commission's formal decision on the modiolus proposals, but informal discussions indicate that the Commission is generally content with the actions that we have proposed and will respond formally on the plan when the complainants' views have been received.

The revised restoration plan commits to the creation of two larger fishing exclusion zones, as recommended in the Queen's University report, and extending the zones that were originally introduced. Legislation procedure for that was introduced on 8 January, following necessary Committee consideration. Those areas were introduced in advance of formal Commission approval of the revised restoration plan, as discussions had indicated that that would be the minimum requirement acceptable to the Commission in respect of safeguarding and restoring the designated modiolus feature.

I acknowledge the contributions, as well as the sacrifices, that have been made by Strangford lough fishermen over the past number of years, the disruption to fishing practices and the efforts that they have put forward to help to protect the modiolus feature. I am also aware that, over recent years, the Strangford Lough Fishermen's Association has developed a voluntary code of practice for its members that will encourage sustainable fishing in the future as well as protect the features of Strangford lough.

I am also aware that a Strangford lough fisheries management plan has been discussed for some time and that fishermen are disappointed that such a plan has not yet been implemented. Unfortunately, as a result of the pilot case opened by the Commission, it would not have been appropriate to introduce such a management plan until the Commission had expressed its approval of our restoration plan, in case further action or regulation were required.

We look forward to hearing the views of the Commission on the adequacy of our proposals in the coming weeks, at which point we will be able to move to discuss the future fishery arrangements in the remainder of the lough. At that time, I will ensure that my officials engage with stakeholders regarding the development and the introduction of a Strangford lough fisheries management plan. I believe that the first meeting on that process will be convened later this month.

I can also confirm that the Department will make a member of staff available for the lough. He or she will closely monitor all fishing activity and ensure compliance with the non-fishing zones, reinforcing our commitment to the Commission. That management plan will have the objective of developing a fishery in Strangford lough that is economically and environmentally sustainable. It will focus on a number of issues that were raised earlier in the debate, including, but not exclusive to, the need to rebalance the fishing effort with the fishing opportunity, the introduction of a permit scheme and pot limitations, support for voluntary measures proposed by the fishermen, and other avenues of possible support.

I hope that the management plan will also focus on the generation of data on the fishery, which will, in time, be

able to demonstrate that fishing operations within the lough are environmentally and economically sustainable.

The crux of today's debate has been around the future of the lough and its potential. I very much take that on board, and I want to be very positive to Members with regard to looking to the future.

A number of Members raised the issue of decommissioning. Some fishermen have suffered financial loss as a result of the impact of the measures that have been introduced on the lough. Some financial support may be available for the permanent cessation of fishing activity — a decommissioning scheme — via the EFF or a purely locally funded scheme. I hope that that issue will be given due focus in the pot fishery management plan.

However, under either option, state aid rules require the vessel to give up its fishing licence, and measures would be needed to cap the remaining fishing capacity in the lough at a new lower level. Obviously, we would have to develop a business case, which would be required to show that such a compensation scheme represents good value for public money. All that is against a general policy of fisheries administrations not to compensate vessels that are displaced by closures. There is potential to take forward a decommissioning scheme, but we will need to do a lot of substantial work to address those issues and take that forward.

Members picked up on the tourism potential. I totally agree: people are very interested in the food journey and are very keen to explore it. That definitely has great potential for Strangford lough. I am absolutely happy to explore PGI status further. It is significant for the marketability of the local industry.

I reassure Members that Strangford lough is recognised and remains as an important asset for the North for not only fishermen and the tradition of fishing but other marine stakeholders and the tourism sector. I acknowledge the sacrifices that fishermen have made over the past decade as a result of all the measures that have come forward.

I end on a positive note: I totally agree about the lough's potential. We need to exploit it more. Avenues have been suggested. Over the next number of months, particularly when we gain approval from the Commission for our management plan, we will look at all the issues side by side in partnership, because so many players are involved in the situation. If we deal with the issue of decommissioning, explore the tourism potential and look at all those things, the potential of the lough is second to none. It should be taken forward and exploited. We need to protect the local industry, which is obviously dependent on fishing opportunities.

I thank the Members for the debate and for bringing forward the issue. I look forward to working with them as we develop the potential of Strangford lough.

Adjourned at 4.52 pm.

Written Ministerial Statement

The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

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Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Emergency Department Services in Belfast

Published at 10.30 am on Tuesday 5 February 2013

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I wish to make a statement to the Assembly regarding the proposals for the future configuration of Emergency Department (ED) Services in Belfast. These proposals will be published today by the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) for a 13 weeks period of public consultation.

In my statement to the Assembly on 13 September 2011, regarding the temporary changes to Accident and Emergency Service Configuration at the Belfast City Hospital, I was clear that in the longer term, a strategic decision will need to be taken on the provision of ED services in Belfast. I also said that this would be a decision for me as Minister to take and it is a decision I will take only after a full and open process of consultation and engagement. Today marks the start of that process of engagement and consultation on proposals for the future delivery of this service. At the outset of this consultation it is worth noting that the drivers for change, which resulted in the temporary changes at the Belfast City Hospital, are the same drivers which are compelling us to plan ahead now for the future ED services in Belfast. Those drivers of change relate to the safety and quality of care; they are not about efficiencies or cuts. The main reasons for the temporary changes included:

- a shortfall in recruitment of suitably qualified medical staff, particularly middle grade doctors;
- the need for adequate training and supervision arrangements for junior medical staff, especially at night time;
- concern expressed by the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency and by the General Medical Council (in August 2011) regarding the current level of supervision of doctors, especially on the Royal and Belfast City hospital sites, thus requiring the immediate action taken at that time;
- a general shortfall in medical trainees in emergency medicine not just in Northern Ireland but in other parts of the UK;
- changes in the Home Office immigration rules which makes it more difficult to recruit doctors from overseas – including locums and middle grade doctors; and,

- changes in the working practices of staff and the need to promote compliance with the European Working Time Directive, which was designed to promote safer patient care and enhance the well being of doctors who had previously worked very long hours.

The proposals in the consultation document have been developed by the HSCB working with the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. The document reviews action already taken to secure ED services across Greater Belfast and sets out a range of options on the way forward. In formulating these options the HSCB has fully considered the regional implications of the proposals, particularly in relation to the South Eastern, Northern and Ambulance Service Trusts.

The preferred option in the document is that there should be two Emergency Departments in Belfast, one in the Royal Victoria Hospital and one in the Mater Infirmorum Hospital, supported by direct access, via GPs, to a range of specialist services at Belfast City Hospital. This preferred option has been identified following detailed consideration of the relevant issues addressed in the document. Following public consultation, if I decide to adopt the preferred option, this change will result in the permanent closure of the Emergency Department in Belfast City Hospital.

My Department has obtained assurances from both the Trust, and the HSC Board, as the commissioner of these services, that the preferred option will provide an ED service in Belfast that is safe and sustainable and that it will deliver high quality care. As I have previously stated my first concern is the safety of patient care and that will always remain as my priority.

As indicated in the consultation document there are three key policy considerations for making changes in the way Emergency Department services are delivered across Belfast.

Firstly, and most importantly, the need to deliver a safe and sustainable service into the future, where highly-skilled clinical teams, supported by an effective physical infrastructure and environment, can provide a high quality service for patients.

Secondly, the future direction for health and social care services, as outlined in 'Transforming Your Care'1 (TYC), is for urgent care services to be provided as close to people's homes as possible, provided by an integrated

1 Transforming Your Care, A Review of Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland, HSCB, December 2011

team from primary, community and hospital services with an emergency service configuration that is sustainable and resilient in clinical terms. The TYC report envisaged all hospitals in Belfast Trust as part of a single network of major acute services.

Thirdly, the strategic direction for acute hospitals and service delivery in Belfast, as outlined in 'New Directions'², focuses on both the development of patient pathways which enable people to access services quickly, without having to attend the Emergency Department, and the development of service profiles for the hospitals in the Belfast Acute Network (Belfast City Hospital, Mater Infirmorum Hospital and the Royal Victoria Hospital).

The proposals in the consultation document aim to move forward the implementation of the above policies, ensuring that patients in Belfast will continue to have access in the future to high quality services and care when they need urgent or emergency treatment. I wish to emphasise that these proposals relate to securing the safety and quality of care; they are not about efficiencies or cuts because the key issue here is the need to ensure that there is an emergency service for Belfast and the nearby areas that works and meets the needs of the population.

The managers and clinicians in Belfast Trust and all the other affected organisations have worked to make the temporary change, introduced in November 2011, effective. From the evidence of how the temporary change has been delivered by the Trust over the past 15 months I believe looking forward that we can have confidence that the model of care proposed in the preferred option is both safe and sustainable. However, I recognise that there may be different views and I therefore want to hear the views of key stakeholders, in particular the public and their representatives, on these important proposals before I make my final decision on the future configuration of the ED service in Belfast. I have therefore asked the HSCB to carry out this public consultation on my behalf starting today and concluding on 10 May 2013.

As well as setting out proposals for the future delivery of ED services in Belfast I look to the HSCB and Health and Social Care Trusts across Northern Ireland to also ensure that the improvements in ED waiting times and patient care, secured through their work with the Improvement Action Group, are embedded. While I recognise that this work will take time to bring to full fruition, progress has been made in securing the high standards of care that I expect to be delivered.

Finally, I would like to extend my gratitude to Emergency Department staff for the dedicated service that they provide to people across Northern Ireland. I am committed to continuing to secure improvements in ED services to ensure all of the population of Northern Ireland has appropriate access to high quality, safe and sustainable urgent and emergency care.

2 New Directions – a conversation on the future delivery of health and social care services in Belfast – Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, 2008.

Committee Stages

Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Regional Development

23 January 2013

Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill [NIA 16/11-15]

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Jimmy Spratt (Chairperson)
Mr Seán Lynch (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Alex Easton
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Ian McCrea
Mr David McNarry
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

The Chairperson: We will now do the clause-by-clause consideration of the Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill. We need to agree each clause individually.

Clause 1 (Grants to water and sewerage undertakers: further extension of initial period)

The Chairperson: Clause 1 grants to water and sewerage undertakers future extension of initial period.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 1 agreed to.

Clause 2 (Statutory charges)

The Chairperson: Clause 2 is on statutory charges.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 2 agreed to.

Clause 3 (Short title)

The Chairperson: Clause 3 is the short title. I put it to the Committee that it is content with clause 3.

Mr McNarry: What you said on the short title gives me an opening.

The Chairperson: Are you saying that you do not want to agree it at the minute?

Mr McNarry: I want to ask you a question to clarify something.

The Chairperson: OK. Go ahead.

Mr McNarry: In light of the evidence, it is clear that this is a Bill to cover a short time. Is there any danger of this Committee walking itself into something that we will be leaving for another Committee or another Assembly? As far as I am concerned, what we are agreeing is patchwork stuff. We have no choice but to agree it. Within what you might say, or if it was the view of the Committee, will there be scope for the Committee to say that it is aware of where the Bill sits and what its intentions are but that, really, that is not the whole story? I have not yet heard any valid reasons from the Department, and there was no point questioning it there. Where we are going with this seems to be a secret, particularly given that the regulator told us last week that if efficiencies were introduced now, all our constituents would be paying 38% less. I do not know whether there is room to cover that, but it seems to me that the Committee might want to cover that itself.

The Chairperson: I will let the Committee Clerk come in on that.

The Committee Clerk: Members will have the opportunity soon. One of the outcomes of members considering a Bill such as this is a formal Committee report, and that is on the agenda to be considered following this. The Committee has the opportunity in the report to comment further on the clauses in the Bill, and there will be a debate on that. Members will then have a further opportunity, over and above that, in plenary, to put forward whatever concerns or comments they have about the Bill, provided that that sticks to the policy direction of the Bill.

Mr McNarry: Thank you very much.

The Chairperson: Does that clarify it for you, David?

Mr McNarry: Yes. Thank you.

Mr Dickson: On a similar note, I am not convinced that extending it by that period is necessarily correct; I believe that it should be extended by one year less than the period by which it has been extended. That would require the Executive to leave the way open for a future Administration to make the decision rather than this Administration making a decision that will flow into the next Administration. Therefore, I am concerned about the length of time.

The Chairperson: It has to be extended beyond 2015 for the Programme for Government commitment. It has to be extended by a year to allow —

Mr McNarry: What happens if the Assembly is extended for another year?

The Chairperson: That is not the case at the moment; we have to deal with the here and now. That is, I suppose, a reasonably strong possibility, but we have no control over that. Members have already agreed to this. Stewart, a short time ago, you agreed to extend it through clause 1.

Mr Dickson: I am sorry, Chair; that is why I am raising the issue. I have a concern about the period by which the Bill extends the subsidy. My preference is for one year less.

The Chairperson: That concern can be recorded in the report. I am sure that you will make your feelings felt in the debate.

Mr Dickson: Ok.

The Chairperson: We go back to the Question on the short title.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 3 agreed to.

The Chairperson: Members, we now go into closed session to discuss the Committee report. This should not take long.

The Committee discussed its report in closed session.

The Chairperson: We are now back in open session. We return to the Committee report, which we have just discussed and agreed in closed session. I now need to formally put it on the record. I am going to go through it. Members have already gone through it, so I will now formally ask members again. Are members content with the powers and management and with paragraphs 1-11, which were agreed in closed session?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Are members content with paragraph 12, as amended by the Committee in closed session?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Are members content with paragraphs 13-27 of the report?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Are members content with paragraph 28, as amended during the closed session?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Are members content with paragraphs 29-31?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Are members content with the clause-by-clause scrutiny?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Are members content that the report, associated minutes of proceedings and appendices be ordered to be printed?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: That concludes this morning's session.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Finance and Personnel

30 January 2013

Civil Service (Special Advisers) Bill [NIA 12/11-15]

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Daithí McKay (Chairperson)
Mr Leslie Cree
Ms Megan Fearon
Mr Paul Girvan
Mr David McIlveen
Mr Mitchel McLaughlin
Mr Adrian McQuillan
Mr Peter Weir

The Chairperson: I refer members to the secretariat paper on the Committee's clause-by-clause consideration of the Bill. We will start at page 2. Point 4 refers to the Committee's previous meeting, at which members gave initial consideration to the Bill's clauses. A number of members advised that they may propose amendments to the Bill through the Committee. Members should go through the Committee or liaise directly with the Clerk of Bills to table any amendments. However, to date, no amendments have been received from members. It will be necessary to establish a clear Committee position at the meeting today on any proposals for amendments from the Committee, irrespective of how fully formulated they are. Do members want to make any comment?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I wish to introduce amendments to a couple of clauses, but not today, because work is ongoing. I want to establish that any decision taken by the Committee today will record the fact that — there may be other members for all I know — the Committee decisions were, I presume, by majority. I am not in a position today to process the arguments, but I would be concerned if the impression was given that the clause-by-clause consideration resulted in unanimous positions in all circumstances, as I am signalling very clearly that I intend to introduce amendments to some clauses. If the record of the discussion reflects that, I will be content.

The Committee Clerk: For clarity, when there is no consensus in the Committee, the report on the Bill will, as with any Bill, reflect a majority position. There is precedent that the Committee can agree to make a reference in the report to divisions being detailed in the minutes of proceedings that is attached to the report.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: OK; thank you.

Clause 1 (Meaning of "special adviser")

The Chairperson: Clause 1 refers to the meaning of "special adviser", which is defined as a person appointed to the NI Civil Service (NICS) to advise a Minister or junior Minister. In written evidence, the Office of the Legislative Counsel (OLC) advised that the Civil Service Commissioners (NI) Order 1999 did not make provision for a junior Minister to appoint a special adviser. The sponsor of the Bill subsequently advised that the order had been amended by the 2007 Order and that junior Ministers are among those who can make such appointments. The Bill sponsor has also advised that he will move an amendment to address a technical issue raised by OLC about the clause. Details of the issue raised and the Bill sponsor's response are in members' papers. Is the Committee content with clause 1, subject to the proposed technical amendment from the Bill sponsor?

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 1 agreed to.

Clause 2 (Special adviser not to have serious criminal conviction)

The Chairperson: This clause prohibits a person with a serious conviction from being appointed as a special adviser. Those in post with such an offence or who incur such a conviction while in post will have their appointment terminated. A duty is placed on Ministers to inform the Department whether a special adviser appointed by them has a serious conviction.

Members will wish to refer to the evidence received regarding clause 2 in the table of themes and issues provided in their Bill folder. Theme 1 is consideration of the needs of victims; theme 2 is blanket disqualification versus individual assessment; theme 3 is compatibility with other human rights requirements; and theme 4 is commitments under the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement.

The Bill sponsor has advised that he will move amendments to address technical issues raised by OLC in relation to clause 2. Again, information on that is in your Bill folder. So, I will put the question: is the Committee content with clause 2, subject to the proposed technical amendments from the Bill sponsor?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: May I record my intention to introduce an amendment to this clause, as well? In recording my intention, I would like to take the view of the Committee.

The Chairperson: We will take a vote on clause 2.

Question put, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments.

The Committee divided:

Ayes 5; Noes 3.

AYES

Mr Cree, Mr Girvan, Mr D McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Weir.

NOES

Ms Fearon, Mr McKay, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 2 agreed to.

The Clerk of Bills: May I just clarify that agreement has been made that clause 2 is subject to proposed technical amendments by the Bill sponsor?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Clause 3 (Meaning of “serious criminal conviction”)

The Chairperson: This clause defines a “serious criminal conviction” as one for which a sentence of imprisonment of five years or more, or another specified sentence, was imposed. Members may wish to refer to the evidence received regarding clause 3 in the table of themes and issues provided in their Bill folder, and those are listed. The sponsor has advised that he will move amendments to address technical issues raised by OLC in relation to this clause. Again, that information is provided in the Bill folder.

Is the Committee content with clause 3, subject to the proposed technical amendments from the Bill sponsor?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Sorry — before you put the question — an issue about conflict-related sentences came up in the evidence and that particularly interested me. It is not so much a subject for an amendment to clause 3, but it may be an issue that requires an additional clause. How would you propose to deal with that eventuality? For example, would acceptance of clause 3, subject to the sponsor’s amendment, preclude the possibility of introducing a clause that addresses the issue of conflict-related sentences?

The Clerk of Bills: No. You have kind of clarified now that you have an issue there. The Committee is indicating its position —

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: So, you could support clause 3, as presented today —

The Clerk of Bills: In an ideal situation, you would have amendments beforehand, but any Member may introduce a new clause or amendment any time up to 9.30 am on the Thursday before Consideration Stage. You would probably address that in the House as to the fact that things developed or whatever —

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Yes.

The Clerk of Bills: — but the member has put his view on the record now.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: What you are advising is that it is possible to support clause 3, as presented today, without prejudice to the ability to introduce a new clause or amendment at Consideration Stage.

The Clerk of Bills: It does not prevent an individual Member from doing that.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: OK; I understand.

The Clerk of Bills: The Committee Clerk may want to reflect that position in the report.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 3 agreed to.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I want to record the fact that that was unanimous.

Clause 4 (Annual report)

The Chairperson: Clause 4 places a duty on the Department to prepare, and on the Minister to lay before the Assembly, an annual report about special advisers. There was general support for this clause in evidence received. Members should see theme 5 in the table of themes and issues in their Bill folder. The Bill sponsor has advised that he will move an amendment to address a technical issue, again raised by OLC, in relation to clause 4. That information is provided. Is the Committee content with clause 4, subject to the proposed technical amendment from the Bill sponsor?

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 4 agreed to.

Clause 5 (Code of conduct)

The Chairperson: This clause places a duty on the Department to issue, and on the Minister to lay before the Assembly, a code of conduct for special advisers. This code forms part of the adviser’s contract of employment. No issues were raised in the evidence in respect of this clause. Members should see theme 5 in the table of themes and issues. The Bill sponsor, again, will move amendments to address technical issues raised by OLC. Is the Committee content with clause 5, subject to the proposed technical amendments from the Bill sponsor?

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 5 agreed to.

Clause 6 (Code for appointments)

The Chairperson: This clause places a duty on the Department to issue, and on the Minister to lay before the Assembly, a code governing the appointment of special advisers. It must provide that an appointment must be subject to the same vetting procedures as those that apply when appointing senior civil servants to the NICS. Members may wish to refer to the evidence on clause 6 in the table of themes and issues. The Bill sponsor has again advised that he will move an amendment to address the concerns of OLC. Is the Committee content with clause 6, subject to the proposed technical amendment from the Bill sponsor?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I intend to table an amendment to this clause. I wish to record that in the proceedings.

The Chairperson: Shall we take a vote on this clause?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Yes, please.

Question put, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment.

The Committee divided:

Ayes 5; Noes 3.

AYES

Mr Cree, Mr Girvan, Mr D McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Weir.

NOES

Ms Fearon, Mr McKay, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 6 agreed to.

Clause 7 (Advisers to the Presiding Officer)

The Chairperson: This clause amends the Civil Service Commissioners (NI) Order 1999 to remove the Speaker of the Assembly from the list of those entitled to appoint a special adviser to the NICS without adhering to the merit principle of appointment on the basis of fair and open competition. For the evidence received relating to clause 7, members may wish to refer to theme 6 on Secretary of State consent in the table of themes and issues in the Bill folder.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 7 agreed to.

Clause 8 (Interpretation)

The Chairperson: This provision contains definitions of words or terms used in the Bill. OLC has raised some technical points in relation to this, and the Bill sponsor has agreed to table amendments to address those. Is the Committee content with clause 8, subject to the proposed technical amendments from the Bill sponsor?

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 8 agreed to.

Clause 9 (Transitional provisions)

The Chairperson: This clause gives effect to the provisions of the schedule. No issues were raised in the evidence.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 9 agreed to.

Clause 10 (Commencement)

The Chairperson: This clause provides for clauses 5 and 6 to come into operation on the day that the Bill receives Royal Assent. Clause 2(4) will come into operation one month after that. All other provisions will come into operation two months after Royal Assent. OLC raised some concerns, and the Bill sponsor advised that he will move amendments to synchronise the timings of the commencement provisions. That information is contained in the Bill folder. Is the Committee content with clause 10, subject to the proposed technical amendments from the Bill sponsor?

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 10 agreed to.

Schedule 1 (transitional provisions: termination payments)

The Chairperson: The schedule makes provision for payment to existing advisers whose appointment is terminated under the legislation. A special adviser is entitled to a payment of three months' salary or the amount stipulated in their contract, up to a maximum of six months' salary. Members may wish to consider the evidence provided under theme 3 in the table of themes

and issues in the Bill folder. Is the Committee content with the schedule as drafted?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I will state our position, and maybe there should be a vote. An amendment that I am considering tabling to an earlier clause may have a consequence for this provision. I have recorded my interest in the earlier clause. Is that sufficient, or should I indicate that there may be a possible consequence for this provision? I suppose that, for safety, I should.

The Clerk of Bills: Yes. If you feel that there may be a consequential amendment to the Bill, you should. I urge the Committee Clerk to note that you registered this at the time.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: OK. I would like the Committee to vote on the schedule.

Question put, That the schedule be agreed.

The Committee divided:

Ayes 5; Noes 3.

AYES

Mr Cree, Mr Girvan, Mr D McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Weir.

NOES

Ms Fearon, Mr McKay, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Schedule 1 agreed to.

Long Title

Long title agreed to.

The Chairperson: The next step is that the initial draft of the Committee's report to the Assembly on the Bill will be considered at our meeting on 6 February, with a view to agreeing the final draft report on 13 February before the Committee Stage expires on 15 February. Members may wish to consider, at this stage, whether they have any recommendations or requests for assurance that they wish to be included in the report. Consideration Stage is a matter for the Bill sponsor to bring forward in line with the requirements set out in the Assembly's Standing Orders. Any agreed Committee amendments are required to be tabled in advance of Consideration Stage.

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 January 2013

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Maritime Museum, Derry

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the establishment of a Maritime Museum in Derry, as detailed in the One Plan.

(AQW 17800/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The establishment of a Maritime Museum in Derry-Londonderry is a programme activity under the catalyst programme 'Accelerating the Growth of the Tourism and Cultural Economy'. Derry City Council has assumed lead responsibility in the One Plan for the delivery of this project.

One Plan: Co-operative and Social Enterprise Hub

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the establishment of a Co-operative and Social Enterprise Hub, as detailed in the One Plan.

(AQW 17801/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The establishment of a Co-operative and Social Enterprise Hub is one of the catalyst programmes in the One Plan. A partnership has been formed with a range of knowledge and experience in this area and is co-ordinating the delivery of this catalyst programme. To date, the group has considered a number of models for the programme and has now agreed that a more detailed feasibility study is required. This is being considered by the Derry-Londonderry Steering Group as part of the Social Investment Fund process.

Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry

Mr Kinahan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many people have reported abuse that occurred outside of the terms of reference of the Historical Abuse Inquiry.

(AQW 18159/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The issue raised is one for which the Inquiry Chairperson is responsible and should be addressed to him.

Social Investment Fund: Unionist Forum

Mr Copeland asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the recent civil unrest and the establishment of the Unionist Forum, whether there will be changes made to the way that the Social Investment Fund is allocated; and whether the information provided by the Unionist Forum will be processed by their officials in time for an allocation from the Social Investment Fund.

(AQW 18230/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: No allocations have been made yet to steering groups who are actively working in each of the nine social investment zones to develop local area plans to deliver the strategic objectives of the Social Investment Fund.

The Belfast East steering group is cognisant of the ongoing civil unrest. Final plans are due to be submitted to the Department by the end of February.

Racial Equality Strategy

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to explain the delay in the delivery of a revised Racial Equality Strategy; and when a consultation stage will be launched.

(AQW 18289/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We are fully committed to tackling racial inequalities and promoting good race relations.

The Racial Equality Strategy is key to achieving these twin aims and officials have been working with minority ethnic representatives through the Racial Equality Panel to draft a new Strategy that will meet the needs and aspirations of minority ethnic people and wider society.

We want to make sure that the document is fit for purpose and we will continue to work in partnership with representatives of minority ethnic groups on the drafting of the Strategy.

We envisage that a 12-week public consultation will begin in spring of this year.

Minority Ethnic Development Fund

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the delivery of a revised Minority Ethnic Development fund.

(AQW 18290/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Our officials have been consulting with representatives of the minority ethnic sector in order to produce a revised funding scheme that takes full account of last year's evaluation of the Fund and that reflects our objectives for the Fund, the needs within the sector and the need for good governance.

Once finalised, the Fund will run from the beginning of the new financial year for two years. Calls for applications to the Fund are expected to be made in the near future.

Shackleton Barracks, Ballykelly

Mr Campbell asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an estimate of the annual maintenance, security and other associated costs to their Department for the remaining land at Shackleton, Ballykelly once the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has re-located there, should no other large scale user take up further accommodation on the site.

(AQW 18330/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: OFMDFM officials are currently working with DARD officials to identify what parts of the site it will require for its headquarters, including associated services such as car parking. Until a decision is made as to the part of the site DARD require and how that will be administered (for example whether there will be separate access and security) we are unable to estimate the costs for annual maintenance, security and other associated costs for the remaining land at Shackleton.

Childcare Strategy

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what guarantees they can give that the Childcare Strategy will be published and implemented ahead of the implementation of the Welfare Reform Bill.

(AQW 18337/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We aim to publish and implement the Childcare Strategy before the proposals contained in the Welfare Reform Bill come into effect. Public consultation on the Childcare Strategy opened on 5 December and will run until March 2013. All comments received will then be reviewed and a final Childcare Strategy published and implemented.

Childcare Strategy

Mr Weir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the implementation of a childcare strategy.

(AQW 18372/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: On 5 December 2012, our Department launched a public consultation on the Executive's proposed Childcare Strategy. The document, 'Towards a Childcare Strategy', sets out the vision and principles for a future Childcare Strategy and is intended to inform the consultation process. Consultation events are being arranged to allow people the opportunity to give their opinion and help shape the Childcare Strategy. Consultation will continue until 5 March 2013 after which all comments received will be considered and a Strategy developed.

The £12 million Childcare Fund assists the development of the Childcare Strategy. Towards the end of last year, we took decisions that will allow up to a further £4.5 million to be spent from this Fund.

Central Investigation Service

Mr Swann asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 17253/11-15, to detail any investigations that were undertaken, including the cost, and whether the cases were successfully proven by the Central Investigation Service.

(AQW 18415/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's Central Investigation Service has undertaken two investigations on behalf of the Department.

Whilst specific details of the cases cannot be provided, the first case in 2010 transpired to be an internal disciplinary matter and the second case is currently with the Public Prosecution Service for consideration.

The costs for each investigation were £297 and £3,633 respectively.

Victims and Survivors Service

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 18007/11-15, where Ministerial responsibility lies for the Victims and Survivors' Service; and who can provide an answer to the initial question posed.

(AQW 18421/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We are responsible for approving the Victims and Survivors Service's strategic objectives, policy and performance framework.

The Victims and Survivors Service is responsible for all operational decisions arising from the implementation of policy and strategic objectives. This includes the assessment of funding applications and any decision to award funding. We have no role in these operational decisions.

Planning Appeals Commission

Mr Wells asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many appeals are being dealt with by the Planning Appeals Commission.

(AQO 3113/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Planning Appeals Commission is an independent Tribunal which operates at arm's length from Government and exercises its functions independently of our Department.

While OFMDFM holds sponsorship responsibility for the Commission and provides the necessary resources to enable the Commission to meet its commitments, the Chief Commissioner is responsible for the day to day operation of the Commission and for deployment of its resources to meet the prevailing workload. Our Department has no locus in the Commission's workload scheduling or decision-making.

The work of the Planning Appeals Commission falls into two broad categories – appeals and referred work.

The appeals work involves making independent decisions on appeals against planning decisions made by departments. The number of appeals in hand at 9 January is 246, which is a major improvement on the backlog of over 3,000 cases at the end of December 2007.

Further, more detailed information is, of course, available from the Commission should you require it.

Referred work involves reporting to departments, following a public inquiry or hearing, on a wide range of matters referred to the Commission including development plans and major planning applications under Article 31 of the Planning Order. The Commission is currently dealing with three requests for public inquiries, including the Sprucefield retail development, and four requests for hearings.

We will continue to liaise closely with the Commission regarding the resources it requires to enable it to meet its prevailing workload.

Corporation Tax

Dr McDonnell asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the devolution of Corporation Tax.

(AQO 3115/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: On 9 January the Westminster Government reiterated its commitment to consider the case for devolving Corporation Tax. As Members will know, the work of the Joint Ministerial Working Group is complete and the report of the main findings was sent to the Prime Minister for his consideration last November. The Government must now decide whether the Executive should be offered the opportunity of taking responsibility for Corporation Tax.

The continued challenges faced by the local business community, as the economy struggles out of recession, means that it is essential that the Government makes its decision as soon as possible. At our meeting with the Prime Minister during his visit in November, we discussed the general implications of devolving Corporation Tax and we agreed then we would have a further meeting in London.

Our officials are actively seeking to secure a date for this meeting as soon as possible.

Social Protection Fund

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister which Departments have submitted bids for funds from the Social Protection Fund for the 2012/13 financial year; and whether the Fund will be used to help mitigate the impact of Welfare Reform on the most vulnerable.

(AQW 18548/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: A number of departmental proposals were received in the latter part of 2012, none of which we considered as appropriate for progression under the Social Protection Fund during the 2012/2013 financial year.

Since then we have decided to subsume the Social Protection Fund into a consolidated and integrated Delivering Social Change Fund which affords us the opportunity to quickly respond in a flexible manner to urgent social needs as they arise, and address the specific needs of some of our most in need individuals and families.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Agrifood

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she is aware of any legal or illegal restrictions being placed on Northern Irish agri-food items that are entering other European market places.

(AQW 18109/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): In answering your question I assume that you are asking this in the context of your recent Press Release about The Irish Farmers Association call for consumers in the South of Ireland to buy only milk branded with the National Dairy Council's (NDC) mark.

As the NDC is an industry funded body any decision by processors in the South to use the NDC mark is a commercial matter which is beyond my remit. Also, whilst issues relating to labelling are the responsibility of the Food Standards Agency (Belfast) my position is that labelling should not be used in a manner that could be construed as market protectionism. The island of Ireland is a net exporter and so, in my opinion, efforts would be put to better use if we worked together to strengthen our export base rather than compete against each other in what is a very small domestic market.

I can also advise that the Minister for Enterprise Trade and Investment, Arlene Foster, has written to Commissioner Ciolos about this matter. She has asked the Commissioner to intervene to persuade the Irish Government to take action to prevent the perceived abuse of Country of Origin Labelling. I understand that she has not yet received a response from the Commissioner.

Minister Foster is also monitoring the promotional campaigns of the Irish National Dairy Council and Irish Farmers' Association which are seeking to reduce the sale of NI milk products to the South of Ireland in favour of local only produce.

I am also aware that Diane Dodds MEP wrote to Defra on this issue and they have informed her that they do not consider it appropriate to take any action while waiting for the Commission response to the DETI Minister. We too have raised the matter with our counterparts in Dublin and will continue to bring whatever influence we can to ensure a level playing field for everyone.

Ash Dieback Disease

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what support her Department is giving to landowners who planted ash trees in forestry schemes and have since been instructed to destroy their trees because of ash dieback.

(AQW 18111/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department's Forest Service is supporting landowners to comply with Chalara ash dieback statutory plant health notices by making assistance available to them to remove and dispose of infected trees. This action makes it possible to clear sites quickly and reduce the risk of disease spread. I have also asked officials to prepare advice on what additional support may be made available to assist landowners to replant trees following compliance with a statutory plant health notice.

Ash Dieback Disease

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in respect of forestry schemes where ash was specified by her Department but has since been removed because of ash dieback what amendments, in relation to re-planting, are permissible to the conditions of the scheme agreement that specified ash.

(AQW 18112/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: If ash has been removed from a site following compliance with a Chalara ash dieback statutory plant health notice, scheme beneficiaries may, with approval from Forest Service, amend the agreement to substitute ash with another species. There are a range of suitable alternative species, including other native broadleaves. Forest Service officials can provide specific advice to Woodland Grant Scheme beneficiaries taking account of their objectives and any environmental constraints. I have also asked officials to prepare advice on what additional support may be made available to assist landowners to replant trees following compliance with a statutory plant health notice.

Aerial Surveillance Equipment

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development under what sections of her Department's operations she has considered using drone or unmanned aerial surveillance equipment.

(AQW 18113/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Forest Service has procured an unmanned aerial system (UAS) for use in the monitoring of areas of larch trees that may be affected by ramorum disease. Work on using near infrared aerial photography to improve early detection commenced late last year and will be resumed in spring as weather permits.

There is potential for the use of UAS in a range of forest management situations involving surveys, including, for example, the mapping of forest areas destroyed by forest fires, monitoring the extent of wind damage to plantations, monitoring the success of reforestation, and to assess the spread of invasive plant species on important unplanted habitats. These and other uses will be explored throughout 2013.

DARD is actively considering the procurement of UAS to use in two other areas of work, namely (i) to assist with work in the surveillance and statutory control of quarantine organisms harmful to plants; and (ii) to help with mapping of areas such as commons. Commons tend to be large inaccessible areas that are difficult to map because of their remoteness and terrain. UAS may offer an effective and efficient solution to the mapping of these areas which in turn could help improve compliance with EU Single Farm Payment rules.

Organic Farming

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) what changes have been made in her Department in the last year in relation to personnel who would have been available to help and advise organic farmers; (ii) what advice and assistance for growing organic produce is now available from her Department; and (iii) for her assessment of the organic sector.

(AQW 18155/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill:

- (i) While there have been some changes in personnel, the overall staff resource in my Department to help and support the organic farming sector remains unchanged.
- (ii) My Department provides advice and assistance for growing organic produce in the following ways:
 - Technical advice and training through CAFRE's Development Advisers and Technologists;
 - Supply chain and marketing advice through Supply Chain Advisers;
 - Financial support through the Organic Farming Scheme to support conversion to organic farming; and
 - Financial support through the Organic Management Option under the NI Countryside Management Scheme.
- (iii) I recognise that higher commodity prices in recent years have resulted in limited premiums at the farm gate for organic produce. This has led to a reduction in the number of organic producers from 224 in 2006 to 139 in 2012. Overall, because of the weak market, there is limited opportunity to expand the sector and any further development will be into supplying niche markets. My Department will continue to work with the sector to listen to market signals and help the sector develop in areas where there are opportunities.

Farm Inspections

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in each of the last three years, how many times has her Department used an aeroplane to complete a farm inspection.

(AQW 18187/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department has not used an aeroplane to complete a farm inspection in the last three years.

Routine use is made of aerial photography taken by a camera mounted in an aircraft to improve mapping accuracy and to assess land areas claimed for land based schemes such as the Single Farm Payment Scheme. This process is managed by the Department of Finance and Personnel (Land and Property Services) and the resultant aerial photographs may be used by farm inspectors to assist in the completion of an inspection. It may also be used in conjunction with satellite photography in the completion of an inspection by control with remote sensing.

In 2010, 2011 and 2012 DARD used a helicopter to conduct aerial surveillance for suspect Ramorum disease in larch.

Criminal Justice Inspection

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to question AQW 17636/11-15, whether she considered asking the Criminal Justice Inspectorate Northern Ireland to complete an external audit of the Central Investigation Service.

(AQW 18188/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department has previously requested that the Criminal Justice Inspectorate (CJI) conduct an independent inspection of the Central Investigation Service. However, CJI were unable to do so and confirmed that DARD is not listed as one of the organisations that come under the CJI's statutory remit to inspect.

Deloitte Review

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 17636/11-15, whether the 10 recommendations made in the Deloitte review have been actioned.

(AQW 18190/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Further to the response to AQW 17636/11-15, which confirmed acceptance of the 10 recommendations included in the July 2010 report by Deloitte on the Department's Central Investigation Service, I can furthermore confirm that appropriate action has been taken in respect of each of the recommendations made.

Central Investigation Service

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 17636/11-15, why external scrutiny was only provided by the Northern Ireland Audit Office on the review of the policies and procedures in place in the Central Investigation Service, in the context of financial audit work undertaken on the Department's 2010/11 Resource Account.

(AQW 18193/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The scrutiny provided by the NIAO as part of the 2010/11 Resource Account's fieldwork was deemed to be sufficiently independent.

CIS has subsequently been subject to review by the Department's own Internal Audit unit.

My Department previously requested that the Criminal Justice Inspectorate (CJI) conduct an independent inspection of the Central Investigation Service. However, it was confirmed that DARD is not listed as one of the organisations that come under the CJI's statutory remit to inspect.

Woodland Cover

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, how many hectares of land were planted with new trees, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 18217/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: During 2007/2008, 552 hectares of new woodland were planted, comprising of 537 hectares of private planting under the Woodland Grant Scheme and 15 hectares planted by Forest Service. There has been no further Forest Service new planting. Under the Woodland Grant Scheme 289 hectares of new woodland were planted in 2008/2009, 213 hectares in 2009/2010, 252 hectares in 2010/2011 and 313 hectares in 2011/2012.

Ash Dieback Disease

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what additional or enhanced measures are being put in place to increase the provision of woodland, in light of the effects of ash dieback disease.

(AQW 18218/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Where ash has been removed from Woodland Grant Schemes in compliance with a statutory plant health notice, scheme beneficiaries may, with Forest Service approval, amend the agreement and substitute ash with another tree species.

I have also asked officials to prepare advice on what additional support may be made available to assist landowners to replant another tree species following compliance with a statutory plant health notice.

Farm Inspections

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether her Department has target times for responding to queries that arise following farm inspections.

(AQW 18219/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department responds to queries that arise following farm inspections according to DARD's Customer Service Standards as follows:

- 90 % of customers seen within 10 minutes of arranged time;
- 85% of customers within 15 minutes;
- 90% of letters / faxes / emails acknowledged within 3 days of receipt;
- 90% of letters / faxes / emails responded to fully within 15 working; days of receipt; and
- Ensure all telephone calls are answered as quickly as possible and within 6 rings.

Specifically, with regard to queries arising from Single Farm Payment inspections, the claimant may use a Client Referral Form if they wish to query their initial farm inspection findings. Following an inspection, claimants receive this form, along with letter, field report and an updated map that outlines the initial findings of the inspection. My Department aims to action and complete these queries within 15 working days of receipt.

Woodland Cover

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what percentage of land in Northern Ireland is covered by woodland and how does this compare with (i) England; (ii) Scotland; (iii) Wales; and (iv) the Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 18220/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Woodland cover in the north of Ireland is 8% of land area. This compares with 11% in the south of Ireland, 10% in England, 15% in Wales and 18% in Scotland.

Woodland Grant Scheme

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much funding has been allocated to the Woodland Grant Scheme, in each of the last three years,

(AQW 18221/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Grant aid for forestry measures co-funded by the European Union under the Rural Development Programme totalled £1.4 million during 2009/2010, £1.6 million in 2010/2011 and £1.6 million in 2011/2012.

Farmers: Financial Assistance

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what more her Department can do to assist farmers who are struggling financially due to circumstances outside their control, such as Single Farm Payments being late because of inspections, bad weather, closed herds due to Bovine TB or the rising costs of fuel and feed.

(AQW 18222/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Let me assure you at the outset that I am very conscious of the current difficulties facing our farmers in the context of rising production costs and the impact of recent bad weather.

My Department has a number of initiatives aimed at helping farmers. Under the competitiveness strand of the Rural Development Programme, my Department has provided £45 million funding for a number of schemes, including:

- Farm Family Options, which includes both skills training and business mentoring;
- The Focus Farm Programme, which looks at sharing best practice, modern technology and innovative farm methods;
- Benchmarking, which is an important tool in monitoring input costs and livestock performance;
- The Supply Chain Development Programme, which supports farmers working together and with others to improve the rewards from their supply chain; and
- The Farm Modernisation Programme, which provides support for farms to modernise their holdings and improve production techniques.

In recent months the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) has delivered a training programme throughout the north of Ireland to assist farmers and growers in the run up to and during the winter period. This included a series of on-farm workshops attended by approximately 1500 farmers. These workshops helped farmers make informed decisions about feeding their livestock in response to the reduced quantity and quality of forage available during the bad summer weather. In addition, CAFRE has also produced forage bulletins and online management tools to help farmers. The Department has also commissioned research into additional measures that farmers can take to mitigate risk associated with extreme weather events.

In addition, I recently announced my decision not to apply a further year's voluntary modulation. This will have the effect of adding €19 million to the total funding available for the 2013 single farm payment and I hope that this measure will contribute in some way to alleviating the financial pressures facing many farmers.

As well as the short-term issues currently facing our farmers, the Agri-Food Strategy Board is developing a strategic action plan which will look at prospects for the entire agri-food industry and how we can support its success in the medium to long term.

I have to explain that there are certain limitations to the action I can take to assist farmers, in particular in relation to commercial issues, such as pricing structures, and compliance with EU rules. Unfortunately, these issues and other global market developments cannot be influenced either by producers or my Department and, therefore, the focus has to be on improving efficiency in order to keep production costs as low as possible.

My Department will continue to offer support and assistance where it can to the challenges facing the industry both in the short and longer-term.

I appreciate that Single Farm Payments are an important part of farm incomes. By mid- January over 86% of claims worth £204 million had been finalised. The claims that cannot be completed at this stage have queries that need to be resolved or require complex assessments that take longer to clear. We are working to complete all the remaining claims at the earliest practical date, but we must administer the scheme in a way that avoids further disallowance by the European Union and this means that payments cannot be released until the correct amount due has been calculated.

TB breakdown herd keepers who may face exceptional difficulties this winter, should discuss the issue with their local Divisional Veterinary Office staff to see if there are ways to alleviate the particular pressure while ensuring any disease risk is minimised. Contact details have issued to those industry stakeholder organisations that may be contacted for such advice by farmers.

Let me assure you that I will continue to do all I can to support our farming and rural communities at this difficult time.

Government Construction Clients

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 16796/11-15, for her assessment of the Code of Practice for Government Construction Clients and their Supply Chains, including the model fair payment charter; and what action her Department is taking to address the problem of supply chain payments to sub-contractors and suppliers. (AQW 18223/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My department applies the Code of Practice for Government Construction Clients and their Supply Chains. The code sets out best practice for the relationships between clients, main contractors and their supply chains. This includes contractual conditions which, among other things, require Contractors to pay Sub-Contractors within a period of not exceeding 30 days of the Contractor being supplied with a valid invoice.

On behalf of my department, Central Procurement Directorate also applies a range of contractual and governance arrangements designed to achieve fair payment on all construction contracts managed by them.

Woodland Grant Scheme

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if there any plans to increase the level of funding available through the Woodland Grant Scheme.

(AQW 18224/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I remain committed to the policy of expanding tree cover from the current 8% to 12 % of land cover. To achieve this, my Department encourages tree planting by providing advice and financial support under the Rural Development Programme. To encourage an increase in the rate of tree planting, my Department, in consultation with stakeholders, is exploring ways to revise the nature of support for tree planting in the context of CAP reform and the development of a draft Rural Development Programme 2014-20.

Farm Business Identification Numbers

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many applications for a Farm Business Identification Number were received by her Department in each month since April 2009.

(AQW 18226/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Table 1 summarises the number of DARD Farm Business Identifier applications received each month. These are the business identifiers used by claimants of Common Agricultural Policy subsidies.

Table 1 – Business Identifier applications received by month.

FB1	2009	2010	2011	2012
JAN	16	42	51	58
FEB	19	71	66	47
MARCH	26	146	109	68
APRIL	49	60	73	57
MAY	44	63	58	38
JUNE	60	41	37	20
JULY	26	47	30	25
AUG	26	52	33	32
SEPT	41	63	33	17
OCT	51	46	34	30
NOV	45	60	37	40
DEC	33	31	25	36
Total	436	722	586	468

These figures do not include applications for Business Identification numbers to claim non-farming rural development grants and since June 2011 do not include applications to keep small numbers of animals (for example as pets).

Farm Business Identification Numbers

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many Farm Business Identification Numbers were registered by her Department in each month since April 2009.

(AQW 18229/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Table 1 provides a breakdown by month.

Table 1 Business ID's registered from an Application by month

FB1	2009	2010	2011	2012
JAN	5	16	33	39
FEB	10	38	36	45
MARCH	12	91	99	59
APRIL	35	51	48	61
MAY	35	28	40	21
JUNE	24	31	18	19
JULY	14	22	25	18
AUG	19	32	30	14
SEPT	22	26	21	17
OCT	34	27	22	15
NOV	33	32	25	21
DEC	14	14	17	21
Total	257	408	414	350

During the same period the Department will also have created a number of DARD Business Identifiers which are not a direct result of an application being received, but may be necessary, for example, for a business whose members are now deceased but whose estate wishes to submit a Single Application Form.

Separate business identifiers are also issued to businesses wishing to claim non-farming rural development grants or, since June 2011, to individuals wishing to keep small numbers of animals, for example, as pets. These are also not included in the figures provided.

Comprehensive Spending Review: Welfare Reform

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much she has set aside in her budget to mitigate the effects of Welfare Reform in each year of the next Comprehensive Spending Review period.

(AQW 18315/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The current budget period extends to 2014/15. No budgets have been set for the period thereafter. The latest HM Treasury and Office of Budgetary Responsibility (OBR) forecasts indicate that public expenditure will be significantly constrained in the next spending review period. It is in this context that my department will address funding priorities within the next Comprehensive Spending Review.

Gaelic Athletic Association Centre of Excellence

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether part of the funding for the Gaelic Athletic Association Centre of Excellence, to be built in Garvaghey, will be funded by 14 per cent of modulation Single Farm Payment funds.

(AQW 18371/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: No modulation funds will contribute to the funding allocated by the Assisting Rural Communities (ARC) North West (NW) Joint Council Committee to the Tyrone GAA County Committee under Axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme (RDP). Modulation funds are currently confined within Axis 3 of the RDP to Measure 3.1, 'Diversification into non-agricultural activities'.

EU-Canada Free Trade Agreement

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the consequences that may arise within the agriculture industry as a result of the Free Trade Agreement between the EU and Canada.

(AQW 18411/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I refer you to the answer given to question AQW 18132/11-15.

Civil Servants: Unrest

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the number of Civil Servants from her Department who have left work early since 3 December 2012 due to unrest; and (ii) the associated financial cost to her departmental budget.

(AQW 18457/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Department has not put any arrangements in place to allow staff to leave work outside normal working hours because of the recent disruptive protests. As such, there is no associated financial cost to the departmental budget.

Hen Houses

Ms McGahan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what financial assistance is available to assist in setting up hen houses?

(AQW 18523/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Whilst I very much appreciate the challenges facing the poultry industry at this time, there is currently no financial assistance for the setting up of hen houses. However, in 2012 my Department provided some financial assistance to the poultry sector through the Farm Modernisation Programme (FMP). FMP Tranche 3 opened for applications in September 2012 until October 2012 and although this is a small grant scheme (maximum funding £4k) it included a range of plant machinery and equipment and other items that could contribute to the modernising of existing production systems for poultry producers.

Whilst it is still early days in the EU negotiations on rural development, and the final agreement could see significant changes being made to the proposals, DARD is currently considering all policy needs for the agricultural sector and the wider rural community, including possible support to larger capital grants schemes as part of a future Rural Development Programme.

My Department has also made funding in the region of £1 million available to the egg industry through the Processing and Marketing Grant Scheme and two local egg packers have benefited through this Scheme.

You will also be aware that I, along with the DETI Minister, established an Agri Food Strategy Board led by Tony O'Neill from Moy Park. That Board is currently developing recommendations to support growth right across the agri food sector and includes a specific sub-group looking at the needs of the poultry and eggs sector. The Board's report, expected in the next few months, will help to shape the future priorities for the agri-food sector.

Horse Meat Investigation

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she will instigate an urgent investigation into how horsemeat entered the food chain, in order to retain public confidence in the local beef industry.

(AQW 18528/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Investigation is underway in the south, led by the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, and throughout Britain and the north of Ireland with the Food Standards Agency in the lead in this jurisdiction, in order to ascertain how or why horse meat came to be found in beef products. My officials are working closely with the Food Standards Agency here in the north to ensure that public confidence in beef born, raised and processed in the north is maintained.

Horse Meat in Food Produce

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she has received assurances from the Irish Minister of Food, Agriculture and the Marine that any food produce, that contained horse meat and originated in the Republic of Ireland, was not a threat to human health.

(AQW 18581/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: In his statement to the Dáil, on the 16 January 2013, Minister Coveney repeated the assurances given to him by the Food Safety Authority of Ireland 'that while no food safety issues arise in this instance there are clearly issues to be addressed in respect of the confidence in the quality of the products concerned which are now being addressed in the full investigation I have initiated'.

Horse Passport System

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, given the discovery of horse DNA in meat plants elsewhere in the British Isles, how confident is she in the fitness for purpose of the horse passport system in operation in Northern Ireland; and what changes are anticipated.

(AQW 18592/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Horse passports are mandatory for all equidae across the EU. The Horse Passports Regulations (NI) 2010, on the identification of equidae, implement Commission Regulation (EC) No. 504/2008 in the north of Ireland.

The Horse Passport Regulations (NI) 2010, which are primarily to protect the human food chain, state that owners must obtain a passport for all horses. A horse must be accompanied by its passport when moved out of the north of Ireland or when moved to the premises of a new keeper. In addition, a person must not sell a horse unless it is accompanied by its passport.

Horse passports record a horse's identity and its veterinary history, and are intended to ensure that horses do not enter the human food chain if they have been treated with certain veterinary medicines harmful to human health.

In order to protect the food chain, my Department enforces these Regulations at point of slaughter and at import / export and I am confident in the operation of these procedures.

There are no plans at EU level to review or to change the horse passport system in the near future. However, my officials will be working with Defra on improving the quality of passports.

Horse DNA

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what investigations her Department has conducted in relation to the traces of horse DNA found in burger products marketed in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 18610/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: No traces of horse DNA have been found in burger products marketed in the north of Ireland. However, in light of the findings in the south investigations are underway, led by the Food Safety Authority of Ireland in the south, and with the Food Standards Agency here. My officials are working closely with the Food Standards Agency here in the north to ensure that public confidence in beef born, raised and processed in the north is maintained.

Rural Development Programme

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the allocation of funding delivered through the Rural Development Programme over the last five years.
(AQW 18631/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The amount of rural development programme expenditure declared to the European Commission in each of the last five calendar years is as follows:

2008	£38.8m
2009	£43.1m
2010	£59.5m
2011	£71.4m
2012	£60.3m*

Spend under the Rural Development Programme can continue up to 2015.

* Relates to expenditure declared to the European Commission from 1st January 2012 to 15th October 2012.

Crime in Rural Areas

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the action her Department plans to take in the next year, in partnership with the PSNI and agencies, to address crime in rural areas.
(AQO 3193/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The PSNI has primary responsibility for tackling rural crime. Over the next year my Department will continue the excellent partnership developed with the Police and other enforcement agencies addressing the scourge of livestock theft. In 2012 I met twice with Chief Constable Matt Baggott and raised the issue of rural crime and we discussed a number of measures to tackle rural crime. Last year this partnership with the Police was evident in a number of joint initiatives, concerning livestock theft, including Farmwatch and the Freeze-branding initiative. Furthermore in December, I launched a Crimestoppers campaign with the Justice Minister David Ford encouraging the rural community to report suspicious activity anonymously. This campaign had the support of the Police, other government agencies, NFU Mutual Insurance and the UFU.

At the operational level the Department's Central Enforcement Team is actively working with the Police, for example conducting roadside vehicle inspections, undertaking joint criminal investigations and indeed training constables in identifying suspicious consignments of livestock. Cross-border smuggling of livestock, sometimes stolen, is a feature of rural crime and the Central Enforcement Team work closely with their DAFM counterparts in the south and the Gardai, and the relationships have been strengthened with joint training and enhanced communication channels.

In recent weeks the Department's Portal staff, while undertaking livestock vehicle biosecurity checks, were able to alert the Harbour Police who subsequently seized agriculture machinery believed to have been stolen.

Farms: Regulatory Burden

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline how she has reduced the regulatory burden on farms since May 2011.
(AQO 3200/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department has had a Better Regulation Action Plan in place since 2010 dealing with what are considered to be the most burdensome regulations that impact on the industry today. Since then it has been actively taking forward an extensive programme of work to give effect to the 63 accepted recommendations put forward by an Independent Panel.

An interim re-measurement exercise was carried out at 31 March 2011 which quantified improvements made against the total regulatory burden which was base-lined in December 2007. This clearly showed that there had been an overall 4.3% reduction in administrative burdens being placed on the industry and this work has been validated with industry representatives. Although our target was higher, it does show that my Department is making progress in this area. Indeed, there are improvements being made all the time within the Department, as technology allows us to do more, which are not being captured within the reduction figure as they were not part of the baseline. Tranche 3 of the Farm Modernisation Programme which closed for applications in October 2012 is an example. 90% of the 6,400 applications were received online which represents a further increase from Tranche 2 of the Programme and another real step forward in reducing the time and cost farmers are asked to spend on paperwork. This time saving is outside the scope of the current Action Plan.

The Action Plan has played its part however as it has been focused, for instance, on helping to provide the legislative support for a province wide service to allow cattle births and deaths to be registered by telephone thereby ensuring that all registrations can be done without the need for the herd keeper to spend valuable time visiting a DARD office. Indeed the uptake of the online facility for registrations has risen from 27.8% in 2009 to 48.5% at the end of December 2012.

Water Borehole Scheme

Mr McEliduff asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the progress made on the water bore hole scheme to assist people who still have no access to mains water supply.
(AQO 3201/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Rural Borewells Scheme is one of a wide range of initiatives developed under the 'Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Framework'. Working in partnership with the Department of Regional Development, my officials developed a grant scheme which offers financial assistance towards the cost of installing a private borewell, and associated treatment, for isolated rural households. The scheme aims to help these households obtain a wholesome water supply where it is currently not available and where it is not technically or financially possible to access the public water mains.

A call for applications to the Scheme took place last June which, following assessment and site survey stages, has resulted in the issue of 35 Letters of Offer to applicants. Site works are currently either underway or planned for most of these projects, with successful drilling having been completed at 1 property to date, while the procurement process for drilling contractors is nearing completion for the remainder. All existing projects are currently on schedule to be completed by the 31 March 2013 deadline. A further 19 projects are ready to proceed from April and, following a review of the first years' activity, it's anticipated that the Scheme will open again for applications in early summer 2013.

Single Farm Payment

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how her Department is processing the current round of the Single Farm Payment applications.
(AQO 3202/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: In November, I announced that 80% of Single Farm Payments would be paid in December. We exceeded this target and at 31 December, 82.8% of claims were paid. The vast majority of these were paid into farmers' bank accounts before Christmas.

At 21 January 2013, 88.4 % of Single Farm Payment claims have now been finalised. These figures include 749 inspection cases, which is over three times more than at this stage last year.

This leaves under 12% cases still to be paid. Of these about a quarter are inspection cases. The remaining 9% of cases cannot be paid immediately for various reasons. For example, we have duplicate field cases, cases where we do not have bank account details, or where probate has not been completed. There are also cases where farmers have claimed significantly more than the visible eligible area shown on the maps they received last Spring. These cases are being carefully checked before payment is made.

As I explained during the debate on the Single Farm Payment scheme last week, we are working to clear the remaining cases as quickly as possible and we expect that the majority of inspection cases will be finalised by the end of May. Again, this is earlier than last year.

While it is not in our interests to delay payment to farmers, we have to ensure that these are made in line with EU rules.

Farming Community: Hardship Fund

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she will introduce a hardship fund for members of the farming community who experience financial problems due to circumstances outside their control.
(AQO 3203/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am very aware of and fully sympathise with the very difficult situation our farmers find themselves in at this time due to circumstances outside their control, not least in the context of the bad weather.

Unfortunately there are currently no financial support measures available for farmers 'losses' or towards additional feeding costs due to the bad weather. Any potential for hardship funding is further severely constrained by business case requirements and compliance with restrictive EU State Aid Rules.

However, I have as you know been able to provide some support by deciding not to apply a further year of voluntary modulation for the 2013 Single Farm Payment Year. This will make an additional €19m, (some £15m at current exchange rates), available to farmers in their 2013 payments.

My officials are also monitoring the situation and have, and will continue to provide practical advice and help to farmers. CAFRE has also run a number of very successful local workshops to assist farmers with winter feeding decisions. In addition my Department has commissioned research into additional measures farmers can take to mitigate risk associated with extreme weather events, and the findings of this research will be made available to the industry in due course.

Agrifood Sector

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what measures her Department is taking to support the agri food sector
(AQO 3204/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department has a number of initiatives aimed at supporting farmers and the agri-food sector. Under the competitiveness strand of the Rural Development Programme, my Department has provided £45m funding for a number of schemes, including:-

- Farm Family Options, which includes both skills training and business mentoring;
- The Focus Farm Programme, which looks at sharing best practice, modern technology and innovative farm methods;
- Benchmarking, which is an important tool in monitoring input costs and livestock performance;
- The Supply Chain Development Programme, which supports farmers working together and with others to improve the rewards from their supply chain; and
- The Farm Modernisation Programme, which provides support for farms to modernise their holdings and improve production techniques.
- Processing and Marketing Grants scheme, which provides support towards capital investment projects to those involved or wishing to become involved in the processing of agri-food products.

I recently announced my decision not to apply a further year's voluntary modulation. This will have the effect of adding €19m to the total funding available for the 2013 single farm payment and I hope that this measure will contribute in some way to alleviating the financial pressures facing many farmers.

My Department works closely with Invest NI, which has the lead responsibility for marketing of our food to the export trade, through a range of supply chain and market intelligence initiatives to support local producers in their export endeavours.

My Department is funding and delivering a Regional Food Programme which offers financial support to assist eligible groups in the local agri-food industry to develop and expand profitable and sustainable markets. The programme is designed to encourage co-operation across the industry to provide a united front to retailers and consumers.

My Department also administers the EU's Protected Food Name Scheme on behalf of applicants. This provides a system for the protection of food names on a geographical or traditional basis and can be used as a valuable promotional tool.

CAFRE supports the agri-food sector by providing technical support and advice through the campus at Loughry and Greenmount. Whilst the Agri Food and Biosciences institute (AFBI) support the sector through its research programme.

As well as the short-term issues currently facing the sector, the Agri-Food Strategy Board is developing an export led strategic action plan which will look at prospects for the entire agri-food industry and how we can support its success in the medium to long term. I expect the Agri-Food strategy board to publish its final report in the coming months.

My Department will continue to offer support and assistance where it can to the challenges facing the sector both in the short and longer-term.

Common Agricultural Policy

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the Common Agricultural Policy reform negotiations aimed at maximising the outcome for local farmers.
(AQO 3205/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Negotiations on CAP reform post 2013 have made only limited progress to date. This is due to the desire to secure an agreement on the EU Budget negotiations for the period 2014-2020 prior to making decisions on CAP and difficulty reaching a compromise on the issues of greening and moving towards flat rate payments. The positions of key players in the budget negotiations started off quite far apart and reaching agreement will not be easy. However I expect there will be a significant push to reach agreement on the budget over the next two months.

I remain steadfast in my view that there should be no further cuts to the CAP budget beyond what the EU Commission have proposed which is a freeze in nominal terms. It is likely that the overall EU budget will be cut but I want to see the CAP budget protected as much as possible.

Discussion on the detail of the proposals for CAP reform is continuing also. I am working hard to influence these discussions and achieve a good deal for our farmers and rural communities. I was pleased that our local MEPs put forward my Department's suggested amendments to the CAP reform proposals for consideration and I look forward to seeing which amendments gain the support of the EU Parliament in the next few weeks. The Irish Presidency has now begun and although the task is considerable, they are optimistic that they can make progress.

I am continuously pushing my priority issues in respect of moving to a flat rate and greening. As well as having met the Commission on a number of occasions, I have been engaging directly with Defra Ministers and my Devolved Administration colleagues, as well as with Simon Coveney TD, Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine in the south. And, of course, I will continue to have regular discussions on CAP reform with our local MEPs. My officials are working with their Defra and Devolved Administration counterparts in contributing to the Brussels working groups and they keep in regular contact with officials in Dublin. For my part, I am acutely aware that we are reaching a critical stage in the negotiations and achieving a good outcome is a top priority for me.

Circuses: Wild Animals

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of the recent high profile court case in England, whether she has any plans to review her decision not to ban the use of wild animals in circuses.

(AQO 3206/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I want to make it clear to the Member that I have not yet developed a position on the matter of a ban on the use of wild animals in travelling circuses in the north of Ireland and I have not made any decision regarding a ban on their use.

It is important to note that there are no circuses based in the north of Ireland. There are a number of circuses registered in the south of Ireland, some of which regularly travel here. My Department has an agreed protocol with counterparts in the south of Ireland which provides for an inspection of animals from these registered circuses before they move back to the south of Ireland. We have no evidence to suggest that the welfare of these animals is compromised.

I have no plans to introduce a ban in the immediate future. My immediate priority regarding animal welfare is the roll out of subordinate legislation under the Welfare of Animals Act 2011, including the regulation of dogs in breeding establishments which will come before Members next month and the development of regulations regarding the welfare of animals in petshops, animal boarding establishments and riding establishments. I also intend to bring forward legislation to regulate the welfare of livestock at markets here.

The recent case in England of Anne the Elephant involved acts of deliberate mistreatment which is totally unacceptable, as is causing, or allowing, the suffering of any animal. However, the Radford report published by the Circus Working Group in England in 2007 concluded that there is little evidence to demonstrate that the welfare of animals kept in travelling circuses is any better or worse than that of animals kept in other captive environments. Anne the Elephant suffered because of deliberate mistreatment by her owners, not because of the conditions in which she was kept.

I can advise the Member that I have been approached by Defra Ministerial colleagues who are proposing to introduce a Bill banning the use of wild animals in circuses in England. It is important to realise that this Bill is being brought forward on ethical rather than welfare grounds. This is because the available scientific evidence does not support the view that the welfare of wild animals in circuses is compromised. The tragic case of Anne the elephant does not change this.

Before making any decision regarding the matter of a ban on using wild animals in travelling circuses here, I would want to take the time to assess the available evidence and give the issue detailed consideration. I met with representatives from Animal Defenders International and the Born Free Foundation yesterday to discuss these issues. Our meeting was frank and constructive. The organisations have undertaken to provide me with evidence which I agreed to examine.

In considering the matter, I would also want to examine developments in the south of Ireland and engage with my Ministerial counterpart there. In addition, I would monitor developments in England, Scotland and Wales and engage with stakeholders, including circus operators and their representatives, to ensure that their views are properly considered. I would wish to take into account developments in Europe. I would also take advice on the legal implications and on the proportionality of the options open to me so that the welfare of animals in circuses is fully protected. I would intend to engage fully with the Departmental Solicitors Office, the Executive and the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee.

Agri-food Sector: Loughry Campus

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to assist the expansion of the agri food sector through Loughry College.

(AQO 3207/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The agri-food industry is one of the more resilient sectors of our local economy, recording growth at a time when many other sectors are experiencing difficulties. Innovation is a key driver for the growth of any sector and within agri-food there has been an increased emphasis on product and process development. It is vitally important that we maximise the support available to meet the current economic challenge and I was delighted to announce recently proposals for a new Food

Innovation Centre at Loughry. We aim to deliver this new development by 2015 at an estimated cost of £1.8 million funded from the 'Jobs in the Economy' budget. The Food Innovation Centre will include a product development area and sensory assessment, packaging design and quality control laboratories. This new facility will be a major addition to Loughry's food education, training and industry development programmes and will stimulate innovation and introduce new technologies to the industry. It will help meet the employment demands of the agri-food sector by providing established and start-up companies with the technical staff needed to grow their businesses. It will also provide much needed jobs in its construction phase. The new Food Innovation Centre will act as a hub for innovation and will encourage the adoption of new technologies and the exploitation of market opportunities to increase industry competitiveness.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Sport Funding

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much additional money has been allocated following the recent announcement of further funding for football, rugby and gaelic sports; and how will this money be allocated and spent.

(AQW 17447/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Additional funding of £4.5m over a three year period has been provided, £1.5m to each of the three sports.

Each of the governing bodies will receive £0.5m in each of the financial years 2012/13, 2013/14 and 2014/15 with the funding split between capital and revenue spend.

My bid to the Executive for this funding was predicated around promoting equality and participation, targeting poverty and social exclusion. Consequently each of the governing bodies has been asked to bring forward projects and programmes that include the following objectives:

- Tackle poverty
- Promote social inclusion
- Provide opportunities to realise socio-economic returns and community benefits;
- Provide opportunities to train and employ the long-term unemployed as coaches and administrators; and
- Provide suicide prevention initiatives.

The Department is currently working with the three governing bodies to help them develop their proposals in line with these priorities.

As the projects and programmes are agreed the governing bodies will be tasked with taking them forward subject to normal budgetary and due diligence processes.

World Police and Fire Games: South Down

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline (i) how her Department will be promoting the World Police and Fire Games in South Down; and (ii) how many people are expected to travel to South Down for the games.

(AQW 17528/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: 2013 World Police and Fire Games Limited (WPFGLtd) has a Communication Strategy in place to ensure that the 2013 Games and the tourism offer of the north of Ireland are promoted locally, nationally and internationally. WPFGLtd has an on-going PR strategy which means that the media in South Down are being targeted on a regular basis in order to get WPFGLtd stories covered in the local media. WPFGLtd are also working closely with the Tourist Board to engage with local councils and further PR opportunities for South Down will arise from this work.

There are ten WPFGLtd events taking place within the South Down/Mournes area; in Kilbroney Park, Rostrevor, Donard Park, Newcastle, Castlewellsan Forest Park and Ballykinler. It is too early in the registration process to provide confirmed athlete numbers for these sports but it is estimated that together these events could attract up to 2,232 competitors and an associated 700 spectators to the area.

World Police and Fire Games: South Down

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline (i) the potential benefit the upcoming World Police and Fire Games can have for the rural community in South Down; and (ii) how Forest Service in South Down is preparing for such events.

(AQW 17532/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: There are ten WPFGLtd events taking place within the South Down/Mournes area; in Kilbroney Park, Rostrevor, Donard Park, Newcastle, Castlewellsan Forest Park and Ballykinler. It is too early in the registration process to provide confirmed athlete numbers for these sports but it is estimated that together these events could attract up to 2,232 competitors and an associated 700 spectators to the area.

Local hoteliers and accommodation providers in the area will benefit from the influx of athletes and visitors associated with the Games. This will also mean increased business for local cafes and restaurants.

WPFPG are in contact with Newry and Mourne District Council discussing how the Games can be promoted in the area and how those visiting the Games can be encouraged to visit south Down as part of their visit. The Tourist Board is also producing promotional material which will market the regions of the north of Ireland to those coming to the Games including the Mournes.

Forest Service has been engaging with the Games organisers 2013 WPFPG Limited, since August 2011, on possible venues within the forest estate, to facilitate a number of events. As a result of this four forest locations have been selected by the organisers, including three in the South Down area. Organisers and Forest Service are currently progressing the operational and licensing arrangements within which the events will be hosted.

Borough Charters: Anniversary

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if any money has been allocated by her Department to assist in the commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the granting of Borough Charters, in 2013.

(AQW 17714/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Budget allocations to Borough Charter projects are subject to business case approval. Currently my Department, through the Ministerial Advisory Group - Ulster Scots Academy (MAGUS), has allocated £42,500 to a Charter project by Coleraine Borough Council. The project will provide a legacy for Coleraine town centre to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the town's charter.

Any further budget allocations to Borough Charter projects will again be subject to business case approval.

Libraries NI and PRONI are organising and contributing to a number of events relating to the 1613 Borough Charters next year. This activity will be funded from existing budget allocations.

CoderDojo: Funding

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline how the £50,000 funding for Coderdojo will be accessed and used.

(AQW 17732/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is providing support to Momentum, the trade association representing the IT and digital sectors in the north of Ireland, to plan and lead a collaborative approach extending the CoderDojo initiative to all 6 regional FE colleges by March 2013.

This pilot will promote wider access to CoderDojo and include the development of learning resources, which can also be used by other educational and community/voluntary organisations across the north, to nurture an interest in programming and software development.

Connecting a diverse range of organisations will provide a joined up approach to maximise the impact and reach of the initiative. This will include linkages to further resources within the libraries network (such as books on programming and technology etc) and the STEM programmes delivered by other organisations.

Ulster-Scots Agency

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much funding has been allocated by the Ulster Scots Agency in the North Down constituency, in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 17834/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The table below shows the amount of funding allocated by the Ulster-Scots Agency in the North Down constituency over the last five years.

2008	£ 32,460.00
2009	£ 54,026.80
2010	£ 49,464.00
2011	£ 29,116.30
2012	£ 28,820.30

Ministerial Private Office: Running Costs

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the cost of running her Ministerial Private Office in the last financial year.

(AQW 17865/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The cost of running the Ministerial Private Office in the last financial year (2011-12) was £216,363.

Salmon Levels

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how her Department estimates salmon levels when most rivers are devoid of fish counters.

(AQW 17874/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DCAL estimates salmon stocks using a number of methods. Stock levels are calculated on 6 index salmon rivers in the DCAL area which are representative of other rivers in the different geographical areas.

Conservation Limits have been calculated for a number of rivers in the DCAL area, but not for all rivers. DCAL has planned to determine Conservation Limits for all major salmon rivers in the DCAL area over the next 3 years.

Where fish counters are not present, angling salmon catch returns are used, and more recently DCAL has used tagging studies to determine adult abundance in salmon rivers.

DCAL has also been actively developing a stock assessment tool based on juvenile electric fishing data; this 'recruitment index' describes the level of young salmon in a river and is a useful management metric/measure.

Salmon Levels

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) her Department's current estimate of salmon levels, both for wild salmon and hatchery salmon; and (ii) how this equates with reports of a heavy run of salmon in 2012.

(AQW 17875/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department monitors wild salmon and hatchery salmon returning to the River Bush through work at the Department's River Bush Salmon Station. The Department has not collected and analysed all of the data as yet in order to give a definitive assessment of the 2012 salmon run.

The higher than normal levels of rainfall in the late summer resulted in high water levels which have allowed increased numbers of salmon to access the upper reaches of the rivers earlier in the season. This may lead to the reports by anglers' of "heavy runs" of salmon.

Salmon Catch-and-Return Policy

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an estimate of the casualty rate resulting from the salmon catch and return policy.

(AQW 17876/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The mortality rate for salmon caught and released by anglers depends on a number of factors such as the type of angling equipment used, for example barbed or barbless hooks, and the procedures used by each individual angler to land, handle and release the fish.

Survival rates of salmon caught and released can be over 90% with use of the appropriate equipment and the correct procedures are followed by anglers.

DCAL has prepared guidelines on best practice for catch and release which will be disseminated widely.

Libraries

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what consideration she has given to extending the opening hours of libraries and providing training for librarians to enable them to assist people in making online claims for benefits.

(AQW 17877/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The opening hours of individual libraries and the training provided to libraries staff is an operational matter for the Board of Libraries NI and its Senior Management Team.

Libraries NI has informed me that it is working in partnership with other agencies to consider how it can assist people who do not have access to computers at home or elsewhere. This would allow them to make use of the public access computers in libraries to undertake a range of online transactions, including benefit claims.

The role of libraries in this context is to provide the physical infrastructure, including library space and computers, and to assist people to gain the necessary skills to use computers effectively.

However due to financial constraints there is no scope within its budget to extend library opening hours to facilitate this particular suggestion.

Public Angling Estate

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether her Department will continue, in the 2013 fishing season, the mandatory catch and release of salmon in the Public Angling Estate along with issuing blue tags for the retention of injured or damaged fish.

(AQW 17901/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department will continue the catch and release only policy for salmon on all Public Angling Estate waters for the 2013 fishing season. This is a condition of sale of a DCAL permit.

Only one salmon carcass tag will be issued at a time to game anglers during the 2013 angling season.

Salmon: Catching and Retention

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she proposes to introduce any statutory controls over the catching and retention of salmon by rod and line anglers and commercial nets-men in 2013.

(AQW 17903/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A statutory ban on the sale of rod caught salmon in the DCAL jurisdiction will be introduced in 2013.

Legislation on statutory controls on the catching and retention of salmon by both rod and line anglers and commercial nets-men will be brought forward in 2013 to be in place for the 2014 fishing season.

Cycling: Financial Support

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the financial support given to cycling in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 17986/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Over the last 5 financial years, up to 31 March 2012, Sport NI has provided both exchequer and lottery funding to cycling, totalling £1,119,797. The amount of funding provided each year is detailed in the table below:

Financial Year	Exchequer Funding	Lottery Funding	Total
2007/08	£71,261	£43,922	£115,183
2008/09	£77,096	£80,563	£157,659
2009/10	£142,766	£70,505	£213,271
2010/11	£331,170	-	£331,170
2011/12	£302,514	-	£302,514

Brandywell Sports Stadium

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure why AQW 16217/11-15 remains unanswered.

(AQW 18047/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The response to AQW 16217/11-15 issued on the 27th December 2012.

Lurgan Park Lake

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the stock that her Department has provided for Lurgan Park Lake in each of the last 5 years, broken down by species.

(AQW 18070/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department has not stocked Lurgan Park Lake with any fish in the last five years as it is not part of the Department's Public Angling Estate.

Wild Salmon Stocks

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, whether her Department will investigate the current and long-term effect on wild salmon stocks in rivers as a result of increasing numbers of sea-farmed salmon.

(AQW 18403/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DARD is responsible for the licensing and management of commercial fish farms while DCAL is responsible for the protection of wild salmon.

DARD has commissioned the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) to investigate the genetic intragression of farmed genes into wild fish. This work has a further year to run before results will be known. DCAL will consider the findings of this work and the effect on wild salmon stocks.

Salmon Fishing

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether her Department is responsible for regulating salmon farmed in the sea.

(AQW 18442/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DARD is responsible for the licensing and management of commercial fish farms which includes salmon farmed in the sea.

Salmon Catch-and-Release Restrictions

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether the salmon catch and release restrictions will apply equally to (i) the special stretches on the River Bush; and (ii) the rest of the river.

(AQW 18535/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Anglers catching salmon in (i) the special stretches of the River Bush will be subject to catch and release which is the Departments policy on all Public Angling Estate waters. (ii) The rest of the river, outside the Public Angling Estate, will be subject to the conditions imposed by the fishery owner, many of whom have followed the Department's lead and implemented a catch and release policy.

A daily bag limit of two salmon applies to all rivers in the Department's jurisdiction where the fishery owner has not implemented a catch and release policy.

World Police and Fire Games 2013

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the World Police and Fire Games 2013.

(AQO 3210/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: There has been significant progress in the preparation for the 2013 World Police and Fire Games. More than 1,900 athletes from over 40 different countries have signed up for the Games and over 6,400 people have applied to volunteer during the Games, exceeding the target of 4,500 applications. There are already 6,059 bed spaces booked through the Belfast Visitor Convention Bureau, representing a value of over £2 million to the local economy. Furthermore, a number of flagship sponsors have been secured to support the Games and contract details are currently being agreed.

The venues for the 57 sports across the North have been announced and agreements have been reached with the various sports governing bodies who will manage the individual sporting events at the venues.

The Company has and will continue to work with local councils to identify opportunities for them to organise or host events related to the Games.

The Company's website provides details on other events taking place during the Games as well as information on local visitor attractions and places of interest, all aimed at showcasing what we have to offer in the north.

In my discussions with the Company I have highlighted the importance of ensuring the social inclusivity of the Games. As part of this, three charity partners have been appointed: The Northern Ireland Cancer Fund for Children, the SOS Bus and the Special Educational Needs Advisory Service will all benefit from an increased profile and fundraising opportunities during the Games.

The Company has undertaken a significant amount of work to date and there is still much to do over the coming months to ensure that Belfast delivers the friendliest Games ever. I will be maintaining close contact with the Company as we move towards the Games in August.

World War I Centenary: Battlefield Visits

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans are being put in place to support young people visiting World War One Battlefields in 2014 as part of the Centenary Remembrance plans.

(AQO 3215/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The First World War is one of several major events and significant anniversaries from the 1912 - 1922 period. The Executive is committed to an inclusive approach helping people to explore different interpretations and the lasting political, social and cultural impact of this decade. This approach is being finalised.

There are no plans at present to provide financial assistance for visits to locations relevant to the 'Decade of Centenaries' such as World War One battlefields or, for example, important sites in Ireland linked to the Easter Rising.

The creative and cultural infrastructure and programmes already funded and supported by my Department will play a key role in telling the stories and different interpretations of the First World War and other important events from this important decade in our history

Motorbike Racing

Mr Girvan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much funding has been allocated for Motorbike racing in 2013.

(AQO 3216/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Responsibility for supporting motorcycle racing in the north of Ireland rests, in the first instance, with the governing bodies of the sport as represented by the 2&4 Wheel Motorsport Steering Group Limited (2&4 Wheel MSG). Sport NI has recently considered an application from 2&4 Wheel MSG under its PerformanceFocus programme. As a result, Sport NI has agreed funding of £338,000 over the period 2013-2017 to assist the development of motorsport across the north,

including motorcycle racing. In addition to this, in the financial year to 31 March 2013, Sport NI allocated £57,491 to individual motorcycle racers under its Athlete Investment Programme. Furthermore, in 2009 DCAL, through Sport NI, provided £2m to motorsport to help bring about health and safety improvements at a number of venues across the north. This included improvement works at motorcycle racing venues such as, Nutts Corner, Kirkistown, Bishopscourt, the North West 200 and Dundrod.

DCAL: Reserved Matters

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the level of engagement she has with her counterparts at Westminster on public services, such as broadcasting, which remain reserved matters.

(AQO 3217/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have had no specific discussions with Ministers in Westminster about broadcasting, but I wrote to Ed Vaizey Broadcasting Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries in May 2012 and reiterated that I believe that culture has a significant role to play in helping communities in the North to understand each other and to understand how we move forward as a more cohesive and integrated society. Furthermore, I have also requested a meeting with Ed Vaizey to discuss broadcasting and I await to hear from him in due course.

I am also currently in the process of holding meetings with local stakeholders and I expect that these will be concluded in the coming weeks.

I expect to be in contact with Westminster in relation to the outcomes of two strategy consultations for indigenous languages which closed on 27th November 2012. Broadcasting will be one of the elements being taken forward. My officials are currently considering responses to the consultations.

World Police and Fire Games: Accommodation

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how she is working with Executive colleagues to ensure that there is sufficient accommodation for visitors and competitors during the World Police and Fire Games 2013.

(AQO 3218/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Accommodation has, and remains a key area of work for 2013 World Police and Fire Games Limited and in recognition of this the Company has developed an accommodation strategy which is based on an analysis of the accommodation required for athletes and visitors during the Games. The strategy indicates that there will be sufficient accommodation for all athletes and visitors.

The Company is working with the full support of the Tourist Board, Hotel Federation and Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau in order to achieve the accommodation targets for the Games and to ensure that all accommodation offered to visitors is of a suitable standard.

In a further effort to maximise the accommodation provision for the Games, the DETI Minister and I attended an Accommodation Breakfast meeting on 20th January which was set up to highlight to Hotels and other accommodation providers the opportunities which the Games present.

There are currently 2,560 rooms booked through BVCB representing a value of over £2 million. The Company will continue to focus on this as a priority and a system is in place to ensure that weekly levels of accommodation uptake can be monitored.

Salmon Conservation

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how her Department is alleviating the detrimental effect of salmon escaping from farms on the conservation of wild Atlantic salmon.

(AQO 3219/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DARD is responsible for the licensing and management of commercial fish farms while DCAL is responsible for the protection of wild salmon.

Bio-security is a priority and DARD's policy is to reduce opportunity for an escape by ensuring good bio-security is in place. Bio-security and other conditions of both the Aquatic Animal Health Authorisation and Fish Culture Licence are checked by DARD, at a minimum, as part of an established annual inspection programme.

DARD has commissioned the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) to undertake research on the possible genetic impact, if any, of aquaculture strains on wild fish and to assess the numbers of sea lice on wild fish. DCAL part funds this research which aims to contribute to determining the genetics of wild salmon populations. This will provide a baseline against which the presence of any non native genetic material of aquaculture strain origin can be detected.

There is not, at present, any evidence of detrimental genetic effects of farm strains requiring alleviation in wild salmon stocks in the DCAL jurisdiction.

Cultural Recognition

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how she intends to address the perceived lack of recognition of Protestant Unionist Loyalist Culture.

(AQO 3220/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department and its Arms Length Bodies and Agencies deliver a range of programmes and initiatives that support all cultures, including Protestant Unionist Loyalist culture.

My Department in line with the Executive's programme for government 2011-15 Priority 4 'Building a Strong and Shared Community', will continue to support programmes and initiatives to unlock the potential of culture, arts and leisure.

The Executive is firmly committed to the use of public money for maximum improvements to the lives of those areas and communities suffering greatest socio-economic inequalities. My Department continues to meet its statutory obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

In this decade of centenaries the Executive is committed to developing an approach and resources to set an inclusive tone and help all sections of our community to learn about the stories, connections and different interpretations behind these events.

DCAL Projects: Mid Ulster

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the plans and projects her Department has delivered for the Mid Ulster constituency in the past five years.

(AQO 3221/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Preliminary work has identified several hundred projects that meet the criteria in your question. While I intend to provide the member with a detailed answer as soon as possible, given the quantity of information involved, I do not anticipate being able to do so until the end of January.

Boxing: Funding

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what expressions of interest have been received for funding boxing clubs.

(AQO 3222/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sport NI, which has responsibility for the management and administration of the Boxing Investment Programme, has received expressions of interest from 100 boxing clubs for funding from across the north of Ireland. All 100 clubs identified a need for equipment, based on a closed list of boxing equipment provided by the Irish Amateur Boxing Association (IABA). Of these, 61 also identified a need for capital works (either repairs or major capital improvements).

All expressions of interest are currently being assessed by Sport NI and the IABA before final funding decisions are taken. However, it is anticipated that clubs will begin to receive allocated equipment from late February through to the end of March 2013.

Following a detailed assessment of the capital needs of clubs, it is anticipated that letters of offer will issue in late 2013/early 2014.

Department of Education

Education and Skills Authority: Consultants

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education whether his Department has acquired the services of consultants in relation to the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority; and to outline the individual circumstances and costs.

(AQW 13925/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): The engagement of external consultants on the creation of the Education and Skills Authority began in the financial year 2006/7. Examination of DE records since this point, and up to the present day, indicates that the Department of Education has acquired the services of external consultants to assist in the establishment of the Education Skills Authority as per the details set out in the tables below.

2006/7

Item	Purpose	Deliverer	Cost incurred in or accrued to the year (£)
1.	Programme Management Support	PA Consulting	235, 610
2.	RPA Newsletter Design	Lesley Stannage Design	910

Item	Purpose	Deliverer	Cost incurred in or accrued to the year (£)
3.	Preparing RPA Workshop materials	Mentoring Connection	2, 674
4.	Recruitment of ESA CE Designate	Capita Resourcing	24, 385
5.	RPA Element of a larger commissions iro DE Communications Audit	Weber Shandwick	2, 000
6.	EQIA Training	Key Consulting	711
7.	Printing RPA Newsletter	Commercial Graphics	746
8.	Review of Research, Monitoring and Advice	PA Consulting	59, 950
	Total		326, 986

2007/8

Item	Purpose	Deliverer	Cost incurred in or accrued to the year (£)
9.	ICT Audit	PWC	32, 250
10.	Communications Support	PA Consulting	9, 350
11.	Outline Business Case	Deloitte	39, 761
12.	HR Support	Deloitte	26, 000
13.	Joint consultancy with NILA – Finance Systems Development Work	PWC	5,500
14.	Programme Management Support (continuation of Item 1)	PA Consulting	10, 090
15.	ESA 2nd Tier Structure & Location Strategy	Deloitte	20, 000
	Total		142, 951

2008/9

Item	Purpose	Deliverer	Cost incurred in or accrued to the year (£)
16.	HR Support (continuation of Item 12)	Deloitte	14, 000
17.	Change Management	Parity Solutions	70, 000
18.	ESA Management Systems	Vivienne Walker	11, 496
19.	Change Management & Organisational Design	PA Consulting	60, 698
20.	ESA 2nd Tier Structure & Location Strategy (continuation of Item 15)	Deloitte	£3, 618
21.	Developing policy codes for use by the proposed ESA	Jackie Simpson	1, 969
22.	Joint consultancy with NILA – Finance Systems Development Work (continuation of Item 13.)	PWC	200
	Total		161, 981

2009/10

Item	Purpose	Deliverer	Cost incurred in or accrued to the year (£)
23.	Evaluation of ESA Directors Remuneration	Hay Group	12, 315
24.	Implementation of RPA Programme	QBM	7, 400
25.	Change Management	Parity Solutions	65, 745
26.	ESA Management Systems (continuation of Item 18.)	Vivienne Walker	10, 113.
27.	HR Support	PWC	60, 855
28.	Workforce Database & Organisational Development	Deloitte	44, 926
29.	Design and Branding Concepts for ESA	Hamill Bosket	2, 750
30.	Design and Artwork for ESA	Tandem Design	3, 755
31.	Design Development for ESA	Frank Designs and Communications Ltd	3, 750
32.	Creating ESA Corporate Brand	McCadden Design	3, 960
33.	Workshop	Parenting Forum	1, 250
34.	Telephone Interviews	Millward Brown Ulster	2, 015
Total			218, 834

2010/11

Item	Purpose	Deliverer	Cost incurred in or accrued to the year (£)
35.	Training seminars	Brian Walley	11, 742
36.	Working group on Controlled body Sectoral group	Chambre of Public Affairs	2, 807
37.	Change Management (continuation of Item 25)	Parity Solutions	275
Total			14, 824

2011/12

No ESA-related external consultancy

2012/13

	Purpose	Deliverer	Cost incurred in or accrued to the year (£)
38.	Re-evaluation of ESA Directors Remuneration	Hay	5,270
39.	Full Business Case for ESA	Deloitte	To be Confirmed
Total			To Be Confirmed

North Eastern Education and Library Board: Irish-medium Funding

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 17192/11-15, whether all Irish medium schools or youth groups in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area were made aware of this funding; and when each school or youth group was made aware.

(AQW 18147/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: 1) All the Irish medium funding, detailed in AQW 17192/11-15, which was used by the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) was allocated to the youth service. This funding was made available as a result of the Review of Irish Medium Education, which recommended that the Department should "encourage and support informal opportunities for learning through the medium of Irish in the youth sector." The NEELB did not allocate any funding to schools.

The NEELB has advised that his Board drew up a grant scheme and worked in partnership with Foras Na Gaeilge when this youth funding was first established in September 2009 to ensure that all relevant youth groups were made aware of its availability. This included Foras Na Gaeilge arranging an initial information event in January 2010 to inform youth groups about the availability of project funding and to provide information on the registration process. The NEELB Youth Service has contacted registered groups each year to inform them of the Irish medium funding available.

2) The five Education and Library Boards have advised that the Inter Board Youth Panel, in consultation with Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and Foras na nÓg, developed a consistent approach to allocating the Irish medium youth funding. An application process was developed for the registration of constituted youth groups who meet the required criteria and this facility is available to locally based Irish Medium youth groups.

While each Board has used different methods for publicising the Irish medium fund to youth groups, they have all ensured that all Irish medium youth groups have been made aware of the availability of this funding and this is an ongoing process.

Education and Library Boards: Funding

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 17192/11-15, whether each Education and Library Board followed similar protocols in making schools or youth groups aware of this funding.

(AQW 18148/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: 1) All the Irish medium funding, detailed in AQW 17192/11-15, which was used by the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) was allocated to the youth service. This funding was made available as a result of the Review of Irish Medium Education, which recommended that the Department should "encourage and support informal opportunities for learning through the medium of Irish in the youth sector." The NEELB did not allocate any funding to schools.

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While each Board has used different methods for publicising the Irish medium fund to youth groups, they have all ensured that all Irish medium youth groups have been made aware of the availability of this funding and this is an ongoing process.

Magheralin: School

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education (i) how many children travel from Moira or Kilwarlin to school in Magheralin; (ii) how many are in receipt of travelling expenses; and (iii) what was the cost in each of the last two years.

(AQW 18345/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The South Eastern Education and Library Board informs me that: (i) 28 pupils, who are eligible for assistance with transport, travel from Moira or Kilwarlin to school in Magheralin; (ii) the parents of all 28 pupils are in receipt of travelling expenses; and (iii) the cost in each of the last two years for which data is available was £4,752.15 (2010/11) and £4,958.17 (2011/12).

Suicide Prevention

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Education how much money his Department has invested in preventing suicides in each of the past three years.

(AQW 18347/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department of Education is committed to contributing fully to the suicide prevention strategy through a focus on promoting positive emotional health and wellbeing across the school community. While there is no specific allocation for suicide prevention there are a number of initiatives which contribute to this aim.

The Pupils' Emotional Health and Wellbeing Programme – i-Matter, aims to support schools to promote resilient emotional health and to cope in the event of a crisis. Diary inserts on a range of topics, outlining useful information and sources of help, are produced annually for pupils'. Guidance documents on dealing with "Managing Critical Incidents in Schools" and "Protecting Life in Schools" have also been developed and will be issued to schools this year.

The Independent Counselling Service for Schools (ICSS) is an independent school based professional counselling service which is accessible to young people of post primary age during difficult and vulnerable periods in their lives.

Expenditure on these initiatives over the past three years is as follows

	09/10	10/11	11/12
i-Matter Programme	2801	25,997	1,360
I.C.S.S.	1,800,000	1,882,000	2,200,000

It is not possible to put a money figure on the delivery of the Personal Development and Learning for Life and Work strands of the Revised Curriculum which also aim to develop the young person as an individual to enhance their awareness of the stressors in their lives and enhance their capacity to deal with them.

Teachers: Employment

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education how many teachers have been employed in a shared capacity by two or more schools, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 18460/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd:

Academic Year	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
No of Teachers	45	38	28	32	28

Sure Start Developmental Programme: North Antrim

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education how much of the £23.4 million allocated to the Sure Start Developmental Programme will be directed towards children in North Antrim.

(AQW 18482/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Sure Start services are currently provided to families with children aged under 4 in at least the top 20% most disadvantaged areas, at ward level. Within North Antrim, 17 wards are currently in receipt of Sure Start services. Ballymena Sure Start project serves 8 wards, of which the wards of Ballee, Moat, Harryville, Dunclug, Fairgreen, Castle Demesne and Summerfield are within North Antrim. The 2012/13 budget allocation for Ballymena Sure Start project is £820,506 to serve their whole catchment area. Spend is not identifiable per ward.

Dalriada Sure Start serves the wards of Armoy, Bushmills, Ballylough, Mosside, Dalriada, Kinbane, Glentaise, Dunserverick, Knocklaid and Bonamargy and Rathlin. The 2012/13 budget allocation for Dalriada Sure Start is £562,063.

There are plans for Dalriada Sure Start to provide services to the Newhill ward, Ballymoney, as part of the planned expansion of Sure Start services to the top 25% most disadvantaged wards. Additional funding will be made available for this.

Irish Language Posters

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Education to detail the advertising, promotional or information posters that his Department has produced which are printed in the Irish language only.

(AQW 18500/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department makes use of promotional materials, including posters, in both English and Irish. Any material produced in Irish is also produced in English; therefore there are no instances of posters being printed in Irish alone.

Primary Schools: Amalgamation of

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 14916/11-15, for an update on the amalgamation of Blythefield, Fane Street and Donegall Road Primary Schools, given that the Belfast Education and Library Board was due to publish and consult on the area plans for primary schools in Autumn 2012.

(AQW 18511/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Publication of area plans for the primary phase has been delayed in order to factor in the views and lessons learned from the extensive response to the consultation on the draft post-primary plans which will inform the development of an appropriate approach for the consultation on the draft primary area plans.

I have said that area planning should not prohibit the relevant school managing authorities taking necessary action to protect the interests of pupils. Any significant change to a school, such as amalgamation, requires an approved statutory development proposal. To date, however, the Belfast Board has not brought forward such a proposal to amalgamate Blythefield, Fane Street and Donegall Road primary schools.

Special Educational Needs: Teachers

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education what consideration his Department has given to providing Conductive Education training for Special Educational Needs teachers.

(AQW 18515/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: School principals are responsible for determining the training needs of their teachers and they can avail of the wide range of courses on all aspects of special educational needs offered by Education and Library Boards (ELBs). ELBs undertake, on an annual basis, a needs analysis of the training required by schools in the forthcoming academic year.

The Chief Executives of the ELBs have advised that boards do not presently provide conductive education training; until an appropriate level of demand is identified there are no plans to provide it in the near future.

Schools: Split-site Funding

Mrs Dobson asked Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 18375/11-15, to detail the level of additional funding provided to each dual site school, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 18519/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Please see the table attached which details the level of additional funding provided to each dual site school, in each of the last five years.

School	2007-2008 £	2008-2009 £	2009-2010 £	2010-2011 £	2011-2012 £
BELB					
St Brides PS	16,636	17,135	17,665	18,000	18,360
Corpus Christi	50,544	52,060	53,665	55,000	56,100
La Salle College	166,399	171,391	73,613	-	-
NEELB					
St Patricks and St Brigid's PS	-	15,114	15,295	15,266	-
St Patricks & St Joseph's Federated	-	15,733	16,136	16,237	16,053
Parkhall Integrated (inc arrears)	-	149,120	150,188	149,763	150,379
St Patrick's Maghera	-	60,423	61,687	61,772	61,630
St Killian's College	-	-	-	64,257	33,516
SEELB					
St Mary's PS	12,950	14,138	15,836	15,213	14,447
Bangor Academy & 6th Form College	53,716	4,816	-	-	-
SELB					
Craigavon HS	-	57,000	59,000	60,403	62,000
St Patricks College	21,667	-	-	-	-
WELB					
Holy Trinity PS	-	16,700	17,132	17,021	17,246
Holy Cross College	-	61,947	-	-	-
VGS					
Foyle College	46,865	46,998	46,590	47,055	47,165
Victoria College	49,773	49,805	47,872	49,551	49,705

*All figures have been supplied by the relevant funding authority.

Children with Disabilities

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Education whether there is a need for a universal policy to state the rights of children with disabilities to access learning opportunities on an equal basis with other children.

(AQW 18524/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) provides a recognised international human rights standard for people with disabilities. This builds upon the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which recognises and aims to protect the human rights of all children.

In addition, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Order 2005 (SENDO) makes it unlawful for schools to discriminate against a child on grounds of a disability and requires them to make reasonable adjustments. Every aspect of school life is covered by this including after schools clubs and activities provided by schools to their own pupils.

Therefore, there is no need for a further universal policy, as safeguards already exist so that children with disabilities can access learning opportunities on an equal basis with other children.

Primary Schools: Class Size

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Education to list the primary schools which have classes of 35 or more children, broken down by Education and Library Board.

(AQW 18526/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Reflecting the research that points to the quality of teaching and learning being a much more important influencer of outcomes than class size, the Department does not set restrictions on class sizes at Key Stage 2 and delegates such decisions to schools which are best placed to identify the most effective structures for teaching and learning to meet their own needs.

While most classes at Key Stage 2 will be at or below 30, there are some primary schools recorded with classes of more than 35, including composite classes. These are listed in the table below.

Primary schools with classes of 35 or more children by Education and Library Board area 2012/13

School	Education and Library board
St Mary's Primary School, Divis Street	Belfast
St Mary's Primary School (Glennview)	North Eastern
Meadow Bridge Primary School, Hillsborough	South Eastern
Our Lady Queen of Peace Primary School, Dunmurry	South Eastern
Ballyholland Primary School	Southern
Hardy Memorial Primary School	Southern
St Mary's Primary School, Rathfriland	Southern
St Patrick's Primary School, Killyman Rd., Dungannon	Southern
St Peter's Primary School, Bessbrook	Southern
Ebrington Controlled Primary School	Western
Holy Child Primary School, Creggan	Western
Jones Memorial Primary School, Mullylogan	Western
Nazareth House Primary School, Derry	Western
St Mary's Primary School, Killesher	Western
Strabane Controlled Primary School	Western

Source: School census.

Note:

- 1 Figures are provisional. Finalised data for 2012/13 will be published in February 2013.
- 2 Figures include composite and non-composite classes. They include children in Years 5 – 7.

Arm's-length Bodies: Staff

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education how many staff are employed in procurement in each of his Department's arm's-length bodies.

(AQW 18550/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd:

	Staff employed in procurement*
BELB	13
WELB	10
NEELB	11
SEELB	17
SELB	17
SCELB	0
CCMS	2
CCEA	3
CnaG	1
NICIE	2
GTCNI	1
YCNI	2
Middletown Centre	3

* includes staff in procurement posts and staff who have procurement duties as an element of their work

Education and Library Boards: Staff Employed in Procurement

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education how many staff are employed in procurement in each Education and Library Board.

(AQW 18551/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd:

	Staff employed in procurement*
BELB	13
WELB	10
NEELB	11
SEELB	17
SELB	17

* includes staff in procurement posts and staff who have procurement duties as an element of their work

Pupils: English as First Language

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education (i) how many; and (ii) what percentage of (a) primary; and (b) post-primary school pupils in North Down do not have English as their first language.

(AQW 18574/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information requested is detailed in the table below.

Primary and post-primary school pupils who do not have English as their first language and who are resident in the North Down constituency – 2011/12

School type	Pupils with a first language other than English	Total pupils resident in North Down constituency	%
Primary	181	7,005	2.6
Post- primary	119	6,245	1.9
Total	300	13,250	2.3

Source: School census

Notes:

- 1 Figures for primary include children in nursery, reception and year 1 – 7 classes.
- 2 The figures included in the table relate to all children who do not have English as a first language. Children classified as 'newcomers' are a subset of the figures above.
- 3 Figures relate to children attending primary and post-primary schools, whether located in the North Down constituency, or elsewhere.

School Newbuilds: Upper Bann

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education for an update on new school build proposals in the Upper Bann Constituency, including the length of time each build was awaiting approval.

(AQW 18601/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In June 2012 I announced funding to three new school builds in the Upper Bann area; St Mary's PS, Banbridge, St Theresa's PS Lurgan and Tannaghmore PS, Lurgan. Work on the planning, design and approval for these schools is progressing and I expect them to move to construction in the coming months.

On 22 January I announced that Portadown Integrated PS and a new build project to encompass the existing schools of St. Mary's, St Paul's and St Michael's Grammar Schools in Lurgan would be advanced in planning.

Authorisation to proceed with construction will be based on the level of capital funding availability at that time and all necessary approvals being obtained.

I have previously made it clear that I would only announce capital projects which I believe could be delivered within a reasonable timeframe. In this regard the projects announced in June 2012 and January 2013 are the only projects from the Upper Bann Constituency on my capital investment plan and any projects previously submitted by schools or managing authorities have no status.

Moving forward I will work with the Managing Authorities to identify priority projects emerging from area plans.

School Intervention Programme

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education which schools are currently involved in the School Intervention Programme.

(AQW 18639/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Where the Education and Training Inspectorate report, following a school inspection, that the quality of education provided by a school is less than satisfactory, the school is entered into the Formal Intervention Process (FIP). The purpose of the FIP is to make sure that a school receives the support and guidance it needs to effect improvement and provide the pupils with the quality of education they are entitled to receive.

There are currently twenty-one schools in formal intervention.

A list of these schools is shown in the table below.

School	Date Entered Formal Intervention
Ballee Community High School, Ballymena	4 March 2010
Blackwater Integrated College, Downpatrick	8 May 2012
Cambridge House Grammar School, Ballymena	3 June 2011
Crumlin Integrated College	1 February 2010
Dundonald High School	17 December 2012
Dunluce High School, Bushmills	7 March 2012
Foley Primary School, Tassagh, Armagh	10 November 2011
Harryville Primary School, Ballymena	22 June 2011
Kirkinriola Primary School, Ballymena	13 April 2011
Knockbreda High School, Belfast	20 October 2009
Laurelhill Community College, Lisburn	10 November 2011
Lisnagarvey High School, Lisburn	6 April 2011
Lisneal College, Derry	11 March 2010
Malvern Primary School, Belfast	24 April 2012
Monkstown Community School	17 December 2012
Omagh North Nursery School	28 September 2011

School	Date Entered Formal Intervention
Orangefield High School, Belfast	10 May 2011
Springhill Primary School, Belfast	23 March 2011
St Gemma's High School, Belfast	13 April 2011
St Patrick's Primary School, Aughagallon	26 October 2010
Tullygally Primary School, Lurgan	23 March 2011

School Intervention Programme

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education which schools have exited the School Intervention Programme in the last three years.

(AQW 18641/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Fourteen schools have exited the Formal Intervention Process (FIP) in the last three years. This includes Dundonald High School which exited the FIP in September 2010 but re-entered in December 2012. In addition, two schools that were in the FIP, closed in this period – Beechfield Primary School, Belfast closed at 30 September 2010 and Dunmurry High School closed at 31 August 2012.

The tables below list the schools that have exited the FIP in each of the past three years.

Schools Exiting FIP in 2010

School	Date Exited FIP
Bunscoil Mhic Reachtain, Belfast	10 September 2010
Dundonald High School ¹	10 September 2010

¹ Dundonald High School re-entered FIP on 17 December 2012.

Schools Exiting FIP in 2011

School	Date Exited FIP
Bunscoil an Traonaigh, Lisnaskea	6 June 2011
Bunscoil Bheanna Boirche, Castlewellan	15 March 2011
Bushmills Primary School	4 April 2011
Cliftonville Controlled Integrated Primary School	11 May 2011
Gaelscoil an Lonnain, Belfast	15 March 2011
Gaelscoil na gCrann, Omagh	1 March 2011
Gaelscoil na Móna, Belfast	17 October 2011
St Bernard's Primary School, Newtownabbey	27 July 2011
St Bronagh's Primary School, Rostrevor	21 September 2011

Schools Exiting FIP in 2012

Ballygolan Primary School, Belfast	17 April 2012
Bunscoil an Iúir, Newry	26 June 2012
Gaelscoil na Daróige, Derry	7 March 2012

School Bus: Holywood to Crawfordsburn

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education what his Department can do to help pupils affected by the withdrawal of the school bus from Holywood to Crawfordsburn Primary School.

(AQW 18677/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: This was a privately arranged bus by the school and was not part of the Department's Home to School Transport scheme. Parents of any pupil in attendance at Crawfordsburn Primary School, and affected by the withdrawal of the school's bus, should contact the South Eastern Education and Library Board. The Board will assess each such pupil to determine whether they are eligible for assistance with transport under the current Home to School Transport policy.

Under the policy, an affected pupil will be eligible for assistance if they live more than two miles from Crawfordsburn PS and there is no other controlled primary school within two miles of their home. Where there is one or more controlled primary

school within two miles of an affected pupil's home, then parents of such pupils must demonstrate that they had applied to those schools (at the time when they applied to Crawfordsburn PS) and were refused a place in each, before the Board will provide assistance.

Examinations

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of (i) GCSEs; and (ii) A-Levels taken in each of the last five years, broken down by subject.

(AQW 18681/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The answer is contained in the tables below.

(i) GCSE Examination Entries, 2006/07 – 2010/11

	GCSE Entries				
	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Accounting/Finance	87	150	179	117	0
Additional Mathematics	3121	3124	3233	3220	3245
Arabic	4	1	10	9	3
Art and Design	5619	5449	5208	5219	5064
Art and Design (Photography)	1	4	3	7	13
Art and Design (Textiles)	10	0	0	0	17
Art and Design: 3D	1	0	0	0	0
Art and Design: Fine Art	33	49	10	10	7
Bengali	0	0	1	0	1
Biology	2053	3629	4071	4132	4133
Business Studies	4572	4623	4107	3852	3295
Chemistry	1965	2792	2945	2822	2975
Chinese	37	44	64	20	26
Classical Civilisation	77	136	95	90	76
Classical Greek	6	5	14	4	13
D&T Electronic Products	50	38	42	59	114
D&T Graphic Products	135	190	163	175	132
D&T Product Design	0	15	59	51	27
D&T Resistant Materials	369	441	583	738	1018
D&T Systems & Control	274	297	260	173	133
D&T Textiles Technology	14	6	9	13	8
Dance	15	56	14	12	0
Design & Technology	4707	4885	4463	4369	3745
Drama & Theatre Studies	1756	1818	1761	1827	1733
Dutch	0	1	1	0	3
Economics	280	333	283	278	254
English Language	24632	24849	24115	24224	24299
English Literature	11467	11400	10926	11173	11308
Film Studies	0	0	0	1	2
French	10588	9141	7716	7194	6603
Geography	8468	7697	7181	6864	6816
German	1222	1271	1229	1265	1059

	GCSE Entries				
	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
History	8437	8006	7664	7822	7782
Home Economics	4302	4302	4197	4118	2837
Home Economics: Child Development	881	783	689	694	2301
Home Economics: Food	202	197	158	242	186
Human Biology	0	0	1	0	0
Information and Communication Technology	6351	7140	7385	7562	7952
Irish (includes Gaeilge)	2482	2181	1838	1813	1787
Italian	80	47	54	51	33
Japanese	0	0	0	0	2
Latin	119	154	138	122	92
Law	7	5	1	0	15
Mathematics	25395	26037	25326	25880	25924
Media/Film/TV Studies	871	852	831	895	1180
Modern Greek	0	0	2	0	0
Motor Vehicle Studies	919	1186	1187	1071	
Music	1774	1803	1817	1876	1778
Office Technology	2722	2668	2401	2201	1607
Persian	1	0	1	0	1
Physics	1966	2556	2849	2885	2934
Polish	29	81	95	80	101
Portuguese	27	20	24	13	17
Psychology	0	3	1	0	3
Religious Studies	12491	12473	11995	12100	12590
Russian	22	14	14	18	34
Science (Core)	0	0	0	3993	8678
Science Double Award	12625	8424	7520	7407	7559
Science Single Award	9901	10725	9437	5062	0
Science: Additional	0	1979	1974	1894	1869
Science: Astronomy	8	0	22	22	27
Science: Electronics	0	0	0	12	3
Science: Environmental	0	0	0	18	33
Science: Geology	14	7	0	0	16
Sociology	109	185	140	134	95
Spanish	3119	3319	3118	3197	3382
Sport/P.E. Studies	3940	4047	4131	4082	3769
Statistics	272	213	210	276	284
Turkish	0	0	1	0	0
Urdu	1	0	1	4	2

Source: RM data solutions

(ii) A-Level Examination Entries, 2006/07- 2010/11

	A Level Entries				
	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Accounting/Finance	115	110	150	157	126
Ancient History	22	16	10	13	13
Archaeology	0	0	0	0	2
Art & Design	1033	1038	1045	1114	1078
Art & Design (Photography)	14	14	9	23	25
Art and Design: Graphics	0	0	1	0	0
Art & Design (Critical & Contextual)	59	73	70	1	0
Art & Design (Fine Art)	11	12	5	7	0
Bengali	0	0	0	0	1
Biology	3097	3157	3197	3132	3334
Business Studies	1273	1186	1228	1249	1249
Chemistry	1762	1823	1775	1831	1768
Chinese	16	30	37	26	30
Classical Civilisation	125	92	96	82	76
Classical Greek	1	0	0	1	3
Computer Studies/Computing	182	119	93	69	70
Critical Thinking	1	2	0	1	0
Dance	11	10	2	8	6
Design & Technology: Systems	29	30	45	385	416
Design & Technology: Product Design	313	345	388	501	504
Design & Technology: Textiles Technology	0	0	0	0	2
Design and Technology	379	345	366	3	0
Drama & Theatre Studies	489	496	585	548	547
Dutch	0	0	0	1	0
Economics	420	420	441	370	371
English	72	92	70	57	52
English Language	22	38	37	64	72
English Literature	2448	2359	2337	2249	2302
Film Studies	6	5	7	14	15
French	662	694	657	707	562
Geography	2049	1859	1980	1766	1819
German	145	159	137	153	113
Government & Politics	1011	978	1018	931	1053
History	2299	2312	2311	2186	2176
History of Art	0	0	0	38	45
Home Economics	571	510	558	597	536
Human Biology	1	0	0	0	0

	A Level Entries				
	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Information and Communication Technology	1131	1001	1101	1368	1476
Irish	254	238	328	334	319
Italian	7	0	2	0	1
Latin	26	26	16	20	19
Law	2	3	3	13	16
Logic / Philosophy	0	0	0	1	0
Mathematics	2462	2501	2704	2933	3062
Mathematics (Pure)	0	1	0	1	0
Maths (Further)	136	153	150	128	175
Maths (Statistics)	7	7	8		6
Media/Film/TV Studies	617	696	850	926	998
Music	483	427	465	485	482
Music Technology	0	0	0	6	12
Physics	1257	1241	1324	1470	1416
Polish	0	3	4	12	21
Portuguese	1	0	1	1	3
Psychology	262	249	307	427	436
Religious Studies	2085	1972	2087	2121	2289
Russian	4	4	9	2	6
Science: Electronics	0	0	0	0	5
Science: Environmental	0	0	1	6	2
Science in Society	0	0	0	9	0
Science: Geology	55	36	46	42	46
Social Science: Citizenship	0	0	0	4	32
Sociology	714	745	787	839	808
Spanish	458	415	407	443	461
Sport/P.E. Studies	701	651	753	822	883
Turkish	0	0	0	0	1
Urdu	1	0	0	0	0

Source: RM data solutions

Attendance Policy

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education whether he plans to make it a legal requirement for schools to have an attendance policy.

(AQW 18725/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education (School Development Plans) Regulations (NI) 2010 states that schools should provide strategies for promoting attendance in the School Development Plan.

My Department is currently working with representatives from schools and Education Welfare Service to devise guidance on attendance management policies. This guidance will be distributed to schools for inclusion in School Development Plans for the 2013/14 academic year.

Department for Employment and Learning

Higher Education Institutions: Budgets

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning why £1.4m arising from the easement in the budgets for Higher Education institutions is being surrendered to the Department of Finance and Personnel.

(AQW 18108/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): The reclassification of Stranmillis University College as a non-departmental public body meant that the Department had to secure budget cover for its planned expenditure, including its forecast in year depreciation for the financial year 2012-13.

The forecast depreciation provided by Stranmillis at the beginning of the year was revised downwards and the college declared an easement on the depreciation budget of £1.4m. This led to the surrender to DFP of the £1.4m as a reduced requirement in the recent monitoring round.

As depreciation is a ring-fenced budget the easement cannot be utilised elsewhere and there was no alternative to surrendering it to the Department of Finance and Personnel as a reduced requirement.

Depreciation is also non cash in nature and therefore the budget cannot be reallocated to cash spending programmes. This reduced requirement does not represent a loss in spending power to the Department.

The Department issued a briefing paper to the Employment & Learning Committee on 4 January 2013 outlining the detail of the second stage of January monitoring.

Third-Level Institutions: Student Places

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide details of the mechanism used to allocate student places to third level institutions, including relevant statutory instruments and budgetary transfer processes.

(AQW 18297/11-15)

Dr Farry: The number of full-time undergraduate places at each university in Northern Ireland is subject to a cap as a means of controlling the cost to government of student support. The cap was introduced in 1994 and is known as the Maximum Student Number (MaSN). Each university's MaSN allocation was initially set in 1994-95 and this has been rolled forward each succeeding year. My department keeps the MaSN under review and it is adjusted as when necessary in light of the resources available for higher education. This can result in increases to the MaSN as was the case with the additional 500 places announced under the Jobs and Economy Initiative. Additional numbers in recent years have been allocated to the universities on a pro rata basis but as you are aware, 50 of the additional 500 places were top-sliced and allocated to the University of Ulster in recognition of the Executive's commitment to the regeneration of Derry.

Such increases are normally made conditional on additional student places being made available in Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and economically relevant subject areas.

The MaSN total for each university includes places for medical, dental and social work and the total of these places is determined by the Department of Health, Social Services & Public Safety (DHSSPS). Likewise the number of places for Initial Teacher Education in the universities and university colleges, is determined by the Department of Education (DE).

In relation to the further education colleges, my department carries out regular reviews of the MaSN allocations to coincide with the College Development Plan (CDP) cycle. The purpose of these reviews is to ensure that the MaSN allocations represent an equitable and rational distribution of full-time higher education places in order to secure maximum recruitment and uptake of places and that the allocations reflect available evidence of existing demand and potential future demand across Northern Ireland. A number of metrics are used to calculate the Higher Education in Further Education MaSN allocation for each of the six colleges as follows:

- Actual performance over the last six years. The department considers each college's Higher Education in Further Education enrolments, both full-time and part-time, in order to assess the overall historical demand for higher education in each college region;
- Estimated future demand. The department considers the total potential demand for Higher Education in Further Education as measured by the 18-50 year old population in each of the regional college areas; and,
- There is a 75% weighting for historical demand and a 25% weighting for potential future demand. An additional weighting is also applied to reflect the distance from the college to the nearest permanent University campus.

Where the number of places in a university or further education college is changed by either my department or the DHSSPS or DE, the institutions' MaSN allocations are adjusted accordingly. Funding in relation to any adjustment is dealt with through the normal budgetary processes which exist in all Northern Ireland departments.

There are no statutory instruments which cover the allocation of student places to third level institutions. Funding provided to these institutions is done so under The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 and as subsequently amended.

Kilcooley Estate, Bangor: Women's Centre

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action his Department will take to help find funding opportunities for the Kilcooley Women's Education Centre, Bangor.

(AQW 18323/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department does not have any statutory basis or remit to core fund voluntary or community organisations to deliver training or education, nor is it resourced to assist voluntary and community organisations to find funding. My Department is therefore unable to help find funding opportunities for the Kilcooley Women's Education Centre.

However, in a recent competition under the Collaboration and Innovation Fund to address issues associated with those not in education, employment or training, the Training Women's Network was successful in securing £770,067 for a project to help 440 young women in this category; Kilcooley Women's Education Centre is one of eight community centres collaborating to deliver this project.

NEETs: West Tyrone

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of young people from the West Tyrone constituency who are not in education, employment or training; and to outline the efforts of his Department to address this situation.

(AQW 18340/11-15)

Dr Farry: Estimates of young people not in employment, education or training are provided through the Labour Force Survey (LFS). However, the LFS sample size and design does not allow for the production of sufficiently reliable estimates of this type at a constituency level. During the period July – September 2012, the LFS estimated that there were 50,000 (22.6%) 16-24 year olds in Northern Ireland who were not in employment, Government supported training or full-time education.

My Department funds a very significant range of programmes and initiatives to support young people from West Tyrone and across Northern Ireland who are not in education, employment or training. I recently secured Executive endorsement of 'Pathways to Success', the cross-departmental NEET strategy for Northern Ireland. I have also secured substantial additional funding of £5.8m for the current financial year, £15.6 million in 2013/14 and £19.6 million in 2014/15, to implement the strategy and the 'Youth Employment Scheme'.

'Pathways to Success' Strategy

My Department is now implementing several new initiatives under the 'Pathways to Success' strategy, to tackle youth unemployment. A Community Family Support Programme (CFSP) pilot commenced in January 2013 to meet the needs of 44 disadvantaged families in Cookstown, Belfast (East and West), Strabane and Newtownabbey.

I recently introduced a training allowance for young people participating in projects funded by the European Social Fund. This allowance ensures that there are effective incentives for young people to participate in programmes that provide the necessary skills and qualifications to secure employment.

In December 2012 I announced a £9 million package under the Collaboration and Innovation Fund (CIF) that will fund 18 projects across Northern Ireland and immediately deliver specialised support to 5,000 disadvantaged young people. One of the delivery partners, South Western College, has been awarded £546,000 to provide training for 300 young people in West Tyrone who are NEET.

Youth Employment Scheme

The Department's Youth Employment Scheme provides support to unemployed 18-24 year old through the following measures:

- Initially 1,000 short 2 to 8 week work experience placements, rising to 3,000 placements annually by March 2015, designed to ensure early engagement with the labour market; this will cost £200,000 in 2012/13 rising to £400,000 and £600,000 respectively in 2013/14 and 2014/15.
- 800 employer subsidies of £5,750 a year in sectors which have the potential to help rebuild and rebalance the economy; (rising to 1,200 by 2014/15), to facilitate and enable further skills development; this will cost £2.3 million in 2012/13 rising to £5.75 million in 2013/14 and £6.9 million in 2014/15.
- 400 training places coupled with additional sector based work experience of between 6 and 9 months (rising to 1,800 by 2014/15) in sectors which have the potential to help rebuild and rebalance the economy. While in training young people will receive a training allowance of £100 a week. This will cost £1.1 million in 2012/13 rising to £5.3 million in 2013/14 and £6.4 million in 2014/15.
- There will also be an investment of £400,000 this year in direct employer engagement rising to £1.1 million in 2014/15. This will provide for marketing and the development of a dedicated cadre of staff to effectively manage employer engagement and participation in the various strands of the initiative.
- As part of the Youth Employment Scheme, the Careers Service offers a personalised skills assessment to young people aged 18-24 years usually within the first three months of claiming benefit. The aim being to maximise the benefits of the work experience placements or skills development opportunities offered as part of the scheme.

- Additionally, Employment Service clients who are 18 plus will either be in work, in training or will be required to be actively seeking work if they are claiming JSA.

Training Programmes

The Training for Success programme provides a guarantee of a training place on its Training for Success (TfS) programme for all unemployed young people in the 16 to 17 age groups, with extended eligibility for those with a disability up to age 22 and up to age 24 for those from an in-care background.

The programme is delivered through contracted training suppliers including a number who operate in the West Tyrone constituency.

Programme-Led Apprenticeships were introduced in September 2009 under TfS, to assist young people who have been unable to find employment as apprentices, during the economic downturn.

Further Education

In common with all other Further Education Colleges, South Western College provides access to a wide range of pastoral care initiatives for their students, including those in the NEET category. These services are supplemented by local, college-specific measures involving local health trusts and other partner organisations.

These processes are designed to ensure that young people enrol in, and are encouraged and supported to remain in appropriate and relevant programmes of learning.

ESF Funding for NEET Projects

European Social Fund (ESF) Project Promoters, including those operating in West Tyrone, have been awarded an increase in existing funding from the current value of 75% of original costs to the full 100%. The funding increase will commence from the 1 January 2013 and will continue for 2013/14 and 2014/15.

Local Employment Intermediary Service

In addition, young people from West Tyrone with employability barriers will also have access to a range of help and support to address unemployment and other issues through the Local Employment Intermediary Service (LEMIS).

I hope you find this information helpful.

Higher and Further Education: Young People in Care

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) any additional assistance and support his Department provides to young people who have been, or are, in care to help them to gain access to higher and further education; and (ii) what additional support is being given to those who are enrolled to remain engaged.

(AQW 18392/11-15)

Dr Farry:

Further Education

My Department has supported two further education colleges, Belfast Metropolitan College and North West Regional College, to attain the Buttle UK (FE) Quality Mark for Care Leavers, in April 2011.

The Quality Mark provides a set of standards and guidelines to ensure appropriate action is taken to raise aspirations of care leavers in relation to accessing further education provision. This is achieved through:

- outreach activities in local communities;
- developing effective links with key organisations;
- adapting application arrangements to ensure that the additional needs of care leavers are met; and
- providing the necessary support to secure recruitment and retention in further education.

The four remaining further education colleges have made a commitment to attain the Buttle Quality Mark.

My Department also provides assistance for students who are experiencing exceptional financial difficulty with meeting costs associated with learning, through its hardship funds, which are administered by the colleges. This can provide individual students with up to a maximum amount of £3,500 per annum to assist with fees, books and equipment, travel costs and associated living costs.

Higher Education

In academic year 2012-13, my Department is providing widening participation premium funding of almost £1.3m to Higher Education Institutions in Northern Ireland to assist with the additional costs of recruiting students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including students from a care background, and to encourage the retention of such students through the provision of on-course support structures, such as mentoring and tutoring.

Students from a care background will be eligible to apply for the same tuition fee loan and maintenance loan support to which all Northern Ireland students who are studying a full-time higher education course in the United Kingdom are eligible. They may also be eligible to apply for a means-tested maintenance grant and supplementary grants, depending upon their circumstances.

My Department is leading on the implementation of Access to Success, the regional strategy for widening participation in higher education. Care leavers have been identified as being under-represented in higher education, and, as such, the strategy will aim to identify these students, and target available resources to support their recruitment and retention in higher education.

Children in Care: Further and Higher Education

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the total number of children, who have experience of care homes, that have been offered places at (i) Queen's University Belfast; (ii) University of Ulster; and (iii) Further Education Colleges, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 18394/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department does not currently have the structures in place to collect data on the number of 'cared for' children applying to or enrolling on higher education courses at universities and further education colleges. However, my officials have contacted the institutions who have provided the following information.

Queen's University Belfast

Academic Year	Offers
2009/10	5
2010/11	14
2011/12	5
2012/13	8

No information is available for 2008/09. Offers to Nursing and Midwifery courses at Queen's University, by students from a care background, are not included in the above table as these courses are outside the UCAS admissions system and data is not held. However, from academic year 2013/14 students applying to these courses will be managed through the UCAS system and information relating to applications by individuals from a care background will be recorded.

University of Ulster

Academic Year	Offers	Enrolments
2009/10	35	12 full-time undergraduate 2 part-time undergraduate 1 postgraduate
2010/11	36	17 full-time undergraduate 1 postgraduate
2011/12	26	13 full-time undergraduate 1 postgraduate 1 Phd
2012/13	43	10 full-time undergraduate 2 postgraduate

In 2008 the University of Ulster had 16 students enrolled who had experience of care homes.

Further Education Regional Colleges

The six further education colleges do not hold this information, going back over the last five years. North West Regional College, which recently participated in the Buttle UK pilot programme, has developed and introduced systems for recording and tracking those with a care background. The college has advised that during the 2011/12 academic year 48 students with a care background, 4 of whom undertook higher education provision within the college, were enrolled. In academic year 2012/13 the College has 6 enrolments from a care background all of these are on Further Education courses.

The remaining five colleges have advised that data collection systems to capture information regarding those with a care background enrolling in further education are currently being developed.

"Access to Success" my Department's regional strategy for widening participation in higher education has identified care leavers as an under-represented group in higher education. The strategy aims to develop mechanisms to gather

comprehensive and reliable data pertaining to access to, and participation in, higher education in order to better identify individuals from a disadvantaged background, including care leavers, and to improve the targeting of available resources to support those with greatest need.

Buttle UK Quality Mark

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail which Higher Education Institutes and Further Education Colleges in have been awarded the Buttle UK Quality Mark in the last five years.

(AQW 18398/11-15)

Dr Farry: The University of Ulster was awarded the Buttle UK (HE) Quality Mark for Care Leavers in 2009. Queen's University Belfast and the two University Colleges have not at this stage formally applied for HE Quality Mark accreditation although both Queen's University and Stranmillis College have indicated that they now meet the standards expected of the Quality Mark.

My Department contributed towards the development costs of a UK (FE) Quality Framework and two Regional Colleges, Belfast Metropolitan College and North West Regional College, attained this Quality Mark in April 2011. The remaining four colleges have made a commitment to attaining the Quality Mark.

During the development of my Department's regional strategy for widening participation in higher education Access to Success care leavers were identified as being under-represented in higher education and they are a target group for interventions in the strategy. In that context I would encourage all Northern Ireland higher education providers to gain and maintain Quality Mark for Care Leavers accreditation.

Disabled Staff

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the legislation that employers are obliged to comply with in relation to staff who become disabled and to clarify whether they are expected to take all reasonable steps to accommodate disabled staff.

(AQW 18446/11-15)

Dr Farry: The legislation in place to protect people with disabilities from discrimination in seeking employment and disabled employees in the workplace is the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2004. This legislation is the responsibility of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM).

The provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2004, place a legal responsibility on Employers to ensure that discrimination and/or harassment of employees with a disability does not occur in the workplace. The Act also places a duty on the Employer to make reasonable adjustments in order to accommodate staff with a known disability. Details of what is deemed to be reasonable are included in the relevant sections of the legislation.

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland is the principal source for advice relating to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2004 and the right of reasonable adjustment therein.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQW 18277/11-15, to detail the breakdown between school and Further Education Colleges for 2011/2012.

(AQW 18527/11-15)

Dr Farry: The table below details the total number of students who received Education Maintenance Allowance in academic year 2011/12 broken down by Learning Centre type.

Learning Centre type	No. of EMA recipients
Further Education College	9,580
Grammar School	6,890
Independent School	20
Secondary School	8,350
Special School	330
Total	25,170

Young Adults with Learning Disabilities

Ms McGahan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what percentage of his departmental budget is spent on young adults with (i) learning disabilities; and (ii) severe learning disabilities in the Southern and Western Education and Library Board areas.

(AQW 18587/11-15)

Dr Farry: Information on relevant spend broken down to the degree set out in this question is not readily available. To extract this information would require individual business areas to review their records in exceptional detail, which would result in disproportionate costs. For information, however, I have set out below a range of provision in place for disabled adults; this has been disaggregated as far as reasonably possible.

My Department funds further education colleges to deliver courses and provide support and assistance to students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The colleges have no tightly defined geographical areas but, broadly, Southern Regional College, North West Regional College and South West College most closely cover the Southern and Western Library Boards areas.

In the 2011/12 academic year, the three colleges delivered provision worth £3.6m for students aged between 16 and 25 with learning difficulties and disabilities. This represents 5.5% of these colleges' total recurrent grant, 2.5% of the FE sector's overall recurrent grant, and 2.08% of the overall FE budget, which funds a number of programmes and initiatives outside of the recurrent grant.

In addition, my Department provides ring-fenced financial support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities of £3.5m per annum through its Additional Support Fund (ASF). In the 2011/12 academic year, a total of £1.652m was provided for these three colleges, being 47.2% of the total ASF budget. As ASF funding is for students of all ages, this figure cannot be disaggregated into age groups.

It is not possible to identify Further Education learners with disabilities as categorised in the question.

"Access to Success", my Department's regional strategy for widening participation in higher education, has identified that students with disabilities and learning difficulties face significant additional difficulties in accessing higher education. The strategy aims better to identify individuals from a disadvantaged background, including students with learning disabilities, and to improve the targeting of available resources to support those with greatest need.

My Department already pays a widening access premium to the universities and university colleges for students with learning difficulties and disabilities. In academic year 2011/12, this amounted to £249,462. The premium is intended to provide specialist equipment and/or specific support for these students, and it is allocated based on the number of full-time undergraduate students in each institution in receipt of Disabled Students Allowance. The allowance itself attracted £3.013m during 2011/12, which was paid to students of all ages.

My Department guarantees a training place on its Training for Success programme for all unemployed young people in the 16 to 17 age groups, with extended eligibility for those with a disability up to age 22. Specialist providers have been engaged to work in conjunction with Training Suppliers to ensure that specialist support is provided, where needed, to participants in this and the ApprenticeshipsNI programme. For the financial year 2011/12, the Department provided £490,809 for this specialist support.

An additional premium of £30 is paid to the training supplier on top of the weekly training fee under the Training for Success programme for the duration of training. Equally, a disability supplement of up to £1,560 is payable under ApprenticeshipsNI to allow Training Suppliers to provide additional support such as specialist equipment. These payments are contained within the overall funding offer; it is not possible to isolate the expenditure.

In 2011/12, under the auspices of 'Access to Work', £117k was spent on people with a Learning Disability. In relation to 'Workable', the figure was £1,166k.

In 2011/12, my Department provided 25% contribution funding of up to £2.4m towards 20 European Social Fund projects that specifically target participants with disabilities.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Down Business Park

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to list the companies who own or rent premises in Down Business Park.

(AQW 18101/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Invest NI, in line with its intervention criteria, provides property to qualifying businesses across Northern Ireland in support of approved economic development projects.

The table below details those companies that have purchased property within Down Business Park directly from Invest NI. You will note that there is only one property within the Park owned by the Agency that attracts a rent; this factory is currently occupied under licence.

Invest NI does not maintain records of any onward property transactions that may have taken place since the completion of the original sale.

You will note that amongst the transactions listed in the table is a property sale to Jobspace (NI) Limited in May 2000. This site was subsequently developed as Down Business Centre. Invest NI does not hold records of businesses that are located within the Centre.

EU-Canada Free Trade Agreement

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what preparations are in place to ensure that this region will benefit from the pending EU and Canadian Free Trade agreement.

(AQW 18131/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Canada is a developed and sophisticated market providing many opportunities across most sectors. In September 2011, Invest NI appointed an in-market advisor to help Northern Ireland companies maximise the trade and investment opportunities that exist in Canada. More recently, Invest NI has developed an initiative known as GoCanada which is a dedicated export development programme designed to help Northern Ireland companies win business there. Twelve companies are currently on the first phase of the programme and are scheduled to visit Canada as part of a multi-sector trade mission in March this year.

Job Creation

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 13912/11-15 and in relation to the support offered to the 1,841 businesses between 1 January and 31 August 2012, how many jobs have been created.

(AQW 18325/11-15)

Mrs Foster: It is not possible to provide detailed information on the number of jobs created since Invest Northern Ireland reports on the number of jobs promoted through assisted projects. This is in line with its Corporate Plan and Programme for Government targets.

The 1,841 businesses offered support included 651 employment-related projects which plan to create 3,519 jobs. Since these projects will take some time to fully implement, the jobs associated with them may take up to five years to be fully realised.

Invest NI is currently reviewing options to enable it to report actual job creation in the future. However, this will take some time to implement and for the information to become meaningful, since assisted projects can take up to five years to reach their maximum level of job creation.

Businesses: Financial Support

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many businesses received financial support from her Department, or its arm's-length bodies, between 1 September 2012 and 31 December 2012.

(AQW 18326/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Provisional results show that between 1st September and 31st December 2012, Invest NI approved offers of financial support to 1,159 businesses.

In addition, during this period Invest NI engaged with more than 1,071 individuals who were interested in starting their own business, 227 of which completed business plans.

In the period 1st September 2012 to 31st December 2012 the North South Body InterTradeIreland had 199 companies on their programmes receiving financial support.

Wi-Fi Scheme

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, to detail the cities and town centres that have a free wi-fi scheme.

(AQW 18369/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Information on the availability of free Wi-Fi services is not collected or held by the Department.

A number of Wi-Fi directories are published on the internet that list paid and free hotspots, including:

- www.broadbandni.com/wireless.php
- www.btwifi.com
- www.fon.com
- www.thecloud.net
- www.hotspot-locations.com
- www.myhotspots.co.uk

Narrow Water Bridge Project

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what representations she has made to (i) the Executive (ii) the Minister of Finance and Personnel; and (ii) the Minister for Regional Development, in support of the Narrow Water Bridge tourism project.

(AQW 18407/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I have not made representations to any of the aforementioned, in respect of the Narrow Water Bridge project.

Broadband Improvement Project

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the number of homes that do not have fixed wire broadband; and (ii) how many homes are to be brought on stream as part of the Northern Ireland Broadband Improvement Project.

(AQW 18412/11-15)

Mrs Foster: DETI does not hold the details of homes that do not have a fixed wired broadband connection.

According to the most recent survey of households undertaken by NISRA, the percentage of households that choose not to avail of an internet connection is 29%. Many of these could, if they wished, be connected with a fixed wired broadband.

Analysis of Northern Ireland's telecoms infrastructure indicates that there are approximately 95,000 premises where the choice of broadband provision is limited and/or the available speeds are less than 2 Mbps.

As part of the Northern Ireland Broadband Improvement Project and in parallel with UK Government targets, it is my Department's objective to provide virtually all Northern Ireland premises access to a broadband service of at least 2 Megabits per second (Mbps) by 2015 and to provide superfast broadband to at least 90% of premises with speeds in excess of 24 Mbps. At present I am unable to comment on how many homes may be brought on stream as this is dependent on responses to the tender brought forward under the project.

Tamboran

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 18021/11-15, to detail (i) whether anyone outside her Department will receive notification of an application by Tamboran for permission to drill a 1000 metre borehole; (ii) who her Department will consult prior to issuing permission to drill; (iii) how her Department intends to ensure that this process will be made transparent; (iv) whether she will inform Members when Tamboran submits its application to drill; and (v) whether she will make details of its proposal available to the public.

(AQW 18437/11-15)

Mrs Foster:

- (i) The company is obliged to notify Planning Service and the Health and Safety Executive.
- (ii) This will depend on the nature and locality of any proposed drilling operations. Any permission given by my Department to drill will be subject to the company having the appropriate consents from Planning Service and Health and Safety Executive.
- (iii) The process followed by my Department is transparent and well established. On receipt of an application, my Department will carry out a Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) which will include consultation and also a technical assessment of the application. Details of the HRA process are available on the Department of the Environment website at:
http://www.doeni.gov.uk/wonderfulni/protected_areas_home/natura_2000/hra_advice.htm
- (iv) I would intend to inform members of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee of any major developments in relation to the Tamboran licence.
- (v) This will depend on the details of the proposal and whether they are deemed commercially sensitive.

Broadband Access: Second Generation

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what percentage of households in each council area have second generation broadband available to them.

(AQW 18693/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The information requested is not held by my Department.

I understand, however, that the mapping associated with the recent OFCOM Infrastructure Report 2012 Update contains the information required.

The report is accessible at the following link: <http://maps.ofcom.org.uk/broadband/broadband-data/>

Broadband Access: Fibre Broadband

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what percentage of households in each council area have fibre broadband available to them.

(AQW 18694/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The information requested is not held by my Department.

I understand, however, that the mapping associated with the recent OFCOM Infrastructure Report 2012 Update contains the information required.

The report is accessible at the following link: <http://maps.ofcom.org.uk/broadband/broadband-data/>

Department of Finance and Personnel

Civil Service Sports Association

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the support his Department has provided the Northern Ireland Civil Service Sports Association in each of the last ten years.

(AQW 18164/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): My Department provided the following support to the NICSSA for the maintenance of the Maynard Sinclair Building.

Year	Maintenance	Capital Grant	Total
02-03	Not available	£150,000	£150,000
03-04	Not available	Not available	Not available
04-05	£21,820*	£150,000	£171,820
05-06	£31,820*	£130,000	£161,820
06-07	£19,652	£131,000	£150,652
07-08	£31,584	£131,000	£162,584
08-09	£52,814	£131,000	£183,814
09-10	£114,109	£131,000	£245,109
10-11	£30,009	£96,000	£126,009
11-12	£27,350	£25,000	£52,350

* As per Planned Preventative Maintenance schedule

My Department through IT Assist has also been providing IT infrastructure services to the Northern Ireland Civil Service Sports Association (NICSSA) since October 2008. These services include access devices, application hosting, and voice and data network services. These services are provided to NICSSA on a full cost recovery basis.

Gross Value Added

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the proportion of UK Gross Value Added received each year from 2005 to 2010.

(AQW 18169/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The table below shows the Northern Ireland Gross Value Added (GVA) at basic prices for 2005 to 2010 together with the corresponding UK figure as well as the NI total as a proportion of the total UK figure. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is responsible for producing GVA for the UK and its regions.

Year	Northern Ireland Total GVA (£ million)	United Kingdom Total GVA (£ million)	NI Total as a % of the UK Total
2005	25,263	1,125,300	2.2%
2006	26,835	1,188,500	2.3%
2007	28,310	1,258,925	2.2%
2008	28,607	1,290,945	2.2%
2009	27,969	1,265,010	2.2%
2010	29,155	1,308,962	2.2%

Net Fiscal Balance Report: National Insurance Contributions

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the calculation used by his officials to estimate the amount of National Insurance contributions generated locally, which was published in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11.

(AQW 18175/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I refer the Member to my responses to AQW 18239/11-15 and AQW 18240/11-15 respectively.

Net Fiscal Balance Report: VAT

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the calculation used by his officials to estimate the amount of VAT generated locally, which was published in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11.

(AQW 18176/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I refer the Member to my responses to AQW 18239/11-15 and AQW 18240/11-15 respectively.

Gross Value Added

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the proportion of UK Gross Value Added received each year from 2005 to 2010.

(AQW 18210/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The table below shows the Northern Ireland Gross Value Added (GVA) at basic prices for 2005 to 2010 together with the corresponding UK figure as well as the NI total as a proportion of the total UK figure. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is responsible for producing GVA for the UK and its regions.

Year	Northern Ireland Total GVA (£ million)	United Kingdom Total GVA (£ million)	NI Total as a % of the UK Total
2005	25,263	1,125,300	2.2%
2006	26,835	1,188,500	2.3%
2007	28,310	1,258,925	2.2%
2008	28,607	1,290,945	2.2%
2009	27,969	1,265,010	2.2%
2010	29,155	1,308,962	2.2%

Northern Ireland Audit Office: Independence

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps he intends to take to ensure that the Northern Ireland Audit Office remains independent of Government and is adequately resourced to complete its statutory duties in relation to the financial governance of public expenditure and the delivery of Government services.

(AQW 18275/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Member will be aware that I have acknowledged the independence of the Audit Office to carry out its statutory role on many occasions. I consider the Audit Office's role to be well defined by Statute and not requiring any further action by my Department to provide clarity. In relation to the resources allocated to the Audit Office, this is a decision for the Assembly. As Finance Minister I will continue to provide the Assembly with the level of detail and analysis I consider appropriate to support budget discussions. This may include my Department's analysis of the Audit Office's financial performance, in the same manner as it would highlight or report on any other body seeking funding from the public purse.

Birmingham City Council v Abdulla

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, following the Supreme Court ruling in the case of Birmingham City Council v Abdulla and others, what steps his Department has taken to ensure that (i) current; and (ii) former employees are made fully aware of the entitlement to claim for equal pay over a longer period.

(AQW 18308/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Department has not taken any steps to inform individuals of any potential entitlement relating to this matter. An employer does not have a legal obligation to advise current or former employees of their legal rights under equal pay legislation.

Changing Places Facilities

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he has resources available to promote and install Changing Places facilities in public buildings.

(AQW 18354/11-15)

Mr Wilson: There is no central fund available to promote the installation of Changing Places facilities in public buildings. Decisions on installation of such facilities in a given building are a matter for the Department responsible for the building.

Rates Arrears: Businesses

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many businesses in the North Down constituency have rates arrears of over £10,000.

(AQW 18373/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Information on the number of businesses in the North Down constituency that have rates arrears over £10,000 is not available as data is collated at district council and ward level only for non-domestic properties. As at 31st December 2012, rates of over £10,000 remain unpaid for 176 non-domestic properties in the North Down Borough Council Area and 99 non-domestic properties in the Ards Borough Council Area.

Narrow Water Bridge Project

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether the £2 million required from his Department to complete the EU package for the Narrow Water Bridge Project is now assured, given the additional £132 million infrastructural funding indicated by the Chancellor George Osborne in his Autumn statement.

(AQW 18409/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Narrow Water Bridge project has sought funding from the INTERREG IVA Programme and as such must progress through the agreed assessment process. No funding can be assured until the project has received all approvals.

The project has been approved by the Programme steering committee, the first hurdle of the approval process, and in accordance with the selection process is subject to the approval of DFP and the relevant department in the Republic of Ireland.

The DFP role, as accountable department for the Public Sector Collaboration theme, is to critically review the project and the supporting documentation provided and my officials are currently involved in this process.

Any additional infrastructure funding identified by the Chancellor does not have any impact on the decision to fund the Narrow Water Bridge project.

Net Fiscal Balance Report: Climate Change Levy

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the calculation used by his officials to estimate the climate change levy generated in 2010-11, which was published in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11.

(AQW 18416/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Annex B of the Northern Ireland Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11 outlines the approach used to estimate the various sources of revenue generated in Northern Ireland (NI).

As indicated, climate change levy receipts from electricity consumption are apportioned to NI according to its share of UK electricity consumption. UK revenues from the consumption of solids & other fuels are apportioned on the basis of NI's share of UK GVA (less extra regio).

The UK figure for the Aggregates Levy is apportioned to NI according to its share of GVA (less extra regio).

The UK figure for customs duties and levies is apportioned according to its share of UK population aged 16 and over.

NI vehicle excise duty is recorded net of refunds in annual reports published by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing NI.

I must re-emphasise that this report has been developed applying the methodology originally designed to produce the "Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland" (GERS) publication and is not intended to provide an accurate estimate of individual revenue items. The report provides an overall assessment of Northern Ireland's aggregate fiscal position, and as such, the report indicates that individual estimates should be interpreted with caution.

Net Fiscal Balance Report: Aggregates Levy

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the calculation used by his officials to estimate the aggregates levy generated in 2010-11, which was published in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11.

(AQW 18417/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Annex B of the Northern Ireland Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11 outlines the approach used to estimate the various sources of revenue generated in Northern Ireland (NI).

As indicated, climate change levy receipts from electricity consumption are apportioned to NI according to its share of UK electricity consumption. UK revenues from the consumption of solids & other fuels are apportioned on the basis of NI's share of UK GVA (less extra regio).

The UK figure for the Aggregates Levy is apportioned to NI according to its share of GVA (less extra regio).

The UK figure for customs duties and levies is apportioned according to its share of UK population aged 16 and over.

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Net Fiscal Balance Report: Customs Duties and Levies

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the calculation used by his officials to estimate the amount of customs duties and levies generated in 2010-11, which was published in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11.

(AQW 18418/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Annex B of the Northern Ireland Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11 outlines the approach used to estimate the various sources of revenue generated in Northern Ireland (NI).

As indicated, climate change levy receipts from electricity consumption are apportioned to NI according to its share of UK electricity consumption. UK revenues from the consumption of solids & other fuels are apportioned on the basis of NI's share of UK GVA (less extra regio).

The UK figure for the Aggregates Levy is apportioned to NI according to its share of GVA (less extra regio).

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Net Fiscal Balance Report: Vehicle Excise Duty

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the calculation used by his officials to estimate the vehicle excise duty generated in 2010-11, which was published in the Net Fiscal Balance Report: 2009-10 and 2010-11.

(AQW 18419/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Annex B of the Northern Ireland Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11 outlines the approach used to estimate the various sources of revenue generated in Northern Ireland (NI).

As indicated, climate change levy receipts from electricity consumption are apportioned to NI according to its share of UK electricity consumption. UK revenues from the consumption of solids & other fuels are apportioned on the basis of NI's share of UK GVA (less extra regio).

The UK figure for the Aggregates Levy is apportioned to NI according to its share of GVA (less extra regio).

The UK figure for customs duties and levies is apportioned according to its share of UK population aged 16 and over.

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Net Fiscal Balance Report: Climate Change Levy

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the calculation used by his officials to estimate the amount of climate change levy generated in 2010-11, which was published in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11.

(AQW 18540/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Annex B of the Northern Ireland Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11 outlines the approach used to estimate the various sources of revenue generated in Northern Ireland (NI).

As indicated, climate change levy receipts from electricity consumption are apportioned to NI according to its share of UK electricity consumption. UK revenues from the consumption of solids & other fuels are apportioned on the basis of NI's share of UK GVA (less extra regio).

The UK figure for the Aggregates Levy is apportioned to NI according to its share of GVA (less extra regio).

The UK figure for customs duties and levies is apportioned according to its share of UK population aged 16 and over.

NI vehicle excise duty is recorded net of refunds in annual reports published by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing NI.

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of individual revenue items. The report provides an overall assessment of Northern Ireland's aggregate fiscal position, and as such, the report indicates that individual estimates should be interpreted with caution.

Net Fiscal Balance Report: Aggregates Levy

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the calculation used by his officials to estimate the amount of aggregates levy generated in 2010-11, which was published in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11. **(AQW 18541/11-15)**

Mr Wilson: Annex B of the Northern Ireland Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11 outlines the approach used to estimate the various sources of revenue generated in Northern Ireland (NI).

As indicated, climate change levy receipts from electricity consumption are apportioned to NI according to its share of UK electricity consumption. UK revenues from the consumption of solids & other fuels are apportioned on the basis of NI's share of UK GVA (less extra regio).

The UK figure for the Aggregates Levy is apportioned to NI according to its share of GVA (less extra regio).

The UK figure for customs duties and levies is apportioned according to its share of UK population aged 16 and over.

NI vehicle excise duty is recorded net of refunds in annual reports published by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing NI.

I must re-emphasise that this report has been developed applying the methodology originally designed to produce the "Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland" (GERS) publication and is not intended to provide an accurate estimate of individual revenue items. The report provides an overall assessment of Northern Ireland's aggregate fiscal position, and as such, the report indicates that individual estimates should be interpreted with caution.

Net Fiscal Balance Report: Vehicle Excise Duty

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the calculation used by his officials to estimate the amount of vehicle excise duty generated in 2010-11, which was published in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11. **(AQW 18542/11-15)**

Mr Wilson: Annex B of the Northern Ireland Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11 outlines the approach used to estimate the various sources of revenue generated in Northern Ireland (NI).

As indicated, climate change levy receipts from electricity consumption are apportioned to NI according to its share of UK electricity consumption. UK revenues from the consumption of solids & other fuels are apportioned on the basis of NI's share of UK GVA (less extra regio).

The UK figure for the Aggregates Levy is apportioned to NI according to its share of GVA (less extra regio).

The UK figure for customs duties and levies is apportioned according to its share of UK population aged 16 and over.

NI vehicle excise duty is recorded net of refunds in annual reports published by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing NI.

I must re-emphasise that this report has been developed applying the methodology originally designed to produce the "Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland" (GERS) publication and is not intended to provide an accurate estimate of individual revenue items. The report provides an overall assessment of Northern Ireland's aggregate fiscal position, and as such, the report indicates that individual estimates should be interpreted with caution.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Emergency Response Vehicles

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the provision of emergency response vehicles in the South Armagh area. **(AQW 18133/11-15)**

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Ambulance Service

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) strives to ensure that all Category A calls are responded to within target, irrespective of incident location. The NIAS positions deployment points (DP) on the basis of activity, identified by predictive analysis of historical data, so that emergency resources can respond effectively by ensuring that the nearest ambulance resource is assigned to an incident. Therefore an emergency response to the South Armagh area may not necessarily be by a vehicle based in that area. Emergency response for the South Armagh area is provided by resources operating from:

- Armagh
- Banbridge
- Craigavon
- Dungannon
- Kilkeel
- Lurgan (DP)
- Newry
- Ballygawley (DP).

The implementation of an inter-agency ambulance and rapid response vehicle deployment point in Crossmaglen, at the Fire and Rescue Station, is under discussion between local level management and NIAS.

Fire and Rescue Service

The following table shows the current holdings within the area for the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service.

	Pumping Appliances	Special Appliances	Flexi Duty Officers
Newry District	0	0	4 x Rapid Response Vehicles
Newry Station	1 x WRL 1 x Rescue Pump	1 x Ops Support Unit	0
Crossmaglen Station	1 x WRL	0	0
Rathfriland Station	2 x WRL	0	0
Warrenpoint Station	2 x WRL	1 x Water Tanker	0
Newtownhamilton Station	2 x WRL	0	0
Armagh Station	2 x WRL	1 x Prime Mover with High Volume Pump Unit	0
Keady Station	1 x WRL	0	0

WRL – Water Tender Appliance

Rescue Pump – carries additional specialist equipment for RTCs/special service calls

Ops Support Unit – carries specialist firefighting equipment for emergency incidents

Prime Mover – hook lift truck

Kilcooley Estate, Bangor: Residents' Health

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust and the Public Health Agency have spent over the last twelve months on improving the health of residents in the Kilcooley Estate, Bangor.

(AQW 18167/11-15)

Mr Poots: Over the past year the Public Health Agency has been developing close working relationships with the Kilcooley Community. Funding investment includes:

- In 2011-2012, the PHA provided a total of £51,180 toward the development of the Kilcooley Allotments project.
- £15,000 in 2012/13 to fund a horticultural assistant to develop the community allotments project.
- £35,000 in 2012/13 to fund a new Community Health Development Worker post for an initial period of three years with a key role in developing capacity and local services for children and families, as well as addressing the health and social wellbeing needs of the surrounding community.

Other resource support includes the allocation of a senior officer to work directly with the Kilcooley Forum and local partners to provide strategic support and facilitate inter-sectoral working within the community focussing on specific health and social wellbeing needs of Kilcooley residents.

Aligned to this the PHA provides funding of £6,400 (estimated staff costs) to the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, through its Specialist Health Development Team, to deliver a wide range of health and social wellbeing improvement programmes across the North Down area which are accessible to Kilcooley residents.

Health and Social Care Trusts: Invoices

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for the period 1 April 2012 to 31 December 2012, (i) the total number of invoices paid; and (ii) the number of invoices paid within ten working days of receipt, by each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 18185/11-15)

Mr Poots: The number of invoices paid by each Health and Social Care Trust for the period 1 April 2012 to 31 December 2012 and the number paid within ten working days of receipt are contained in the table below.

Trust's 10 day Prompt Payment Performance for period 1 April 2012 to 31 December 2012

Trust	Number of invoices paid	Number of invoices paid within ten working days of receipt
Northern	106,273	48,288

Trust	Number of invoices paid	Number of invoices paid within ten working days of receipt
Belfast	266,578	105,573
Western	85,649	64,254
South Eastern	111,549	55,109
NIAS	11,155	2,679
Southern	88,569	41,208

Fire and Rescue Service: Posts

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the people fulfilling the roles of (i) Chief Fire Officer; (ii) Director of Human Resources; (iii) Director of Corporate Planning; (iv) Deputy Director of Corporate Planning; (v) Stores Manager, (vi) Deputy Stores Manager; and for how long they have been in post.

(AQW 18227/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- i The Chief Fire Officer post has been filled on an interim basis by the Deputy Chief Fire Officer since 27 June 2012.
- ii. The Director of Human Resources post is currently vacant. Since August 2011 the duties of the post have been covered on a rotation basis by 2 senior managers; prior to that they were covered by a senior HR manager seconded from Health and Social Care role. The NIFRS expect to have a substantive Director in post by April 2013.
- iii. The Director of Planning, Performance & Corporate Affairs post has been vacant since 1 April 2012 and duties have been covered by other members of staff. The recruitment process for this post is ongoing.
- iv. The NIFRS has no Deputy Director of Corporate Planning post.
- v The Stores Manager post has been overseen by an operational Group Commander since November 2009. The recruitment of this post is currently being planned.
- vi. The NIFRS has no Deputy Stores Manager post.

Autism: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many (i) children; and (ii) adults in North Down are diagnosed with autism.

(AQW 18267/11-15)

Mr Poots: Figures provided by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust indicate that at 14th January 2013, 104 children in the North Down area had a confirmed diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The Trust was unable to provide figures for the number of adults in the North Down area diagnosed with ASD.

Within the previous two years 287 children and 15 adults in the North Down area had undergone a formal assessment for ASD.

These figures have not been validated by the Department.

Autism: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many (i) children; and (ii) adults in North Down have undergone a formal assessment for autism.

(AQW 18269/11-15)

Mr Poots: Figures provided by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust indicate that at 14th January 2013, 104 children in the North Down area had a confirmed diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The Trust was unable to provide figures for the number of adults in the North Down area diagnosed with ASD.

Within the previous two years 287 children and 15 adults in the North Down area had undergone a formal assessment for ASD.

These figures have not been validated by the Department.

Altnagelvin Area Hospital: Services

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the services that have been removed from Altnagelvin Hospital in the last five years.

(AQW 18284/11-15)

Mr Poots: I have been advised by the Western Health and Social Care Trust that the following services have been removed from Altnagelvin Hospital in the last five years:

- Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm (AAA) procedures following an ongoing Regional Review of Vascular Services. However in an emergency situation and in the interest of patient safety this procedure may still be performed in Altnagelvin.
- Upper Gastrointestinal (UGI) surgery for cancer as a result of a retirement of a consultant and a regional reconfiguration of UGI on one site for all NI.
- Radicle prostatectomy for prostate cancer following a decision, regionally, that this procedure would be centralised at the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust
- Elective paediatric orthopaedic surgery following the retirement of an orthopaedic surgeon in September 2011. Paediatric orthopaedic inpatient surgery is now performed in Belfast. Paediatric orthopaedic outpatient services have been maintained at Altnagelvin provided by paediatric surgeons from the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust.

Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority: Respite Care, North Down

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has for mental health respite care in North Down following the recent decision to close the House 9 mental facility as a result of Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority assessment.

(AQW 18298/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Trust is currently negotiating the provision of a respite bed within one of their statutory residential facilities in Enterprise Court in order to replace the bed that had been provided within House 9.

Mental Health Illnesses: North Down

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what alternative respite care is available for carers of people diagnosed with mental health illnesses in North Down, given the closure of the House 9 mental health facility.

(AQW 18299/11-15)

Mr Poots: The following respite provision is currently available within the North Down area:

- Day Hospitals - In each of the Trust's three sectors, Down, Lisburn and North Down and Ards. Planned therapeutic programmes for individuals may provide respite care Monday to Friday 9 - 5pm.
- Day Care provision via voluntary sector agencies- Northern Ireland Association of Mental Health (NIAMH) i.e. Willow tree House, Lisburn and Scrabo View, Newtownards. Both provide a range of day care and support which may facilitate respite on a day to day basis Monday to Friday 9-5pm.

Fire and Rescue Service: Business Cases

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many business cases have been made by the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service in each of the last five years; (ii) the average length of time of a business case takes from inception to approval during this period; (iii) the average cost of an individual business case; and (iv) how many business cases are currently awaiting approval.

(AQW 18318/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) The table below details the number of business cases prepared by NIFRS in each of the last 5 years. Figures for 2008/09 and 2009/10 have been estimated as NIFRS commenced keeping formal records relating to business cases only from October 2009

Year	Business Cases
2012/13 to date	81
2011/12	138
2010/11	28
2009/10	34
2008/09	49

- (ii) Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service does not record the length of time a business case takes from inception to approval.
- (iii) The costs of preparing business cases are not collated.
- (iv) On 15 January 36 business cases were awaiting approval.

Kilcooley Estate, Bangor: Residents' Health

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much funding the Public Health Agency will direct towards improving the health of the population of the Kilcooley estate, Bangor over the next twelve months.

(AQW 18321/11-15)

Mr Poots: Over the next twelve months the PHA intend to maintain the services and funding for the population of the Kilcooley Estate as detailed in the response to AQW 18167/2011-15.

Multiple Sclerosis: Dalriada Hospital

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why respite provision for multiple sclerosis patients at the Dalriada Hospital has been cut from eight weeks to four weeks.

(AQW 18381/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust has advised that although there is no standard respite care package for MS patients, their respite policy states service users and their carers are entitled to respite of up to 8 weeks per year. Such provision is based on their individually assessed needs and allocated accordingly.

Multiple Sclerosis: Respite Provision

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the respite provision available to people diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in all areas.

(AQW 18382/11-15)

Mr Poots: Details of Health and Social Care Trusts' respite provision for people with Multiple Sclerosis in Northern Ireland are attached.

Belfast HSC Trust

Belfast Trust has a recurrent contract with the MS Society to provide a range of respite services for people with MS. These include yoga, neuro physiotherapy, counselling, art classes, exercise classes, aromatherapy, hand massage, mindfulness course, computer class, bowls, outings, history talks, and reminiscing class.

The Trust also contracts with a wide range of voluntary and independent organisations to provide a range of services for people with disabilities, including MS. These organisations have expertise in working with a full range of disabilities. The ultimate goal is to ensure the equality and social inclusion of people with disabilities.

The Trust has three day centres for people with disabilities providing a range of rehabilitative, social and respite functions which can be accessed by people with MS – Beech Hall in West Belfast, Woodlands in North Belfast, and Island Resource Centre in East Belfast.

Some service users are in receipt of direct payments which are used to purchase respite services tailored to their individual needs.

Northern HSC Trust

People in the Northern Trust area with MS have access to a range of respite provision including nursing and residential homes with appropriate RQIA registration; the MS unit in Dalriada; Thompson House in Lisburn; Foster Green Brain Injury Unit in Belfast; the Share Centre in Lisnaskea and the MS Centre in Cumbria. Respite is also provided by way of respite grants from the voluntary sector; used to help people to go away for respite breaks and also through Direct Payments.

Southern HSC Trust

People aged 18-65, diagnosed with MS in the SHSCT area, are provided with respite in nursing and residential homes, at Forster Green Hospital in Belfast and through the use of Direct Payments.

South Eastern HSC trust

Within South Eastern Trust there are 7 neurological respite beds situated in Thompson House Hospital which can be accessed by people with MS. In addition, people with MS may avail of the usual range of respite options, including residential or nursing homes or domiciliary based services.

Western HSC Trust

Within the Western HSC Trust area, people with MS have access to respite provision including Spruce House, Londonderry (in-patient respite); the Dalriada MS regional centre respite; the Share Centre in Lisnaskea; Strangford Lough Lodge Disabled Holiday Centre in Portaferry and at a range of nursing and residential homes –

Hill Crest Nursing Home, Omagh; Silverdale Nursing Home, Castlederg; Woodmount Nursing Home; Culmore Manor, Londonderry; Longfield PNH, Londonderry; Brooklands Nursing Home, Belfast; Cornfield Care Home, Londonderry;

Deanfield PNH, Londonderry; Daleview House, Londonderry; Edgewater, Londonderry; Templemoyle, Londonderry; Rush Hall, Limavady.

Multiple Sclerosis: Facilities

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the facilities to which patients with multiple sclerosis have been referred in each of the three years; and to list the number of referrals to each provision.

(AQW 18385/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Health and Social Care Trusts have advised that this information is not readily available.

Multiple Sclerosis: Dalriada Hospital

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the Northern Health and Social Care Trust has considered any proposals to use the beds provided for patients with multiple sclerosis at Dalriada Hospital for any other purpose.

(AQW 18389/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust has advised that it has not considered any such proposals.

Multiple Sclerosis: Care Homes

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether his Department or any of the Health and Social Care Trusts have considered proposals to refer patients with multiple sclerosis to care homes rather than the unit at Dalriada Hospital.

(AQW 18390/11-15)

Mr Poots: HSC Trusts access respite for their patients from a range of providers, including the facility at Dalriada Hospital. Service user engagement undertaken along with the Multiple Sclerosis Society in the Northern Trust area in 2010, confirmed that not all service users want their respite provided within a hospital based setting.

In accordance with Transforming Your Care, HSC Trusts are seeking to move from a service-led approach to a more person-centred model in which Trusts act as enablers, working in partnership with disabled people and their families/carers to help people access the support that meets their individual needs. This may include some of the traditional residential and day care services but will increasingly reflect a wider range of needs.

Childminders

Ms McGahan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the new regulations and the impact they will have on registered child minders with assistants.

(AQW 18399/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department issued new Minimum Standards for Childminding and Day Care for Children Under Age 12 in July 2012. There are no new regulations associated with these standards.

Compliance with the standards is mandatory for all registered providers of childminding and day care services, including childminders who employ an assistant.

All services have until September 2013 to adjust their practice in accordance with standards and, during the interim period, Trusts will work with providers to assist them in attaining compliance.

The Health and Social Care Board has produced implementation guidance to accompany the standards and is working with a range of stakeholders, including the Northern Ireland Childminding Association to refine the guidance to minimise any adverse impact on children, parents and providers.

Antrim Area Hospital: Transfer

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether discussions have taken place between his Department and the Northern Health and Social Care Trust on the transfer of Antrim Hospital to the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust; and to publish the detail of these discussions.

(AQW 18401/11-15)

Mr Poots: No discussions have taken place between my Department and the Northern Health and Social Care Trust on the transfer of the Antrim Hospital to the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust.

The public consultation on the proposed changes emerging from Transforming Your Care closed on the 15 January 2013. The consultation document stated that the principal hospital in the current Northern network is Antrim and that it would continue to deliver all core general hospital services. The document noted that a large number of people using Antrim Area Hospital live in the greater Belfast area and proposed that future hospital network arrangements should reflect this and ensure appropriate links with Belfast Hospitals. The responses to the consultation exercise are now being considered.

Fracking

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) whether anyone from his Department or the Public Health Agency has been invited to Enniskillen on 28 January 2013 to hear Dr. Eilish Cleary, Chief Medical Officer for Health for New Brunswick in Canada, discuss her recent report on fracking and its effects on public health; and (ii) whether anyone will be attending on behalf of his Department or the Public Health Agency.

(AQW 18404/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department and the Public Health Agency are aware of the event scheduled for 28th January and officials hope to attend.

Foster Care Allowance

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current rate payable per child though Foster Care Allowance, broken down by age; and to detail the purpose for which these allowances are to be used.

(AQW 18405/11-15)

Mr Poots: All foster carers, including kinship foster carers, receive financial support from social services to help them meet the costs associated with caring for foster children. The allowances from 1 April 2012 are detailed below. These allowances include provision for food (including school meals), household costs (including heating, electricity and general wear and tear), clothing and footwear, pocket money and travel costs. Foster carers are free to spend the food, household and travel allowances as they feel benefits the child most. In addition, foster carers receive additional payments for other essential items and for birthdays, holidays and Christmas. In some placements, enhanced payments or fees are made, on a case by case basis, in acknowledgement of the greater time and effort needed to care for and support some children.

Age Group	Per Week	Per 4 Weeks	Per Annum
0-4	£115.40	£461.60	£6000.80
5-10	£127.51	£510.00	£6630.80
11-15	£146.78	£587.12	£7632.56
16+	£170.02	£680.00	£8840.00

Thrombolysis: Antrim Area Hospital

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients admitted to Antrim Hospital received out of hospital thrombolysis in the year (i) preceding; and (ii) following the withdrawal of the cardiac ambulance.

(AQW 18420/11-15)

Mr Poots: This information is not readily available as there is not a dedicated data base for the capture of such.

Information that has been taken from a ward source indicates that;

- (i) In the year prior to pre hospital thrombolysis for cardiac patients being taken over by the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) there were 3 patients who received this treatment.
- (ii) In the year following pre hospital thrombolysis for cardiac patients being taken over by the NIAS there were 4 patients who received this treatment.

This information has been provided by the Northern HSC Trust who have advised that they cannot give assurance of the reliability of this information.

Greenfield Residential Home, Strabane

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the future status of Greenfield Nursing Home, Strabane.

(AQW 18450/11-15)

Mr Poots: Departmental officials have been informed by the Western Health & Social Care Trust that no decision has been taken in relation to any change in the provision of services at any of its statutory residential homes, including Greenfield Residential Home.

Furthermore, the Trust will continue to develop its services to meet local needs in the context of reform and modernisation of service provision, and the strategic direction of Transforming Your Care. This outlines the expectation of a reduction in residential accommodation for older people over the next 5 years.

The public consultation on the proposals emerging from Transforming Your Care took place over the period 9 October 2012 to 15 January 2013. Decisions on the way forward will be taken in response to the feedback received during the consultation.

Any local decisions will be taken in a planned way with the involvement of residents, families and the local community.

Food Safety Authority of Ireland: Horse Meat

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for her assessment of the risk to public health posed by the information from the Food Standards Agency of Ireland that horsemeat has entered the food chain through beefburgers sold in supermarkets.

(AQW 18506/11-15)

Mr Poots: There is no evidence to suggest that there is a risk to public health posed by the information from the Food Safety Authority of Ireland's (FSAI) authenticity survey.

There may however prove to be food labelling regulation breaches identified. The fundamental principle of all food labelling rules is that a product must be labelled accurately. For example, if a product is labelled as a beef burger, it must only contain beef. If a product is labelled as a burger, the label should list all of the meat contained. It is unacceptable for consumers to be misled in any way.

That is why the Food Standards Agency (FSA), as the UK central competent authority, has launched an urgent investigation into the issues highlighted by the survey. The FSA is working closely with the food industry and FSAI to ascertain how or why horse meat was used in the affected products. All of the retailers involved so far have removed potentially affected products from their shelves.

Fire Station, Omagh

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the development of the new fire station in Omagh, following the collapse of the Patten Construction Group.

(AQW 18513/11-15)

Mr Poots: The process for the selection of a replacement contractor to complete the Omagh Fire Station project has commenced. It is anticipated that tender documentation will be issued on 23 January 2013. It is intended to appoint a contractor to re-commence works on site in March 2013 with a planned completion date in February 2014.

Civil Servants: Unrest

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of Civil Servants from his Department who have left work early since 3 December 2012 due to the civil unrest associated with the flag protests; and (ii) the associated financial cost to his departmental budget.

(AQW 18607/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) I can confirm that my Department has no record of any staff who have left work early since 3 December 2012 due to the civil unrest associated with the flag protests.
- (ii) I can confirm that my Department has not incurred any associated financial cost to its departmental budget since 3 December 2012 due to the civil unrest associated with the flag protests.

Fire and Rescue Service: Disability and Special Needs Services, County Antrim

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether any of the Fire and Rescue Service's declared underspend will be used for disability and special needs services in the Glens and elsewhere in Antrim.

(AQW 18714/11-15)

Mr Poots: Any underspends arising within the resource budgets of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, or any of my Department's Arms Length Bodies, are considered as part of the management of the Department's overall financial resources to secure the key Ministerial priority of delivering financial breakeven. In terms of capital underspends, these are typically considered as part of the overall proactive management of the capital programme in order to identify other projects to which funding can be allocated.

Department of Justice

Benefit Appeal Hearings

Mr Wells asked Minister of Justice why the Courts and Tribunals Service decided to transfer benefit appeal hearings to court buildings.

(AQW 18102/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): The use of courthouses for social security benefit appeals is not unusual as hearings are already heard in courthouses throughout Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service is required to maximise court estate utilisation and efficiently use public funds. Tribunal business levels are increasing and will continue to rise with the advent of Welfare Reform.

Courthouses provide an independent and dignified environment with appropriate facilities for a diverse range of hearings in less formal accommodation, including civil and family matters. The use of suitable informal hearing rooms in courthouses will be carefully planned and listing tribunals when courts are hearing major criminal cases will be avoided.

Prison Staff: Security Threats

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice what assistance is provided for prison staff who have been forced to leave their homes because of security threats.

(AQW 18104/11-15)

Mr Ford: In addition to advice and support, financial assistance is available for:

- temporary accommodation;
- travel & subsistence expenses;
- removal expenses;
- mortgage arrangement and survey fees;
- solicitors and estate agents fees;
- transfer grant to cover additional items of expense; and
- additional housing cost allowance.

Help is also available when a shortfall occurs between the purchase price of the new house and the money available for the purchase; an advance of salary up to half of gross pay can be allowed. Should an advance be granted, repayment is deferred for two years, after which it becomes repayable through monthly salary deductions for up to 10 years.

Prisoners: Christmas Release

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) how many prisoners were released for Christmas; and (ii) of these, how many (a) did not return at the appointed time; (b) defaulted or breached the terms of their release; (c) came to police attention; and (d) were returned to custody before their appointed time.

(AQW 18106/11-15)

Mr Ford: A total of 72 prisoners were released under the Christmas Home Leave Scheme. Of these, two prisoners failed to return at the time stipulated by the Christmas Home Leave Board.

Ten prisoners and one young offender failed to abide by their home leave conditions. Of these eleven, ten came to the attention of the police and seven were returned to custody before the time originally stipulated.

Royal Ulster Constabulary Part-time Reserve Gratuity Scheme

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice whether the £392,000 surplus from the Royal Ulster Constabulary Part-time Reserve Gratuity Scheme was (i) kept ring-fenced; (ii) held within the Department; or (iii) surrendered.

(AQW 18141/11-15)

Mr Ford: There is approximately £392,000 remaining of the £20m funding provided by Treasury for the Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme. This residue is held within the Department awaiting a final decision. No decision has yet been taken on how the residue can or should be used.

Dissident Republican Threat

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice what additional resources his Department is employing to help combat the dissident republican threat.

(AQW 18142/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Department of Justice funding allocation was agreed by the Executive for the years 2011-15. This included £45m of additional security funding from the Executive for the PSNI.

In addition, working with DFP, access to a further £199.5m was secured from the Treasury to meet PSNI security pressures.

Prison Service: Deaths in Custody

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to the staff suspended from duty and subsequently dismissed following the investigations into the deaths in custody of Colin Bell and John Deery at Maghaberry Prison, to detail the (i) start and end date of each suspension; (ii) dates of recommendations by Adjudicating Governors to dismiss the staff members; (iii) the staff who appealed to the Prison Service and the date that each appeal was determined by the Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development; (iv) the result of each appeal; (v) the total cost to the Prison Service in respect of each suspended member; and (vi) the combined total cost in the Colin Bell and the John Derry cases.

(AQW 18149/11-15)

Mr Ford: As less than five members of staff were suspended and subsequently dismissed from the Northern Ireland Prison Service, in both cases cited, the information has been withheld.

This is to protect the identity of the individuals concerned as disclosure would be contrary to the Data Protection Act 1998.

Prisoners: Parole

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of prisoners released on parole from HMP Maghaberry and HMP Magilligan during 2012, and of those released how many had been imprisoned for committing (i) sexual related crime; (ii) terrorist related crime; and (iii) other crime.

(AQW 18209/11-15)

Mr Ford: Table A below details the number of prisoners released on home leave from both Maghaberry and Magilligan Prisons during 2012:

Table A

	Maghaberry	Magilligan
Total number of prisoners released	539	1,437
Number of prisoners released who were convicted of sexual related crime	24	50
Number of prisoners released who were convicted of terrorist related crime	20	Nil
Number of prisoners released who were convicted of other crime	495	1,387

Prison Service: Supporting Prisoners at Risk

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 17942/11-15, (i) to detail the reason why the Northern Ireland Prison Service did not test the competence of those in receipt of Supporting Prisoners at Risk training to an appropriate standard; and (ii) whether, since June 2012, the Northern Ireland Prison Service has introduced an examination or assessment for all staff attending such training.

(AQW 18212/11-15)

Mr Ford: The testing of competence does not routinely take place following regular training courses and was not in place prior to June 2012 in relation to Supporting Prisoners at Risk (SPAR) training. An assessment was introduced in June 2012.

Prison Service: Code of Conduct

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether the Committee for Justice is deemed to be a key stakeholder in the consultation process relevant to the proposed revised Northern Ireland Prison Service Code of Conduct and Discipline and Code of Ethics, and to explain the reason if it is not so deemed.

(AQW 18214/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Justice Committee will be given the opportunity to consider the Code of Conduct and Discipline and Code of Ethics on completion of the drafting process.

Prison Service: Staff Training

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 16744/11-15, to provide a copy of the staff training programme for Northern Ireland Prison Service staff who are responsible for the care, management and support of such prisoners as outlined, and in particular those at risk of self-harm.

(AQW 18215/11-15)

Mr Ford: While it would not be feasible to provide all of the information requested due to the significant content of the pack, the programme's aims and objectives are attached at Annex A.

Annex A

Aim:

To identify prisoners at risk of suicide or self harm and provide holistic care, support and interventions, in a multi-disciplined manner.

Objectives:

Participants will be able to:

- Recognise behaviours, statements and reactions that may indicate a risk of suicide or self-harm.
- Open a SPAR Document and complete a Referral Form.

- Recognise that accurate and timely record keeping is essential, in the management and support of prisoners deemed 'at risk'.
- Understand the procedure for placing an inmate into a Special Observation Cell.
- Take part and contribute to Case Reviews.
- Recognise the importance of effective and accurate handovers.

Prison Service/PSNI: Disciplinary or Employment Legislation

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) to detail the aspects of disciplinary and/or employment legislation or related policies that differ between the PSNI and the Northern Ireland Prison Service; (ii) whether PSNI training officers have been made aware of the differences and are able to provide the necessary tuition to meet the specific needs of the Northern Ireland Prison Service; and (iii) whether the Chief Constable will be held accountable for any future litigation cases related to the malpractice or failings of the proposed Professional Standards Unit.

(AQW 18252/11-15)

Mr Ford: The PSNI and the Northern Ireland Prison Service are two separate bodies; therefore the employment legislation and disciplinary policies relating to each of them are unrelated. Prison officers are Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) employees, whereas police officers are not employed by NICS, but are warranted officers with terms and conditions set out in specific legislation agreed at the Police Negotiating Board.

In respect of discipline, it would therefore not be appropriate to compare these organisations. Differences in employment legislation and disciplinary policies are not pertinent to the generic investigative skills training which staff in the Professional Standards Unit will receive from the PSNI.

The Chief Constable's office will not be held accountable if, in the future, there are litigation cases relating to alleged malpractice or failings of the Professional Standards Unit.

Prison Service Staff: Dismissals

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) how many Northern Ireland Prison Service staff have been dismissed for gross misconduct; and (ii) of those dismissed, how many appealed but withdrew the appeal before hearing and received a discretionary or similar monetary payment, since 2004.

(AQW 18253/11-15)

Mr Ford: Since 2004 the Northern Ireland Prison Service has dismissed 26 staff for gross misconduct. None of the individuals who appealed to the Civil Service Appeal Board withdrew their appeal prior to their hearing.

Prison Service: Complaints

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, given that the Inspectors who conducted the announced inspection at Maghaberry Prison in March 2012 found that serious complaints made by prisoners about staff were often poorly investigated and that more robust monitoring is required, to outline his proposals for how the Northern Ireland Prison Service will manage such complaints in the future to ensure compliance with correct procedures and best practice.

(AQW 18259/11-15)

Mr Ford: A dedicated team has been established within Maghaberry Prison to routinely monitor prisoners' complaints ensuring compliance with the correct procedure. The team will also monitor the withdrawal of complaints made against staff.

All serious complaints by prisoners against staff are now referred directly to the duty governor or a senior manager for investigation. If appropriate, the complaint can be investigated by the PSNI.

Prison Service: Investigators

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 16619/11-15 and with reference to paragraphs 44 and 63 of the Pearson Review Team Report of 9 June 2009, whether the Northern Ireland Prison Service will be employing a bank of experienced investigators, namely retired senior police officers and others with investigative skills, and if not give the reason.

(AQW 18261/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Prison Service will not be seeking to recruit retired senior police officers for the Professional Standards Unit. Staff will be appointed from within the Northern Ireland Civil Service and provided with appropriate training.

Sex Offenders: Convictions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many convicted sex offenders being managed in the community are currently unaccounted for; and of these offenders (i) for how long they have been missing; (ii) what is their category of sex offender; and (iii) when they were (a) convicted; and (b) released back into the community.

(AQW 18301/11-15)

Mr Ford: Information concerning offenders who have failed to comply with the notification requirements of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 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.

Prisoner Release Victim Information Scheme

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of victims of crime who registered with the Prisoner Release Victims Information Scheme since its inception; and the number of victims who did not.

(AQW 18302/11-15)

Mr Ford: As at 11 January 2013, 3,663 victims of crime (or their families) have met the qualifying criteria for registering with the Prisoner Release Victim Information Scheme. Of these, 926 have registered with the scheme and 2,737 have not.

Frances McKeown

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, given that the journal of custody of suicide victim Frances McKeown showed that she knew how to appear non-suicidal, and a body of evidence stating that those contemplating suicide become adept at hiding their feelings, whether he will consider his stance on the current Supporting Prisoners at Risk procedures and ensure that these procedures are applied to vulnerable prisoners at all times and introduce a grading system of risk.

(AQW 18303/11-15)

Mr Ford: There is currently no decision to review the SPAR procedures in order to apply them to vulnerable prisoners at all times.

Legal Services Commission: Legal Aid

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice on how many occasions the Legal Services Commission has run out of legal aid funds and (i) requested; and (ii) been granted additional finance; and to list the dates of payments and the additional amounts requested and awarded.

(AQW 18304/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Department of Justice came into existence on 12 April 2010; therefore financial information has been provided from 2010/11 onwards.

The Northern Ireland Legal Service Commission's (NILSC) initial budget allocations for legal aid funds in 2010/11 and 2011/12 are set out in the table below, with comparison against annual expenditure levels.

Table 1: Legal aid budget and expenditure for 2010/11 and 2011/12

	Main Budget Allocation £m	Additional Funding granted £m	Total Funding granted £m	Total Net Spend £m
2010/11	85	17.7	102.7	101.1
2011/12	83.6	25.3	108.9	108.2

Note: Figures relate to civil and criminal legal aid and running costs.

Department of Finance and Personnel's (DFP) in-year monitoring process provides a formal system for subsequent review of spending plans to ensure that resources are directed towards the highest priority areas, offering an opportunity for Departments to bid for additional funding allocation, if required.

As set out in the above table, additional resources of £17.7m and £25.3m were allocated to the NILSC via Budget Monitoring Rounds in years 2010/11 and 2011/12 respectively. The NILSC met all liabilities throughout this period and did not run out of legal aid funds.

In 2012/13, an unfunded pressure of £22m was identified by the NILSC and bid for during the recent Monitoring Round. The NILSC wrote to the Law Society of Northern Ireland and the Bar Council of Northern Ireland on 18 December 2012, to inform them of the in-year funding pressures which have emerged in the course of the financial year and to advise them of the work which continues to secure additional funding. This is the first occasion that the NILSC has felt it is necessary to alert the legal profession in this way. My Department has already provided additional budget cover of £10m towards this pressure and is considering what further funds may be made available. Final budget allocations will be confirmed by end of January 2013.

Additional published information relating to the NILSC's expenditure in the years prior to devolution is available in the Northern Ireland Audit Office's (NIAO) report on Managing Criminal Legal Aid, dated 28 June 2011. (Refer to page 36, para. 4.3).

Prison Service: Information Storage

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 17469/11-15, if he will provide guidance on where the Northern Ireland Prison Service should hold, store or transfer this information should it be required by another agency or person at a later date.

(AQW 18305/11-15)

Mr Ford: Decisions relating to ill-health are only held by the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) for current staff and those retired on these grounds. Once a member of staff is dismissed they are no longer an employee and NIPS are not entitled to have access to medical decisions taken after this date. Therefore, NIPS are not required to hold, store or transfer such information.

Limavady Courthouse

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Justice whether he will conduct an assessment of the impact on users of the closure of Limavady Courthouse, to identify ways of minimising inconvenience.

(AQW 18329/11-15)

Mr Ford: The impact of closure on users was considered throughout the consultation process and informed my decision. While there is potential that some users may be inconvenienced, there will be other users who will benefit from the transfer of business to Coleraine Courthouse. All court users, in particular victims and witnesses, will be provided with a higher standard of accommodation and facilities at the Coleraine Courthouse.

Fireworks: Licences

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice how many fireworks licences have been issued in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 18367/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Department of Justice became responsible for issuing firework licences on 12 April 2010. The information available from that date is set out below:

Year	Firework Licences Issued
2010	615
2011	575
2012	570

Fireworks: Offences

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice, to detail the number of convictions for offences related to the use of fireworks, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 18368/11-15)

Mr Ford: The information is as follows:

Number of convictions for firework related offences 2004-20091.

Year	Convictions
2005	17
2006	10
2007	48
2008	26
2009	21

The offences included are, unlawfully keeping fireworks for sale, throwing firework, unlawfully exposing fireworks for sale, possession of the "banger", possession of fireworks without a licence, possession of prohibited fireworks, selling fireworks without production of a licence, failing to keep proper records of fireworks sales, purchasing fireworks without a licence and using fireworks without a licence.

Data are collated on the principal offence rule; only the most serious offence for which an offender is convicted is included.

Data for 2005-2006 should not be directly compared with data from 2007 to 2009 as the data sets are sourced from different systems.

Badger Baiting

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of convictions for badger baiting in each of the last five years. (AQW 18413/11-15)

Mr Ford: Badger baiting related offences may be prosecuted under a number of statutes. In particular, badgers are classed as a Schedule 5 species and protected within the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985. Badger baiting may be prosecuted as an animal cruelty offence under Article 10 of the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985 and section 13 of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972.

Conviction data does not distinguish between offences involving badgers and other animals under this legislation. In terms of more general convictions for direct cruelty to animals, there have been 63 convictions in total between 2005 and 2009 (the latest year for which conviction statistics are available); three for damaging or destroying the shelter of a wild animal and 60 for more general, direct animal cruelty offences.

The table below gives the number convicted for the calendar years 2005 – 2009 (the latest year for which figures are currently available).

Number of people convicted for relevant animal cruelty related offences, 2005-2009

Year	Number of Convictions
2005	18
2006	14
2007	19
2008	12
2009	10
Total	63

The offences included are, Causing Unnecessary suffering to animals, Cruelty to animals and Damaging or destroying shelter of wild animal.

Data are collated on the principal offence rule; only the most serious offence for which an offender is convicted is included.

Data for 2005 to 2006 should not be directly compared with data from 2007 to 2009 as the data sets are sourced from different systems.

Policing and Justice: Local Communities

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what courses his Department makes available to help young people understand the role and responsibility his Department has for policing and justice in local communities. (AQW 18427/11-15)

Mr Ford: My Department is committed to engaging with young people in order to raise awareness and understanding of its areas of responsibility. While it does not offer specific courses, there are a wide range of initiatives being taken forward that help young people to understand the justice system. These are detailed in the table below.

Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) also have a role to play in raising awareness around policing and community safety issues through their engagement with communities and the delivery of solutions to locally identified issues.

A wide range of information on the roles and responsibilities of my Department is also available on NI Direct.

Lead	Initiative
Department of Justice	Outreach events with schools to raise awareness of the dangers and consequences of becoming involved in crime. Recent engagement has focussed on anti-social behaviour and hate crime.
	Contributions to the Young Citizen's Passport Northern Ireland , a guide to those parts of the law that have most relevance to everyday life for young people in Northern Ireland. Made available to all young people in secondary education.
	Research material provided by the Department as well as material from outreach events made available to pupils through the LearningNI network.

Lead	Initiative
Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service	An outreach programme which includes a number of annual events including the Magistrates' Mock Trial Competition for Key Stage 3 pupils, the Advocate Challenge and work experience for Key Stage 4 pupils.
	Annual Internship Programme offering placements for second-year law students in Northern Ireland. Providing opportunities to meet Judges and legal practitioners and gain insight into administration of the courts.
	Facilitation of court visits by school and community groups, which give an insight into the workings of the court and justice system.
Youth Justice Agency	The Generic Offender Programme which includes a section designed to help young people referred to the Agency understand the importance of laws, law enforcement and the responsibilities of citizens. This programme includes examination of the role of the PSNI and wider criminal justice system.
	Young people on Community Responsibility Orders spend 50% of their time examining citizenship issues and impact of crime on victims.

Policing

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice to outline his Department's role within policing.
(AQW 18428/11-15)

Mr Ford: Policing is a complex business involving a number of key stakeholders, all of whom have a shared interest in ensuring the delivery of the best possible policing service in partnership with the wider community.

The Department of Justice (DOJ) has a range of powers relating to devolved policing and justice functions, set out in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (Devolution of Policing and Justice Functions) Order 2010. As Justice Minister I am accountable to the Northern Ireland Assembly for the policing and justice functions for which the DOJ is responsible, namely the resourcing, legislative and policy framework of the justice system. The Department keeps these under regular review.

The Department is responsible for securing adequate resources for policing and ensuring the propriety of their use.

Under the terms of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000, I may determine and revise the long term objectives for policing in Northern Ireland, in consultation with the Policing Board, Chief Constable and such other persons as deemed to be appropriate.

The Department is also responsible for the effective governance of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Policing Board and the Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, arrangements for which are set out in a Management Statement and Financial Memorandum for each organisation, in line with DFP requirements.

My Department, alongside the Policing Board, is responsible for overseeing the work of the Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) through the PCSP Joint Committee. PCSPs play a pivotal role in consulting and engaging with the local community in order to identify and prioritise the issues of concern in relation to policing and community safety.

Maghaberry Prison

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice to outline the changes that have been implemented to the regime in the separated section of Maghaberry Prison since the end of the so called dirty protest by republican prisoners.
(AQW 18436/11-15)

Mr Ford: The regime for republican prisoners held in Roe House was returned to a pre-protest position to reflect the fact that prisoners were no longer participating in protest action. No further changes have been made.

Human Trafficking

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice to detail the resources that are being made available to facilitate the work of the Engagement Group on Human Trafficking.
(AQW 18517/11-15)

Mr Ford: My Department hosts meetings of the Engagement Group on Human Trafficking and provides the secretariat. No financial resources have been allocated to the Group as such, but clearly major expenditure is allocated to tackling human trafficking. The purpose of the Group is to formalise and strengthen partnerships between statutory bodies and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and to provide an arena for the exchange of information, ideas and expertise.

A Crimestoppers campaign, launched on 21 January 2013, to raise awareness of human trafficking for forced labour and domestic servitude, is an example of the Group working in practice. My Department and the Police Service of Northern Ireland contributed funding for the development of posters and leaflets, as well as a video and a radio clip. Members of the Engagement Group then assisted in distributing the leaflets and posters across Northern Ireland.

G8 Summit

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice (i) how many police officers from outside Northern Ireland are expected to be drafted in to help police the G8 Summit; (ii) whether they will operate in PSNI uniforms and as PSNI officers; (iii) what is the expected cost; and (iv) from what constabularies they will be sourced.

(AQW 18530/11-15)

Mr Ford: Mutual aid 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.

Desertcreat Training Centre

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice whether the insignia of Her Majesty's Prisons will be displayed at the new training centre planned for Desertcreat; and what are the plans for such provision.

(AQW 18588/11-15)

Mr Ford: The insignia of the three partner services, the Northern Ireland Prison Service, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, and the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, will be displayed in appropriate positions within the new Community Safety College at Desertcreat.

High-risk and Conflict Areas

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Justice to detail any communication his Department has with the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department of Foreign Affairs in relation to people from Northern Ireland working in high risk and conflict areas.

(AQW 18628/11-15)

Mr Ford: There has not been any communication between my Department and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department of Foreign Affairs on this matter.

Department for Regional Development

Salt Bins

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development how many salt bins have been provided on public roads in each winter since 2009.

(AQW 18201/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): The number of salt bins provided by my Department's Roads Service, in each winter since 2009, is detailed in the table below:

Year	Number of Salt Bins provided
2009	3516
2010	3875
2011	4281
2012	4759
Total	16431

In addition, the following number of grit piles has been provided over the same period:

Year	Number of Grit Piles provided
2009	37731
2010	39593
2011/12	50286
Total	127610

Footpath Upgrades: Kilcooley Estate, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development how much has been spent on upgrading footpaths in the Kilcooley Estate, Bangor in each of the last five years,

(AQW 18203/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service completed a footway reconstruction and upgrading scheme in Kilcooley Estate in 2011/12, at a cost of £145,000.

This work was in addition to the routine maintenance repairs carried out in the estate over the past five years for which cost details are not readily available.

Wind Turbines: Planning Service and Roads Service

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) for his assessment of Spatial Planning Advice Note: SP12/09 Planning Applications for Wind Turbines Sited Near to Trunk Roads, which is used by the Planning Service and Highways Agency in England; (ii) how this advice could be used by the Planning Service and Roads Service when assessing wind turbine applications considering that with PPS18 and best practice guidance as the only substantive requirement for safe location of turbines and roads is for a turbine setback distance of fall over height plus 10 percent from a road.

(AQW 18268/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have consulted with officials from my Department's Roads Service and can confirm my Department currently uses the guidance available in PPS 18 and the accompanying Good Practice Guidance, which it considers to be adequate. Details of haulage routes, access, etc as part of the Environment Impact Assessment, along with confirmation about de-icing and shadow flicker, if considered necessary, are requested. The set-back of fall over distance plus 10% is also applied. Although this is seldom an issue, it has been used on a few occasions.

Wind Farms

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of (i) the risks associated with wind farms that are located close to roads, in particular junctions, sharp bends and pedestrian and cyclist crossings; and (ii) whether he agrees that wind farms could cause visual distraction.

(AQW 18271/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it currently uses the guidance available in Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 18 and the accompanying Good Practice Guidance in relation to wind farms. The guidance covers many of the issues related to the road safety impacts of wind farm developments, such as structural failure and visual distraction. The issue of visual distraction is addressed in sections 1.3.25 and 1.3.55 of the Good Practice Guidance and forms the basis of any assessment undertaken.

Roads Service officials further advise they are not aware of any wind farms in existence, or proposed, that could be considered to be close to junctions, sharp bends, or pedestrian or cyclist crossings on a major road. Wind farms are, by their very nature, much more likely to be sited in open spaces, usually well away from any form of settlement.

Wind farms, like many other features visible from the road network have the potential to cause a visual distraction. However, I am content that application of the aforementioned guidance ensures there is adequate consideration of the potential risks caused by wind farms.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the steps that Northern Ireland Water have taken to source materials and equipment locally and to outline the initiatives taken to increase procurement opportunities for local suppliers. (AQW 18273/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it takes the following steps to ensure its tender opportunities are made known to local and regional suppliers:-

- Publishing all tender opportunities on the E-Sourcing Northern Ireland website. This website is used extensively by the public sector in Northern Ireland to advertise tender opportunities.
- Publishing tender opportunities, tender guidance and details of the tender programme for the year ahead, on the NIW's website www.niwater.com.
- To ensure compliance with the Utilities Regulations, all tender opportunities with an estimated value of £347,868 or above, are advertised in the European Journal which can be accessed by local suppliers.
- Taking appropriate steps to implement procurement guidance from Central Procurement Directorate, some of which is specifically directed towards improving opportunities for local enterprises.

In addition, NIW recognises that some local suppliers may not have the capacity to contract directly with NIW, but will participate in the supply chain as sub-contractors. To assist local suppliers in identifying potential sub-contracting opportunities, NIW publishes on its website details of contracts awarded along with the details of the successful suppliers.

Finally, NIW annually advertises and hosts its own 'Meet the buyer' event and actively takes part in other such events that are hosted by local business forums, as and when appropriate. These events provide an opportunity for local suppliers to:-

- Better understand the tendering procedure.
- Network with other suppliers from across the industry.
- Inform NIW of their capabilities which NIW can use to shape future sourcing strategies.

- Know where to obtain information on potential tender opportunities.
- Discuss current/envisaged opportunities with procurement professionals.
- Have their procurement queries answered.

Unadopted Roads and Footpaths

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development how he plans to deal with the number of unadopted roads and footpaths.

(AQW 18281/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service works within current Private Streets legislation to bring about the satisfactory completion of roads determined for adoption within new housing developments.

Roads Service liaises with developers and other responsible parties to agree arrangements to have the necessary works completed and, when appropriate, uses the appropriate legal enforcement powers and calls upon the road bond monies, if required.

Master Plans: Bangor and Holywood

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what role his Department will have in the Bangor and Holywood Masterplans; and what financial support the Department will provide.

(AQW 18309/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Department for Social Development (DSD), in conjunction with North Down Borough Council (NDBC), has led in the development of a Masterplan for Bangor, which was published in July 2011. My Department's Roads Service was part of an advisory group providing assistance to the development of urban regeneration initiatives for the town centre of Bangor. The same arrangements are to be adopted when the advisory group for the Holywood Masterplan is formed in the coming months.

My Department was asked to fund the reconfiguration of Hamilton Road in Bangor Town Centre, if traffic modelling showed a future benefit. However, this benefit has not yet been proven and such a scheme may not be classed as a priority, when considered alongside other competing projects promoting safety and traffic progression.

My Department has also been asked to contribute to the cost of resurfacing the carriageways within the extents of the Bangor and Holywood public realm schemes. I can confirm Roads Service would be prepared to fund and carry out resurfacing works to the main carriageway (High Street) as part of the Holywood public realm scheme. However, it is not in a position to commit any further additional funding for roads within Bangor, at this time.

My officials remain committed to working with DSD, NDBC and their consultants on the development of the Holywood Masterplan programme, as well as implementation of the public realm schemes in Bangor and Holywood over the period of the works, to the end of 2015.

Kilcooley Estate, Bangor: Footpath Resurfacing

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development whether all the footpaths in the Kilcooley estate, Bangor have now been resurfaced.

(AQW 18320/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: All of the footways in Kilcooley Estate, Bangor were originally constructed with flagstones. My Department's Roads Service has resurfaced in asphalt all of the footways for which it has maintenance responsibilities, however others within the estate, which the Northern Ireland Housing Executive is responsible for, remain in their original form.

Derry/Londonderry: UK City of Culture

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Regional Development what support his Department is giving to help achieve the One Plan theme of Sustainable Connected Cities as part of the Derry/Londonderry UK City of Culture vision.

(AQW 18336/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department is a member of the One Plan Inter-Departmental Co-ordination Group and is committed to supporting implementation of the One Plan. This is reflected in the significant commitment my Department is making towards the delivery of a range of Roads and Public Transport projects in the North West. These align with the One Plan and include the following:

Public Transport:

- funding a project to upgrade the railway track between Coleraine and Londonderry over three phases, with the first phase to be completed in 2013 in time to accommodate a projected increase in passengers for the Derry/Londonderry City of Culture year;
- a full revision of Londonderry city bus services by Translink and creation of a quality bus corridor; and
- development of proposals for a bus priority lane and investigating associated technology.

Roads:

- the proposed dualling of part of the A5 between Londonderry and Strabane improving access to both Londonderry, the main centre of population in the North West with its port and airport facilities and to Strabane, with its important cross border link. In addition, Roads Service continues to progress development of the planning process for the A6 Londonderry to Dungiven dualling scheme, with the results awaited of a Public Inquiry held last September (progression of this scheme will be subject to funding being made available in future budget settlements);
- an extension of park and ride facilities at Drumahoe to 271 spaces (to be delivered by the middle of February 2013);
- completion of the Outer Orbital Route Feasibility Study;
- the development and processing of legislation required to deliver a Residents' Parking Scheme in the Bogside by end of 2013;
- the development of a Car Park Management system, which will utilise variable messaging signs located strategically throughout the city; and
- the delivery of a traffic calming scheme at Rossville Street/Lecky Road, and progression of a further scheme at Steelstown Road.

In addition, officials within my Department continue to engage with ILEX and Derry City Council to examine further opportunities to support the delivery of the One Plan and are currently looking at options to widen the One Plan as part of a Spatial Planning Framework for the wider North West.

Rural Roads: Omagh and Strabane

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the budget that has been set aside for the maintenance of the rural roads infrastructure in the (i) Omagh District Council area; and (ii) Strabane District Council area in (a) 2013/2014; and (b) 2014/2015; and whether additional monies have been secured for essential maintenance work in the previous three years' monitoring rounds.

(AQW 18339/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service does not maintain separate financial records to distinguish between rural and urban roads. In addition, final budgets for the maintenance of all roads infrastructure in the Omagh and Strabane District Council areas for the 2013/14 and 2014/15 financial years have not yet been set. When available, budget details will be published in the Annual Reports to District Councils.

Details of additional monies secured for Structural Maintenance in Omagh and Strabane District Councils in the three financial years from 2009/10 to 2011/12 are provided in the table below:

District Council	Financial Year		
	2009/10 (£k)	2010/11 (£k)	2011/12 (£k)
Omagh	932	1,515	1,736
Strabane	741	1,082	1,507

Town Centre Trade

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment has been completed to ascertain the impact on town centre trade of charging for car parks that were previously free to use,

(AQW 18378/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's budget, which was approved by the Assembly in 2011, included plans to increase parking charges in each of the four years of the budget period. While the Year 1 increases were applied, including the introduction of charges to a number of car parks which were previously free, I announced in November 2012 there would be a freeze on any further increases within the current budget period.

Charging in Roads Service car parks serves to discourage all-day parking and consequently improves availability of spaces for town centre users. While it is beyond the remit of my Department to monitor levels of trading in town and city centres, I would expect that improved accessibility, through the increased availability of car-parking spaces, would make a positive contribution towards town centre activity.

Civil Servants: Unrest

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of Civil Servants from his Department who have left work early since 3 December 2012 due to unrest; (ii) and to detail the associated financial cost to his departmental budget.

(AQW 18456/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department has not issued any formal instruction to its staff on this matter. However, staff can make use of flexible working arrangements which allow them to leave work early if required. The nature of flexible working is such that hours unworked during a particular day or time period are made up at a later stage.

Translink: Community Transport Pilot Scheme

Mr Molloy asked the Minister for Regional Development whether the proposed pilot scheme between community transport provision and Translink is on schedule.

(AQO 3169/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department is working in co-operation with Translink, the Southern Education and Library Board, the Rural Community Transport Partnerships, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and representatives from the Health Boards to identify the opportunities for improvements to the integration and efficiency of publicly-funded transport services. In order to assess the short, medium and long-term changes that are possible, it is proposed to undertake a pilot project in the Dungannon/Cookstown area. It is expected that after a period of planning the pilot will begin later this year, followed by an evaluation, the duration of which has yet to be decided. Local stakeholders will be involved at key points throughout the project.

A5: Funding

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline any recent discussions he has had with the Minister of Finance and Personnel in relation to securing the budget for the A5.

(AQO 3170/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department continues to work closely with the Department of Finance and Personnel regarding future budgets for the A5 and any financial implications arising from the delayed start to the scheme.

This co-operation has enabled some internal reprofiling of my Department's budget, which will facilitate the deferral of some of the A5 allocation, to when it is required. In addition, at my prompting, the Finance Minister has secured flexibility from HM Treasury to carry forward £50 million of Reinvestment and Reform Initiative (RRI) borrowing power into 2014-15. This additional flexibility is immensely helpful in managing the ongoing delay to the A5 project.

Taxis: Bus Lanes

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the consultation on all taxis being allowed access to bus lanes.

(AQO 3171/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's officials are currently finalising the Consultation Report relating to all taxis being allowed access to bus lanes. I hope to be in a position to make a decision on this issue before the end of this month.

However, should I decide that all taxis are permitted access to bus lanes, this would be conditional on the Department of the Environment changing the taxi licensing regime to move to a single licence type.

Cars: Short Journeys

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on how his Department is encouraging the public not to use their cars for short journeys.

(AQO 3173/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Executive has agreed my Active Travel Strategy and I intend to launch the Strategy shortly.

The strategy was developed in co-operation with other Departments. It encourages more active and healthier modes of travel such as cycling and walking – particularly for the large number of shorter journeys which we all make.

The strategy includes funding active travel demonstration projects to show how active travel can benefit people and communities, the environment and the economy, and in so doing generate enthusiasm to develop active travel more widely. One of these projects, the Belfast Public Bike Hire Scheme, involves installing a third generation bike hire scheme in Belfast city centre by 2014/15.

Under 'Belfast on the Move' 20 new controlled pedestrian crossing points, 0.8km of new dedicated cycle lanes and 2.6km of new bus lanes, which also accommodate cyclists, will be introduced within the city centre. This will help free up city centre street space for the benefit of walking and cycling.

My Department continues to work with Schools promoting the walking and cycling targets in the Programme for Government. Working with school children provides the opportunity to mould travel behaviour for life.

My Department was at the forefront of implementing the NICS Cycle to Work scheme which I launched last June. This scheme enables staff to hire a cycle for use for the journey to and from work. This scheme has been made available to staff within the Northern Ireland Civil Service since June 2012.

Car Parking: Block Payment Schemes

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has any plans to introduce weekly, monthly or yearly block payment schemes for town centre car parking,
(AQO 3174/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: A limited number of monthly and quarterly season tickets are made available at the majority of Roads Service charged car-parks. The season tickets offer a cost saving in comparison to daily charges.

The number of season tickets made available for each car-park will depend on the number of spaces and normal usage of spaces within the car-park but does not secure the availability of a parking space in the car-park.

At present, there are no plans to introduce weekly or yearly season tickets for town centre car parking.

Street Lighting: Belfast

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the delays in repairing street lighting in Belfast.
(AQO 3175/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am pleased to inform the Member that the contractual issue, which had recently delayed the repair of street lights within Belfast, has been resolved. The backlog of repairs has also been cleared and any new street lighting outages are presently being attended to within the normal response period of 5 working days.

Car Parking: Enniskillen

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department has considered the introduction of pay on foot (barrier) car parks in Enniskillen town centre to improve compliance with parking payments and to reduce traffic congestion in the town.
(AQO 3176/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Although pay on foot car parks are automated, they do require the presence of a parking attendant. Due to the costs of purchasing and maintaining the equipment required to operate these car parks and the requirement to provide an attendant, the capital and ongoing operational costs for Pay on Foot barrier systems are substantially higher than those for Pay and Display car-parks. As my Department is obliged to seek recovery of the costs of providing parking services, its policy is to use more economical Pay and Display car parking systems, where possible.

My Department therefore currently has no plans to introduce any Pay on Foot car parks in Enniskillen.

Unadopted Housing and Roads: NAMA

Mr Lynch asked the Minister for Regional Development what proposals are in place for dealing with unadopted housing developments and roads which are National Asset Management Agency held properties.
(AQO 3177/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: In cases where housing developers have ceased trading, including those sites owned by the National Asset Management Agency, officials from my Department's Roads Service 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 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.

Department for Social Development

Welfare Reform Bill

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the consequences if the Welfare Reform Bill does not become law.
(AQW 18161/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): Although Northern Ireland has devolved responsibility for Social Security, by and large we operate a single social security system as the cost of social security benefits payments is met direct from HM Treasury on a needs basis. Effectively this means that individuals in Northern Ireland receive the same by way of social security benefits and tax credits as individuals elsewhere in the UK and are subject to the same conditions of entitlement.

If the Welfare Reform Bill for Northern Ireland does not become law then the outcome has to be planned for, that the Northern Ireland Block Grant would be affected by very significant costs on an ongoing basis until such times as parity is reinstated. Iain Duncan Smith, Secretary for Work and Pensions has already made it clear that divergence from the GB social security

system would have financial consequences for the Block Grant. The level of any adjustment would be a matter for discussion between the Northern Ireland Executive and the United Kingdom government. Any reduction in the Block Grant would have major consequences across all Northern Ireland Departments and their spending priorities with the inevitable consequence that other public services provided to all citizens in Northern Ireland would suffer.

An issue which cannot be ignored in such a scenario would be our ability to continue to process claims and pay claimants under current benefit rules. The IT systems used in Northern Ireland are owned and maintained by GB, with Northern Ireland paying a small percentage of the cost of running the GB system. As GB implements the new benefits and changes to existing benefits created by the Welfare Reform Act 2012 the DWP IT system will be changed. In that event Northern Ireland would have to either procure a Northern Ireland specific system or implement clerical work-arounds in order to continue to pay benefits under existing rules. Neither solution is appealing and paying full costs of procuring and maintaining a dedicated IT system would not be affordable.

Neighbourhood Renewal: Kilcooley Estate, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development how much money has been spent on Neighbourhood Renewal for the Kilcooley Estate, Bangor over the last five financial years.

(AQW 18165/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The total amount spent on Neighbourhood Renewal for the Kilcooley Estate, Bangor over the last five financial years is as follows:

Financial Year	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	Total
Amount spent	£140,989	£374,689	£293,814	£295,634	£416,738	£1,521,864

Small Pockets of Deprivation: Funding

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development how much money has been spent on Small Pockets of Deprivation for the Rathgill Estate, Bangor over the last five financial years.

(AQW 18166/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The amount spent on Rathgill Estate, Bangor through the Small Pockets of Deprivation programme over the last five financial years is set out in the table below:

2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
£49795	£73647	£78248	£78136	£76400

Environmental Improvements: Kilcooley Estate, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development how much money has been spent by his Department on environmental improvements at the Kilcooley Estate, Bangor over the last five years.

(AQW 18168/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In the past 5 years almost £170,000 has been spent on environmental improvements in the Kilcooley Neighbourhood Renewal Area. This is in line with the funding priorities determined by the Kilcooley Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership's Action Plan, which takes account of the needs of the area, and reflects previous spending in the preceding period when over £720,000 was allocated to environmental improvement programmes.

Co-ownership Scheme: Administration Costs

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 17078/11-15, to detail the total cost of administering the Co-Ownership Scheme during the period from April 2008 to October 2008 inclusive.

(AQW 18208/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The total cost of administering the Co-Ownership scheme during the period from April 2008 to October 2008 inclusive was £1,763,350.00

This amount is broken down as follows, Personnel Costs £775,158.00; Establishment Costs £133,103.00; Administration Costs £192,422.00; and Funding Costs £662,667.00

The breakdown is provided to show "funding costs", which was a unique item in that period when the NI Co-Ownership Housing Association was obtaining private finance, and also "personnel, establishment and administration costs" which, together, comprise the running costs of the organisation.

Co-ownership Scheme: Purchase of Property

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 17078/11-15, given that £15m was available to the Co-Ownership Scheme for 2008/09, to detail the amount paid by the Co-Ownership Scheme to assist the purchase of property during the period April to October 2008.

(AQW 18228/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The amount paid by the Co-Ownership Scheme to assist the purchase of property during the period April to October 2008 inclusive totalled £13,757,330.00. This was in respect of 248 properties in which the applications were received prior to April 2008.

Benefit System

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Social Development whether changes to the benefit system, which were made by the Coalition Government, have been rolled out in all areas of Northern Ireland; and if only in some areas, which areas have been targeted first.

(AQW 18251/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Northern Ireland Welfare Reform Bill contains a number of proposed changes to the benefit system which largely correspond to those which have been (or will be) implemented by the Coalition Government.

Although introduced in the Assembly on 1st October 2012, the Northern Ireland Bill is currently at the Committee Stage and therefore none of the proposed changes have been rolled out in Northern Ireland yet.

High Streets Task Force

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Social Development (i) when the departmental High Streets Taskforce will report; (ii) how many town centre meetings the Taskforce has called; and (iii) whether he has been given an interim report.

(AQW 18255/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I received the Taskforce report at the end of November and was pleased to be able to endorse a number of recommendations which my Department can take forward to support town and city centres. The DSD High Streets Taskforce consulted with a range of stakeholders and Departments most closely involved with city and town centre issues. In addition the taskforce also held 29 'High Street' meetings in cities and towns across Northern Ireland to hear directly the views of high street traders and other parties on the issues affecting them. A number of the issues raised were cross-cutting or within the remit of another department and for this reason I brought the report to the Executive's economic sub-committee in December for discussion. In the coming weeks I intend to fulfil my commitment to report back to a core group of High Street stakeholder representatives. Following this meeting I will make the report available on my Department's website for others to read and consider.

Departmental Spend

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Social Development to detail his Department's spending in each constituency since May 2011.

(AQW 18258/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Departmental spending is not routinely captured and recorded on a constituency basis.

However, full details of the Department's expenditure for the 2011-12 financial year were published in the annual Resource Accounts, laid before the Assembly and copy placed in the Assembly library in July 2012. The 2012-13 Resource Accounts will similarly be published in July 2013.

Welfare Reform: Comprehensive Spending Review

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Social Development how much he has set aside in his budget to mitigate the effects of Welfare Reform in each year of the next Comprehensive Spending Review period.

(AQW 18265/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Department for Social Development does not yet have a budget allocation for the next Comprehensive Spending Review period. This will only be determined once HM Treasury has conducted a comprehensive spending review and once the Northern Ireland Executive has set the budget for the next spending review period.

The amount of funding allocated for Welfare Reform will be a matter for the Northern Ireland Executive in line with Northern Ireland Executive priorities and the outcome of the UK comprehensive spending review process.

Neighbourhood Renewal: Kilcooley Estate, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what level of funding is planned to go towards Neighbourhood Renewal for the Kilcooley Estate, Bangor in the next three financial years.

(AQW 18285/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Kilcooley Neighbourhood Partnership's Action Plan sets out priorities for implementing Neighbourhood Renewal through to 2015. The action plan is reviewed yearly by the Neighbourhood Partnership with new actions and projects added. Currently funding of £863,023 has been committed to a range of projects, which have already been approved, over the next three financial years. Future projects will be considered, as and when these are added to the Action Plan, taking into account their value for money, their potential contribution to addressing deprivation and the availability of finance.

Small Pockets of Deprivation: Funding

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what level of Small Pockets of Deprivation funding is planned for Rathgill Estate in Bangor for the next three financial years.

(AQW 18286/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Small Pockets of Deprivation programme is due to end in March 2015.

The funding allocated to Rathgill Estate under the Small Pockets of Deprivation programme is based entirely on bids for funding from Rathgill Community Association. It is not possible to anticipate their future bids, which will be subject to appraisal, however funding for the last three years has averaged approximately £77,530.

Areas at Risk Programme: Beechfield Estate, Donaghadee

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development how much has been spent on the Areas at Risk programme in the Beechfield Estate, Donaghadee.

(AQW 18287/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Beechfield Estate in Donaghadee received funding of £67,766 from the Department's Areas at Risk programme for the period 1 April 2011 until 31 March 2013 to finance the running costs of the Beechfield Community House and a range of community activities drawn up by the Beechfield Residents' Association Planning Team. To date £16,478 has been drawn down.

Areas at Risk Programme: Beechfield Estate, Donaghadee

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development whether there is any flexibility to allow a year's extension for the Areas at Risk Programme for the Beechfield Estate, Donaghadee.

(AQW 18288/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Beechfield Estate in Donaghadee received funding of £67,766 from the Department's Areas at Risk programme for the period 1 April 2011 until 31 March 2013 to finance the running costs of the Beechfield Community House and a range of community activities drawn up by the Beechfield Residents Association Planning Team. The programme, however, was slow to start and it was agreed that the end date would be extended until 30 September 2013 by which time it is anticipated that the funding allocation will be fully drawn down.

Housing Executive: North Down

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development what plans are in place for district, area and inter-agency Housing Executive meetings in light of its restructuring, with particular reference to North Down.

(AQW 18296/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I assume the Member is referring to the restructuring programme currently underway in the Housing Executive which will result in their offices largely aligning with the proposed councils under the Review of Public Administration. Hence the Newtownards and Bangor offices will form one management unit. Their aim is to retain both Newtownards and Bangor offices to sustain local customer services but to locate management and administrative resources in the Newtownards office to maximise efficiency.

While the management team will largely be based in Newtownards, managers will be available to meet tenants and elected representatives in Bangor as required. Furthermore there will still be a management presence in the Bangor office and the majority of staff delivering local services will continue to work locally from the Bangor office. Once the restructuring is complete the Housing Executive will communicate the new arrangements.

In the interim services to the public and elected representatives will continue as normal with interagency, council and partnership meetings proceeding as before.

Disability Living Allowance: Appeals

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Disability Living Allowance appeals that have been (i) lodged; (ii) processed; and (iii) successfully overturned in the claimant's favour, in the Foyle Constituency, in the last three months.

(AQW 18300/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information cannot be provided in the format sought. The Appeals Service arranges for Disability Living Allowance (DLA) appeals to be heard at venues throughout Northern Ireland. The selection of venues for appeal hearings is determined by the postal district within which the appellant resides. The data is only available in this format.

Any appeal lodged with the Social Security Agency is subject to reconsideration and may therefore not progress to The Appeals Service. Appeals may not be dealt with in the same year that they are received.

The Chairman of the Tribunal records whether the decision made on appeal was either more or less advantageous than a previous decision. A more advantageous decision may increase the allowance or direct that a new award be made. A less advantageous decision may reduce the allowance or make no change to the original determination. The table below sets out information for the last three months in respect of DLA appeals within the postal district of Londonderry:

Period	No. of appeals received	No. of appeals determined	No. of appeals determined that were more advantageous
1/10 – 31/12/2012	86	98**	44

** Note – more appeals were determined than received, as some of those received in previous months are included in the determined figure, whereas the received numbers relate solely to the 3-month period.

Full Duty Applicant Status: Under-16s

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of children under the age of 16 who are in receipt of full duty applicant status.

(AQW 18316/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive advises that it does not accept homelessness applications from children under the age of 16 years of age. Accordingly, no one under 16 years old has been awarded Full Duty Applicant status (FDA). In the event that a young person under 16 years of age approaches the Housing Executive, contact is made with the local Social Services.

Kilclief Gardens, Bangor: Demolition of Flats

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what is the timescale for the demolition of the flats at Kilclief Gardens in the Kilcooley estate, Bangor.

(AQW 18324/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive anticipates that the flats at Kilclief Gardens, Kilcooley, Bangor will be demolished within 3 to 4 months.

The Housing Executive is currently in the process of procuring a new contractor for this work as the contractor originally scheduled for the demolition has gone into liquidation.

Welfare Reform Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development for an estimate of the additional financial impact on his Department's budget if the Welfare Reform Bill does not receive Royal Assent until June 2013.

(AQW 18328/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Social Security spending on Northern Ireland and all the associated risk of increased demand is met directly by HM Treasury on the basis that Northern Ireland maintains parity of social security policy. It is outside of the Northern Ireland Executive managed Departmental Expenditure Limit Block and does not directly impact the funding allocated by the Executive to spending on areas such as health and education.

A delay in the Northern Ireland Welfare Reform Bill would mean that Northern Ireland is unlikely to achieve the same introduction dates as Great Britain. Under the funding arrangement between HM Treasury and Northern Ireland, adjustments can be made to the Northern Ireland Executive Block where the Northern Ireland Executive decides to change social security policy to differ from the rest of the United Kingdom. The level of any adjustment would be a matter for discussion with UK ministers.

The Northern Ireland Executive would have to decide where any resulting deductions are found from the budgets of Northern Ireland departments.

The early estimated cost of a delay in the Welfare Reform Bill is £38m. This timescale is based on 6 months and assumes that the Welfare Reform Bill receives Royal Assent in June 2013 with a further 3 months to pass the required regulations. The £38million estimate includes annually managed expenditure controls which will not be achieved and the funding which may have to be found by the Northern Ireland Executive for the discretionary elements of Social Fund. The impact of recent changes to introduction dates for welfare reform such as the delay in the managed migration for Personal Independence Payment announced by the Coalition government or the Northern Ireland flexibilities secured for Universal Credit are excluded.

The costs of the administrating, calculating and paying social security benefits and implementing welfare reforms are met from the Northern Ireland Executive Block Departmental Expenditure Limit and the Department for Social Development budget. This will have to meet any additional costs of administrative work arounds, welfare reform projects and costs of accessing later IT releases or using IT systems which the Department for Work and Pensions have updated or amended as the reforms go live in Great Britain.

My officials are continuing work to ascertain the costs and impacts.

Tenants: Regulations

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development whether he has any plans to introduce regulations that will ensure that tenants of private rental properties will be protected should their landlord be declared bankrupt, including provision to ensure they do not lose their deposits.

(AQW 18335/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department is currently assessing applications by a number of bodies to become tenancy deposit scheme providers. It is envisaged that the schemes, which will safeguard tenant deposits and provide a fair and effective mechanism to resolve disputes, will be operational from April this year.

Where a landlord takes out a mortgage and makes the lender fully aware that a tenancy exists, or will exist, the general rule is that the lender will also be bound by the lease. This means if the landlord is declared bankrupt and the lender later gains possession of the property they will have to let the lease run on until the end of the contractual period and accept rent from the tenant. Once a lender obtains a possession order from the Courts he must apply to the Enforcement of Judgements Office (EJO) to have it enforced. I understand that the EJO has protocols in place which aim to keep tenants involved in cases of repossession.

Housing Executive

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Social Development, in light of his recent announcement regarding the Housing Executive, what assurances he can give to people who remain as leaseholders of former Housing Executive properties on which the Housing Executive still holds responsibility for external maintenance, that these responsibilities will be met by any new housing authority or association.

(AQW 18342/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My statement announces the beginning of a process to explore the development of new structures which will deliver focused and sustainable housing into the future. It is not my intention to adversely affect the rights of tenants or former tenants but is about improving services. We are at the very early stages of the design process and I acknowledged in my statement that much work is still to be done. That said I can assure you that all responsibilities currently held by the Housing Executive will be considered and appropriate transfer of these responsibilities will be developed. There will be engagement and consultation as the process evolves to deal with all areas of concern.

Housing Executive: Temporary Accommodation

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development how many children are in households which are deemed as temporary accommodation.

(AQW 18348/11-15)

Mr McCausland: It should be noted that temporary accommodation is not defined in legislation. However, legislation requires the Housing Executive to ensure that temporary accommodation (such as Housing Executive Hostels, Voluntary Hostels, or accommodation in the Private Rented sector) is made available to applicants who are deemed to be homeless.

The information is not available in the format requested. However, the Housing Executive advise that, at 14 January 2013 there were 934 households with children who are living in temporary accommodation as follows:-

- 115 - Housing Executive Hostels
- 144 - Voluntary Sector Hostels
- 675 - Private Sector

Full Duty Applicant Status: Children

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development how many children are in receipt of full duty applicant status.

(AQW 18349/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I would refer the Member to the answer provided to AQW 18316/11-15

Credit Union Accounts

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the powers of the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Division to investigate Credit Union accounts.

(AQW 18350/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Child Maintenance and Enforcement Division have powers of investigation into Credit Unions under article 17 of the Child Support (Northern Ireland) Order 1991.

This provides that inspectors appointed by the Department can acquire such information as is required for the assessment and enforcement of maintenance liability and as may be required by the Department for any purpose of the Child Support Order.

We have recently become aware that Credit Unions have been subject to regulation by the Financial Services Authority from 1 April 2012. My Officials are currently seeking legal opinion and clarification on the inclusion of Credit Unions in respect of enforcement powers

- collection and enforcement powers under Article 29 of the Child Support (NI) Order 1991.
- Lump sum deduction Order under Article 32E and Regular Deduction Orders under article 32A of the Child Support (NI) Order 1991.
- Enforcement of a Liability Order through a garnishee orders via the Enforcement of Judgements office under Article 35 of the Child Support (NI) Order 1991.

I will report back to the Assembly when I have received a definitive answer.

Window Schemes: North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the timescale for the LAPs window schemes for North Down.

(AQW 18361/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 15835/11-15 on 23 October, which advised that the need for double glazing schemes to be programmed through Local Area Priority schemes was superseded by the Programme for Government target to ensure full double glazing in all Housing Executive properties by 2014/15.

The Housing Executive has advised that the current position regarding double glazing schemes in North Down is as follows: -

- The scheme in Lisnabreen/Clanmorris for 168 properties started in August 2012 with an approximate end date of May 2013.
- The scheme for 167 properties in Rathgill/Kilcooley/Loughview started in October 2012 and is estimated to be completed in July 2013.
- The scheme in Whitehill for 257 properties started in November 2012 with an approximate end date of September 2013.

Housing Executive: Conlig

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development whether any maintenance schemes are planned for Housing Executive homes in Conlig.

(AQW 18362/11-15)

Mr McCausland: A kitchen replacement scheme for 44 properties is planned for Conlig in 2015/16.

Public Realm Works: Millisle

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development whether any funding is available for public realm works in Millisle.

(AQW 18365/11-15)

Mr McCausland: DSD's urban regeneration activities are restricted to settlements which have a population of 4,500 or more. The population of Millisle recorded in the 2001 Census figure was 1,791 persons within the statutory development limit. Consequently, Millisle is defined by NISRA as a rural settlement and, therefore, falls under the remit of DARD.

Welfare Reform: Mobility Scooters and Guide Dogs

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development how many people will lose their (i) mobility scooters; and (ii) guide dogs as a result of Welfare Reform.

(AQW 18433/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The provision of both these services is through charitable organisations which fall outside the direct remit of my Department.

- (i) Motability is an independent voluntary organisation and is responsible for the administration of the Motability contract hire scheme. While my Department facilitates the operation of the scheme by diverting payments of Disability Living Allowance to meet contract hire payments, it is not directly involved in setting the policy for the Scheme.

At present, eligibility to the Motability scheme depends upon a person being in receipt of the higher rate mobility component of Disability Living Allowance or War Pensioners' Mobility Supplement. As a result of Welfare Reform, it is proposed that Personal Independence Payment will replace Disability Living Allowance for those of working age, and the enhanced rate of the mobility component of Personal Independence Payment will act as the gateway to the Motability scheme in the future. The new assessment criteria for Personal Independence Payment have been designed to ensure that individuals whose ability to get around is severely impacted by impairments affecting either physical

or non-physical abilities may receive the mobility component at the enhanced rate. This reflects the key principle of developing an assessment which considers the impacts of impairments equally, regardless of their nature. It is not possible to pre-empt the outcome of individual assessments under Personal Independence Payment and consequently any potential impact on the number of people who will be eligible for mobility scooters in the future.

- (ii) Guide dogs are the responsibility of the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association and are provided on a voluntary, charitable basis. This is outside the scope of my Department.

Energy Efficiency Directive

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development how he intends to meet Article 4 of the Energy Efficiency Directive (Directive 2012/27/EU) to mobilise investment in the renovation of the national stock of residential and commercial buildings. (AQW 18434/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Article 4 of the Energy Efficiency Directive requires member states to establish a long term strategy for mobilising investment in the renovation of the national stock of residential and commercial buildings, both public and private. The strategy should encompass:

- an overview of the national building stock;
- identification of cost effective approaches to renovations;
- policies and measures to stimulate cost effective deep renovations to buildings;
- a forward looking perspective to guide investment decisions; and,
- an evidence based estimate of expected energy savings and wider benefits.

Cross departmental discussions are being facilitated by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to determine the department with lead responsibility on each of the articles contained in the Directive.

Northlands Independent Treatment Centre

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development why Supporting People has withdrawn its funding for Northlands Addiction Treatment Centre, given the role it plays in supporting people through their recovery from addiction problems. (AQW 18470/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive Supporting People Programme had an annual funding agreement of £52,192 for 8 places at the Northlands support living scheme.

Following an inspection by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority we were advised on 9th May 2012 that the service had been registered as a residential care unit.

In line with the Housing Support Regulations NI (2003) it was necessary to cease funding to Northlands with effect from the date of registration, 11th March 2012 as registered schemes are not eligible for Supporting People funding.

Window Replacement: Willowbrook Estate, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what plans there are to replace windows in Willowbrook Estate, Bangor. (AQW 18473/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive owns 104 dwellings in the Willowbrook Estate in Bangor. 80 of which already has double glazing installed previously. The remaining 24 dwellings are included in a double glazing scheme programmed for 2013/14.

Maintenance Schemes: Willowbrook Estate, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development whether there are any plans for maintenance schemes for the Willowbrook Estate, Bangor. (AQW 18474/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Of the 104 dwellings owned by the Housing Executive in the Willowbrook Estate, 19 are programmed to have kitchens replaced in 2017. The remaining 85 dwellings had their kitchens replaced in 2006. There are also 13 dwellings with Economy 7 heating which will have gas installed in 2013/14. All other dwellings already have either gas or oil heating, apart from some properties where a tenant refused a heating change.

Housing Benefit: Arrears

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development how many people who are living in Housing Executive properties are currently in arrears for Housing Benefit. (AQW 18476/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I assume the Member is referring to how many Housing Executive tenants who receive Housing Benefit are also in rent arrears. As at 16 January 2013 there were 12,724 Housing Executive tenants receiving Housing Benefit who were also in rent arrears of any value.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 15771/11-15, what was the percentage of recipients of Disability Living Allowance, in each constituency at 31 December, in each of the preceding ten years. (AQW 18507/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The table below shows the percentage of recipients of Disability Living Allowance, in each Assembly Area for the years 2002 to 2010.

Assembly Area	% of Assembly Area Population receiving Disability Living Allowance								
	2010	2009	2008	2007	2006	2005	2004	2003	2002
Belfast East	9.8%	9.6%	9.5%	9.5%	9.5%	9.4%	9.2%	8.7%	8.4%
Belfast North	14.6%	14.2%	13.8%	13.8%	13.8%	13.7%	13.5%	12.7%	12.4%
Belfast South	8.0%	7.9%	7.8%	7.7%	7.7%	7.5%	7.4%	6.9%	6.7%
Belfast West	19.2%	19.0%	18.4%	18.2%	18.2%	18.0%	17.7%	16.9%	16.5%
East Antrim	8.1%	7.9%	7.8%	7.6%	7.4%	7.3%	7.1%	6.6%	6.3%
East Londonderry	8.5%	8.2%	7.9%	7.8%	7.6%	7.5%	7.3%	6.8%	6.6%
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	8.9%	9.2%	8.8%	8.7%	8.5%	8.5%	8.8%	8.4%	8.1%
Foyle	13.3%	13.1%	13.0%	13.0%	12.9%	12.9%	12.7%	12.2%	11.9%
Lagan Valley	7.7%	7.6%	7.5%	7.4%	7.3%	7.1%	7.0%	6.6%	1.2%
Mid Ulster	10.3%	10.2%	10.0%	9.9%	9.7%	9.8%	9.9%	9.5%	9.2%
Newry And Armagh	10.6%	10.6%	10.5%	10.5%	10.6%	10.7%	10.7%	10.0%	9.7%
North Antrim	7.8%	7.6%	7.5%	7.3%	7.3%	7.1%	6.9%	6.5%	6.2%
North Down	6.8%	6.7%	6.5%	6.5%	6.3%	6.1%	5.9%	5.5%	2.9%
South Antrim	7.9%	7.7%	7.5%	7.4%	7.3%	7.3%	7.2%	6.8%	5.8%
South Down	9.9%	9.8%	9.6%	9.5%	9.6%	9.5%	9.3%	8.8%	8.0%
Strangford	8.1%	7.9%	7.7%	7.6%	7.5%	7.4%	7.1%	6.7%	0.5%
Upper Bann	10.8%	10.7%	10.5%	10.5%	10.6%	10.6%	10.4%	9.8%	9.6%
West Tyrone	13.7%	13.6%	13.3%	13.1%	13.0%	12.9%	12.7%	12.1%	11.8%
Total	10.3%	10.1%	9.9%	9.8%	9.8%	9.7%	9.6%	9.1%	8.0%

The Information provided in this response is governed by the Principles and Protocols of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. This is enforced by UK Statistics Authority.

Social Housing: Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development how many people are currently on the social housing list in Carrickfergus. (AQW 18512/11-15)

Mr McCausland: There are currently 963 applicants on the social housing waiting list for Carrickfergus, 548 of whom are in housing stress.

Welfare Reform: Mental Health Issues

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what changes to his Department's services for people with mental health issues will result from Welfare Reform. (AQW 18520/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Welfare Reform will bring about a number of changes to existing benefits and the way they are administered. Whilst the proposed changes will not have a disproportionate impact on those with mental health issues specifically, my Department is currently considering the impact of the changes on all vulnerable groups in order to put in place appropriate support mechanisms.

Housing Executive: Double glazing Contract

Mrs Dobson asked Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 13996/11-15, what impact his recent decision to abolish the Housing Executive will have on the delivery of a new double glazing contract for existing Housing Executive tenants. (AQW 18525/11-15)

Mr McCausland: For clarification my recent announcement referred to restructuring and not the abolition of the Housing Executive. It is important to realise that there is still a need for the functions that the Housing Executive currently performs to continue within the new structure in order to deliver services to tenants.

The double glazing programme is on target to be completed by March 2015 and the restructuring of the Housing Executive will have no impact.

Social Housing: Larne

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development how many people are currently on the social housing list in Larne. (AQW 18567/11-15)

Mr McCausland: There are currently 495 applicants on the social housing waiting list for Larne of whom 147 are in Housing Stress.

Housing Executive: Donaghadee and Millisle

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many people in Donaghadee and Millisle are waiting to be housed by the Housing Executive. (AQW 18575/11-15)

Mr McCausland: There are currently 155 applicants on the social housing waiting list for Donaghadee, 94 of whom are in Housing Stress; and 63 applicants on the social housing waiting list for Millisle, 32 of whom are in Housing Stress.

Oaklee Housing Association

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development how much public money has been awarded to Oaklee Housing Association since 2010; and how much more will be awarded by the end of this Assembly term. (AQW 18597/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The amount of Housing Association Grant (HAG) payable to Oaklee Housing Association against schemes which started on site from 2010/2011 to 31 December 2012 is shown in Table 1: -

Table 1

Year	Total HAG Paid
2010/11	£21.7m
2011/12	£7.7m
2012/13*	£0.869m

* Figure represents starts to 31/12/2012

In addition, the Housing Executive estimates that Oaklee Housing Association could potentially receive a further £11.9m HAG approximately, based on schemes which are programmed to start on site before the end of the current financial year, as shown in Table 2: -

Table 2

Programmed schemes Jan – March 2013	Total estimated HAG payable
Project approved (yet to start)	£2.1m
Schemes under assessment	£6.8m (estimate)
Schemes yet to be submitted	£3m (estimate)

The Housing Executive also administers Housing Association Grant to Housing Associations to adapt homes to meet the accommodation requirements of tenants with special needs and for Voluntary Purchase Grants. Funding awarded to Oaklee in respect of these is detailed in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Year	Funding
2010/11	£364,000
2011/12	£171,000
2012/13 (up to 31/12/12)	£80,000

Table 4 below details Housing Executive Supporting People funding paid to Oaklee for the current financial year and for the previous two years.

Table 4

Year	Funding
2010/11	£1,678,000
2011/12	£1,621,000
2012/13 **	£1,463,000

** Figure is a projected figure based on payments as at January 2013.

Note: It is not possible at this stage to provide information for 2013/14 and 2014/15 for Adaptations and Voluntary Purchase Grants; and Supporting People funding.

With regard to the period up until the end of this Assembly term, the new Social Housing Development Programme for the period 2013/14 – 2015/16 is currently with me for approval and it is therefore not possible to give an estimated Housing Association Grant figure in respect of Oaklee programmed schemes at this stage.

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Neighbourhood Renewal: Upper Bann

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the economic regeneration projects funded in each Neighbourhood Renewal Area of the Upper Bann Constituency in each of the last three financial years, including the amounts granted.

(AQW 18598/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is as follows:

NR Area	Economic Renewal Project	Annual amount granted		
		2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Portadown	Retail Capacity Building	-	£9,825.31	£17,362.29
Portadown	Promoting Sustainable Lifestyles Instructor Training	-	-	£2,582.47
Portadown	Practice Firms	-	£17,530.00	£14,310.00
Portadown	Grow Project	-	-	£7,784.94
Brownlow	Retail Capacity Building	-	£4,466.05	£7,891.95
Brownlow	Bluestone Business Park	£12,470.00	-	-
Brownlow	Promoting Sustainable Lifestyles Instructor Training	-	-	£6,456.10
Brownlow	Practice Firms	-	£17,530.00	£14,310.00
Brownlow	The Enterprise Firm	-	-	£27,927.30
Brownlow	The Grow Project	-	£2,800.00	£14,462.35
Brownlow	Outdoor Pursuits Instructor Training	-	£13,600.00	£53,800.00
Lurgan	Retail Capacity Building	-	£75,028.80	£132,584.76
Lurgan	Promoting Sustainable Lifestyles Instructor Training	-	-	£9,407.46
Lurgan	Practice Firms	-	£17,530.00	£14,310.00

NR Area	Economic Renewal Project	Annual amount granted		
		2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Lurgan	The Enterprise Firm	-	-	£18,070.00
Lurgan	The Grow Project	-	-	£21,073.71

Pension Centre, Carlisle House

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the action his Department has taken to fill vacant posts in the Pension Centre in Carlisle House.

(AQO 3183/11-15)

Mr McCausland: As at 13 January, there were four vacancies in the Pension Centre in Carlisle House.

At that date my Department had 413 staff working in Carlisle House and in an operation of that scale vacancies are a regular occurrence. My officials make use of all the options open to them under the Northern Ireland Civil Service Vacancy Management Policy when seeking to fill posts and over the past six months have filled 28 posts in the Pension Centre and identified three people who will be taking up posts in the coming weeks.

Housing Executive: Trade Unions

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development what measures he has taken to engage with trade union representatives and staff with regard to the proposed changes in the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

(AQO 3181/11-15)

Mr McCausland: NIPSA were involved in the earlier consultation phase of the PwC Housing Executive review in 2011. The overall findings of this earlier consultation informed my proposals for developing new social housing structures. I welcome NIPSA's continued input going forward and can confirm that I and my officials will be engaging with NIPSA throughout the process.

Following the release of the written statement, my Permanent Secretary wrote to the General Secretary of NIPSA stating that the Housing Executive will be asked to work with my officials in the development of this programme and there will be consultation with Trade Union Side representatives throughout.

Indeed, work on this has already begun: shortly after the issue of the written statement, Departmental officials held an initial meeting with John McPeake and Maureen Taggart, the NIHE Director of Personnel & Management services, to address primary staff concerns and to agree to work jointly to allay staff anxieties. Over the forthcoming weeks, I plan to meet with Alison Millar of NIPSA to discuss staffing concerns.

Social Housing: South Down

Mrs McKeivitt asked the Minister for Social Development how many new and affordable social houses his Department plans to build in South Down in 2013-2015.

(AQO 3186/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I am currently considering the new three year Social Housing Development Programme for approval in respect of 2013/14-2015/16.

Based on the details of the schemes currently included in the Social Housing Development Programme for 2012/13-2014/15 for South Down, there are 115 General Needs units, eight units for Young People Leaving Care, nine units of Supported Housing for people with Learning Disabilities, and 12 units of Supported Housing for the frail and elderly.

This adds up to a total of 144 units for the period 2012/13-2014/15.

Based on last year I am pleased that through Co-Ownership, in South Down, 49 houses were provided in 2011/12 and 55 so far in 2012/13.

The Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) 2012/13 – 2014/15 is published on the Housing Executive's website. The link is as follows: - http://www.nihe.gov.uk/index/services/housing_need.htm

Childcare

Mr Ó hOisín asked the Minister for Social Development whether any sanctions will be imposed on lone parents when no affordable and suitable childcare options are available to enable them to work.

(AQO 3187/11-15)

Mr McCausland: A lack of affordable and suitable childcare provision is currently considered acceptable as 'good reason' if an individual in receipt of social security benefit turns down an offer of work.

This operational flexibility will be carried forward in the guidance to support the Welfare Reform Bill for Northern Ireland which is currently undergoing its legislative passage in this Assembly.

Welfare Reform: Independent Advice Sector

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Social Development how he will ensure that the independent advice sector will have adequate resources to assist with any impacts of Welfare Reform.

(AQO 3188/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department supports frontline advice services through its Community Support Programme which provides approximately £1.6 million annually to councils who add their own funding allocation, £1.9 million in 2012/13, and commission services for their local areas.

Regional support for advice is delivered by the Northern Ireland Advice Services Consortium - made up of Advice NI, Citizens Advice NI and Law Centre NI - with a funding contract from my Department of £3.5 million in place from 1 October 2012 to 31 March 2015.

Funding of advice provision is linked closely to supporting communities and providing advice and support on new and emerging government policies and initiatives. My Department is conscious of the potential impact of Welfare Reform and officials are currently engaging with the Northern Ireland Advice Services Consortium to discuss how we can work alongside the Advice Sector to best support our claimants through the implementation of Welfare Reform.

Housing Associations

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development what measures he plans to put in place to ensure that his Department has the ability to hold housing associations to account following the proposed abolition of the Housing Executive.

(AQO 3190/11-15)

Mr McCausland: For clarification my announcement referred to restructuring and not abolition, which is a phrase the media and some members have used.

The landlord function of the Housing Executive will fall under the same regulation and inspection regime that applies to all social housing providers within the Housing Association sector.

There are a number of key measures undertaken by the Department to hold Housing Associations to account. The key areas are: -

Inspections – a rolling programme of Inspections which are carried out by my Department's Regulation and Inspection Unit to determine individual Housing Associations' compliance of the Housing Associations Guide and ongoing monitoring of Board minutes and relevant financial information. The Inspections carried out in the past four years have resulted in: -

- Eleven Housing Associations being suspended from the Social Housing Development Programme;
- Five Associations entering into mergers with other Associations;
- A further eight Associations currently in the process of merging into three;
- Nine Chief Executives being removed from their posts and two Management Teams being replaced in two associations;
- Boards having been completely refreshed in two Associations with a third moving towards this by their next Annual General Meeting.

As I said in my written statement on Social Housing Reform released on 9 January, my Department will be responsible for overall Housing Strategy, policy, legislation and funding and in addition there will be significant enhancement of the Department's Regulation and Inspection unit and function. This will be developed through a detailed programme of projects and key stakeholders will be consulted throughout the process.

A positive relationship has developed with Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Association under the leadership of Cameron Watt who has acknowledged that the inspection process is instrumental in strengthening the Housing Association movement and has indicated that NIFHA will continue to cooperate closely with the Inspection Unit.

Social Housing

Mr Lynch asked the Minister for Social Development whether any of the proposed changes to the provision and management of social housing will be made on the basis of objective need.

(AQO 3191/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive currently identify housing need and deliver housing services on the basis of objective need and any new regional housing body would continue that responsibility.

Social Housing

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development why the construction of social housing does not reflect the types of houses required.

(AQO 3192/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Social Housing Development Programme is formulated to address the needs of those households assessed as being in Housing Stress on the Social Housing Waiting List.

Before the announcement of the proposed Welfare Reform bill, it was considered that two and three bed properties would address the needs of the vast majority of households seeking social housing in Northern Ireland. With Welfare Reform, I recognised the potential for under occupation within current housing stock and the need for additional one bed units. I have instructed the Housing Executive, who manage the Social Housing Development Programme, that they must ensure that Housing Associations bring forward additional single units over the next three years.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Parliament Buildings: Fax Machines

Mr Wells asked the Assembly Commission to detail the total annual cost of renting the phone lines for the fax machines in Parliament Buildings.

(AQW 18156/11-15)

Mr P Ramsey (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The total annual cost for line rental (for telephones and fax machines) in Parliament Buildings is in the region of £58k. We do not have a separate cost for line rental for fax machines.

Building Services Branch will shortly be carrying out an audit of fax machines being used in the building and I will provide you with an update when I have the result from that review.

Parliament Buildings: Fax Machines

Mr Wells asked the Assembly Commission whether it has carried out a cost-benefit analysis on the use of fax machines in Parliament Buildings.

(AQW 18160/11-15)

Mr P Ramsey (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Assembly Commission has not carried out a cost benefit analysis on the use of fax machines in Parliament Buildings. However, following the last election, the number of fax machines in Parliament Buildings was reduced with a number of MLA's and staff no longer requiring one.

Building Services Branch will continue to monitor the need for the provision of fax machines and look for opportunities to further reduce the numbers. This will include an audit of fax machines being used in the building and I will provide you with an update when I have the result from that review.

Parliament Buildings: Great Hall Electronic Message Board

Mr Wells asked the Assembly Commission why the large electronic message board in the Great Hall remains switched on at night, weekends and public holidays.

(AQW 18163/11-15)

Mr P Ramsey (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The electronic information board located in the Great Hall is managed by the Information Systems Office. However, as they are not the last people to leave the building, it was agreed with Security that Doorkeepers /Ushers would be requested to switch off the screen last thing at night and turn it on first thing in the morning.

As well as being used to display information about Assembly business, the information screen is also used to provide emergency evacuation details and directions for 'out of hours' functions.

I can assure you that the Office of the Keeper, in conjunction with the IS Office, will endeavour to ensure that the screen is not left on for any longer than necessary to facilitate tours and events.

I hope that the above information provides the detail that you sought, however, should you require any supplementary information I would be very happy to assist with your enquiry.

Parliament Buildings: Great Hall Internet Terminal

Mr Wells asked the Assembly Commission whether there has been a recent analysis of electricity consumption and frequency of use of the internet terminal that is located at the entrance of the Great Hall.

(AQW 18182/11-15)

Mr P Ramsey (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The kiosk located at the entrance to the Great Hall is owned and maintained by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) and the Assembly Commission does not record details of its use. However, DFP have confirmed that in an average month there are approximately 450 sessions on the terminal each lasting an average of 3 minutes.

The kiosk uses the same electricity as a standard desktop computer and is programmed to turn off on a Friday evening at midnight and to restart on Monday morning to save electricity over the weekend.

Parliament Buildings: Telephone System

Mr Wells asked the Assembly Commission whether it has any plans to change the telephone system in Parliament Buildings to allow people who are being called from the Assembly to view the phone number of the caller.

(AQW 18306/11-15)

Mr P Ramsey (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Assembly Commission is currently considering the future provision of telephony within Parliament Buildings as the current service provided by the Northern Ireland Civil Service will no longer be supported from September 2013.

A number of options are being considered including the installation of Internet Protocol Telephony (IP Telephony). While there are no specific plans at this stage to provide a system with 'caller display', this issue will be considered when developing the specification for any new system.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 1 February 2013

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Energy Efficiency Measures

Mr McKay asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when they will bring forward proposals to retrofit energy efficiency measures into homes; and to explain how this will help the construction industry.

(AQW 18669/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): Our recently announced Energy and Jobs Initiative aims to boost employment in the construction sector and accelerates delivery of £60 million of capital projects, many of which will support sustainable construction projects, including those linked to retrofitting and energy efficiency.

Over the next few weeks, officials from our Department will be working with colleagues from the Department for Social Development and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to specifically refine delivery and operational proposals with the purpose of facilitating this acceleration.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Farmers: Areas of Special Scientific Interest

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether her Department has given consideration to compensating farmers and land owners whose lands do not meet the criteria in the Single Farm Payment regulations, as a consequence of Areas of Special Scientific Interest regulations.

(AQW 18351/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): In certain circumstances, Single Farm Payment (SFP) can be paid on land within an Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI). As set out in the 2012 Single Application guide, SFP can be paid on land that no longer meets the usual SFP eligibility requirements as a result of the implementation of EU legislation on the conservation of wild birds, natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora. This includes land within an ASSI. Farmers should have been formally notified by the NI Environment Agency if their land is in an ASSI.

The land may be used to claim entitlements provided it met the SFP eligibility requirements and formed part of the area determined as eligible for payment in 2008.

Farm Woodland Premium Scheme

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) how many payments due in respect of the farm woodland premium scheme are outstanding for the year 2012; and (ii) to outline the reason why payments have been getting later over the last three years?

(AQW 18370/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Forest Service paid 96% of 2012 Farm Woodland Premium Scheme (FWPS) claims by the end of December 2012. There are currently 45 claims that have not been paid. These claims were received after the requested return date and could not be validated in time for the December payments. They are now being validated and payments will be made by the end of February.

In 2010, payments were generally made in October and November. A new annual claim process required by EC regulation was implemented in 2011 and as a consequence, payments in 2011 and 2012 were generally made in December each year.

Lough Neagh Working Group

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the costs incurred to date by Departments in relation to the working group which is undertaking a scoping exercise into the potential for public ownership of Lough Neagh. (AQW 18406/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Lough Neagh Working Group comprises 6 core members (all senior civil servants) with a small secretariat providing administrative support. The scoping exercise has been taken forward as part of the normal duties of these individuals.

Ash Dieback Disease

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for a breakdown of the costs incurred by her Department's Forest Service Ash Dieback emergency hotline and email. (AQW 18444/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: At Friday 18 January 2013, the Department's ash die-back helpline had received 27 enquiries by telephone and 15 by email. The estimated cost of staff time in responding to these enquiries is £1300.

Ash Dieback Disease

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of calls and messages received by the Forest Service Ash Dieback emergency hotline and email. (AQW 18445/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: At Friday 18 January 2013, the Department's ash die-back helpline had received 27 enquiries by telephone and 15 by email.

Country of Origin Labelling: Food Products

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) whether she can assure the public that food produce that is sold through local supermarkets is correctly labelled in relation to its country of origin; and (ii) to clarify what powers her Department has in this regard. (AQW 18516/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Responsibility for food labelling policy rests, (via the DHSSPS), with the Food Standards Agency who enforce the rules alongside local councils. These FSA regulations contain provisions regarding the origin labelling of food also, mainly in relation to the duty not to mislead the consumer.

My legislative responsibility in this area relates solely to the EU-wide Beef Labelling Regulations which were introduced in 2000 to provide consumers with clear reliable information about fresh and frozen beef offered for sale. These regulations do not cover beef in processed products, such as processed beef burgers, pies, sausages, ready meals or tinned meat, which are covered by FSA regulations.

All operators in the supply chain, down to retail level but excluding food service, must label their beef with the country or countries in which the animal was born, reared, slaughtered and cut, along with the licence number of the slaughter and cutting plant/s. A key requirement of this traceability system is that it should enable beef on sale to be traced back to where it originated. DARD inspectors carry out extensive controls on the traceability of beef and beef products, both fresh and frozen in abattoirs and licenced cutting plants. Environmental Health Officers carry out checks at retail outlets. Operators who fail to comply with the rules must remove their beef from sale until it is relabelled correctly. Serious breaches could constitute a criminal offence which, on conviction, will lead to a fine.

My Department has long been a promoter of the use of local produce. We have a wealth of high quality, safe and wholesome foods available to the processing, food service and retail sectors and the key benefit of local produce is, of course, the provenance that comes with it, that we know where it has come from and the route it has taken to the consumer's plate.

Much of our local beef also carries the Farm Quality Assured Scheme label which provides customer assurance as the conditions of this voluntary industry scheme involve adherence to standards which are inspected regularly to ensure compliance.

In the north of Ireland we have a strong track record in our use of quality assurance systems and traceability of our foodstuffs and I am confident that these will continue to provide the assurances sought by consumers.

Forest Service Board

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 18065/11-15, whether she will consider nominating or appointing individuals from the private sector to the Board of the Forest Service and to give a reason for her position on the matter. (AQW 18543/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Forest Service Chief Executive is responsible to me for the Agency's performance and operations. As such, he is responsible for ensuring that all aspects of the management and organisation of the Agency are kept under review and

ensuring that they best suit its business needs. That includes the arrangements for governance including the composition of the Management Board.

Any recruitment is carried out in accordance with procedures prescribed by the Department of Finance and Personnel.

I do not normally become involved in the day to day operation of the Agency but expect to be consulted by the Chief Executive on the handling of operational matters which could give rise to significant public or parliamentary concern. Thus, the Chief Executive will consult me when he carries out his review of the Non-Executive Director Post later this year.

Horse Meat: Beef Products

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the action she has taken since becoming aware of horsemeat being found in beef products in supermarkets; and (ii) when did she first become aware of this issue. (AQW 18544/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill:

- (i) In light of the findings in the South of horse DNA in beef products, investigations are underway, led by the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, and by the Food Standards Agency here. My officials are working closely with the Food Standards Agency here in the north to ensure that public confidence in beef born, raised and processed is maintained.
- (ii) I was made aware of this incident on the Tuesday evening, the 15th January at 6.43 pm via an e-mail from the Food Standards Agency to my private office.

Horse Meat: Imports

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the amount of horse meat imported in each of the last five years, including the country of origin. (AQW 18579/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: No routine checks are carried out of meat and meat products entering the north from the EU, including from Britain and the south of Ireland. Consequently, no records are available on these imports.

There have been no consignments of horsemeat from outside the EU entering the north through our Border Inspection Post during the last 5 years.

Horse Meat: Imports

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the final destination of horse meat imported in each of the last five years; and whether any of these destinations are licensed processors or producers of food products for human consumption. (AQW 18580/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Please see response to AQW 18579/11-15.

Meat Plant Inspections

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how often inspectors visit meat plants to check on the provenance of the meat being processed; and how the frequency compares with five years ago. (AQW 18589/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: DARD officers have a role in ensuring that the legally required Official Controls are carried out in approved slaughterhouses and cutting establishments. This includes regular inspection of the traceability of beef under the Beef Labelling Regulations. The frequency of the visits is determined on the basis of risk.

During 2012, 114 inspections were conducted to check beef labelling information. This compares with 134 inspections conducted during 2008. The average number of visits to each business was 2.98 in 2008 and was 3.00 in 2012.

DARD inspections apply to both fresh and frozen beef, but do not extend to beef sold in processed form, for example pies or sausages, or sold to businesses selling beef to the final consumer, for example catering establishments.

Environmental Health Officers are responsible for the Beef Labelling controls at retail level and of processed beef products.

Meat Plants: Horse DNA

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what incidence of horse DNA, or other foreign material, has been found in any of Northern Ireland's meat plants in each of the last five years. (AQW 18590/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: There has been no incidence of horse DNA or other foreign material found in the very limited amount of speciation testing which has been performed by my Department, over recent years.

As part of its response to the unfortunate recent discovery of equine DNA in Irish product, the Food Standards Agency has initiated work on a food authenticity survey of processed meat products.

Meat Plants: Horse DNA

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, given the discovery of horse DNA in meat plants elsewhere in the British Isles, what assurance is there that the provenance of material processed in Northern Ireland's meat plants is beyond reproach.

(AQW 18591/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: There is only a very limited amount of horse slaughter undertaken in the north by one small slaughter plant in Co Armagh. All equine product from this plant is exported to England or the Continent, or disposed of locally as by-product.

Cross contamination of beef with horse meat is possible in the north's processing plants where beef which originates outside the north is used as a raw material for processing.

Beef labelled as having been born, raised, slaughtered and processed in the north is therefore very likely to be beyond reproach.

Beef Traceability and Labelling in the north was found to be satisfactory during the EC's Food and Veterinary Office audit of the UK in 2011.

Rural Development Programme

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the religious breakdown of staff undertaking the administration of the Rural Development Programme, broken down by each of the Joint Council Committee areas.

(AQW 18657/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Under the contract with my Department for delivery of Axis 3, Joint Council Committees must ensure that in all their dealings in relation to staff matters, they comply with all the relevant and applicable equality of opportunity and fair employment legislation. As Joint Council Committees do not employ staff directly but utilise a Service Level Agreement with Councils, (who also must adhere to the same legislation) I am unable to provide a religious breakdown of staff.

Single Farm Payment Applicants

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 14157/11-15, to detail (i) the number of 2012 Single Farm Payment applicants who received late payments after 30 June deadline; (ii) how many applicants were paid interest; and (iii) what was the total amount of interest paid.

(AQW 18665/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: This information will not be available until after the deadline, which is 30 June 2013.

Rural Development Programme: Delivery

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she is taking to address the issues of councils deciding to pull out of the delivery of the Rural Development Programme.

(AQW 18671/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am interpreting your question to refer to lead councils with responsibility for Administration Units involved in Axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme. I am not aware of any councils having made a decision to pull out of the delivery of the Axis 3 programme.

Agrifood Inspection Branch

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the financial cost of the enforcement training that is currently taking place in the Agricultural Food Inspection Branch.

(AQW 18788/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Department's Agri-food Inspection Branch implements a range of local and EU legislation relating to food & feed safety, plant health, product certification and marketing standards. This is achieved through a number of specialist teams of professional staff with expertise in food technology, agriculture and horticulture. It is necessary where non-compliance with legislation is identified that the most appropriate action is taken. This can on occasion require formal enforcement action and it is considered essential that inspection staff within the Branch are appropriately trained.

The delivery costs associated with this training amount to approximately £3,000 per course. Each course can accommodate up to 16 people which on this basis would incur a cost of £190 per person.

The course is accredited to Level 4 through the Open College Network and lasts for 6.5 days.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Schools: Rugby

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions she or her officials have had with the Minister of Education in relation to increasing participation levels for playing rugby in schools.

(AQW 17880/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): As part of the implementation of my strategy for sport, Sport Matters, discussions between the Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) and the Department of Education (DE) take place regularly on how schools can contribute towards increasing participation rates in sport generally.

As part of this process, DE has agreed to make a number of contributions to the sports participation targets within Sport Matters. These contributions are set out in the published Sport Matters Action Plan 2011-2015.

I can confirm, however, that I propose to meet with the Minister of Education to discuss options around increasing participation levels in playing sport, including rugby, within schools.

Schools: Rugby Coaches

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions she or her officials have had with the Minister of Education to ensure there is a fair representation of rugby coaches in schools to improve participation levels.

(AQW 17881/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As part of the implementation of my strategy for sport, Sport Matters, discussions between the Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) and the Department of Education (DE) take place regularly on how schools can contribute towards increasing participation rates in sport generally.

As part of this process, DE has agreed to make a number of contributions to the sports participation and performance targets, including Physical Education (PE) and coaching, within Sport Matters. These contributions are set out in the published Sport Matters Action Plan 2011-2015.

I can confirm, however, that I propose to meet with the Minister of Education to discuss options around increasing participation levels in playing sport, including rugby, within schools.

North Atlantic Salmon

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she has reached agreement with the six holders of commercial coastal net licences to continue their voluntary moratorium on catching North Atlantic Salmon into 2013.

(AQW 17902/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My officials have sought meetings with each of the coastal salmon net licence holders with a view to extending the 2012 arrangements into 2013.

Irish State Papers

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the communication her Department has had with the National Archives regarding online access to the Irish State Papers, which are currently only available to individuals who visit the archive offices in Kew, Surrey.

(AQW 18353/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can confirm that there has been no communication between my Department or the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) with The National Archives (TNA) in relation to the State Papers of Ireland.

The State Papers are the functional responsibility of TNA and decisions with regard to digitisation lie solely with them. As Official Records for the 16th-18th centuries, they lie outside PRONI's statutory remit under the Public Records Act (NI) 1923.

Despite the records being based at Kew, TNA have advised that many of the papers are already available online to institutions for trial and purchase for the period, 1509-1714. These can be accessed at State Papers Online at: <http://gale.cengage.co.uk/state-papers-online-15091714.aspx>

PRONI officials will be engaging with TNA in order to explore the possibility of subscribing to State Papers Online over the coming year.

Irish State Papers

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if her Department has any plans to discuss with the National Archives the provision of online access to Irish State Papers for residents in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 18355/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department has contacted the National Archives (TNA) to discuss the provision of online access to the Irish State Papers. TNA have responded indicating records for the period, 1509-1714 are already available to institutions

through State Papers Online. TNA have also indicated that the digitisation of post-1714 State Papers with a commercial partner is currently in progress, and some of these records are expected to be released online later this year.

State Papers Online is available to institutions on a subscription basis. PRONI officials will be engaging with TNA in order to explore the possibility of subscribing to State Papers Online over the coming year.

Sport Development: Kilcooley Estate, Bangor/North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what her Department can do to assist with sport development in (i) the Kilcooley estate, Bangor; and (ii) North Down.

(AQW 18425/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Under the Recreation and Youth Service NI Order 1986 district councils, rather than me, are responsible for sporting and recreational development with local areas. Sporting development within the Kilcooley Estate, Bangor and in North Down is therefore a matter, in the first instance, for North Down Borough Council.

Nevertheless, over the last five financial years, Sport NI has provided a total of £9,427,322 to assist North Down Council in developing sport in its area. This includes just over £9 million funding towards the development of facilities, such as the 50m pool in Bangor, which are available for use by residents and sports clubs across North Down, including the Kilcooley estate. Furthermore, Sport NI funding provided through the Active Communities Programme supports the employment of the following sports coaches in the North Down area:

- Gaelic games
- Rugby Union
- Cricket
- Netball
- Basketball
- Physical Leader

Indoor Athletics: Training Facility

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she will investigate the potential of bidding for additional capital which has become available during this budget period, to develop a dedicated indoor athletics training facility.

(AQW 18438/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Responsibility for investigating the potential for capital funding for athletics in the north of Ireland rests, in the first instance, with the governing body of athletics, Athletics NI. At present, I have no plans to bid for additional capital towards the development of a dedicated indoor athletics training facility. I would, however, consider a future bid should Athletics NI come forward with a suitable proposal that would contribute to the delivery of the targets in Sport Matters and my wider priorities of promoting social and economic equality and tackling social exclusion and poverty in areas of deprivation.

Civil Servants: Unrest

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the number of Civil Servants from her Department who have left work early since 3 December 2012 due to unrest; and (ii) the associated financial cost to her departmental budget.

(AQW 18458/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Staff, as normal, are able to leave work within the normal NICS flexible working arrangements. There has been no disruption to our normal business and no financial cost.

Athletics Funding

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the total amount of money that has been provided for athletics, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 18521/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sport NI, an arms length body of my Department, has provided a total of £2,416,758 to athletics in the last 5 years, up to 31 March 2013. This amount consisted of Exchequer funding totalling £2,143,196 and Sports Lottery Funding totalling £273,562. This is broken down as follows: -

Financial Year	Exchequer Funding	Lottery Funding	Grand Total
2007/08	£ 67,650	£ 21,800	£ 89,450
2008/09	£ 79,000	£ 20,100	£ 99,100
2009/10	£ 287,279	£ 51,511	£ 338,790
2010/11	£ 1,503,631	£ 79,170	£ 1,582,801

Financial Year	Exchequer Funding	Lottery Funding	Grand Total
2011/12	£ 205,636	£ 100,981	£ 306,617
Grand Total	£ 2,143,196	£ 273,562	£ 2,416,758

Bushmills Salmon Station: Annual Operating Costs

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the annual operating costs of the salmon station at Bushmills.

(AQW 18533/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The annual operating costs for the River Bush Salmon Station for the financial year 2012/13 were approximately £115,000, made up of premises costs £43,000 and hatchery costs £71,000.

Fishing Rights: River Bush

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure who owns the fishing rights to the River Bush and at what cost to the public purse the Department obtains its interest.

(AQW 18534/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department leases the fishing rights to restricted and unrestricted stretches of the River Bush. Under Data Protection legislation, Section 40 (2), the Department cannot identify the owner. The Department does not have details of the ownership of the fishing rights to the River Bush outside those stretches which form part of the Public Angling Estate.

The total cost of leasing the fishing rights, which includes the hatchery buildings, is approximately £26,000 per annum

Waterways Ireland: Portora Lock, County Fermanagh

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what is stored in the green sheds on Waterways Ireland property near the lakeshore at Portora Lough, County Fermanagh.

(AQW 18563/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Waterways Ireland site close to Portora Lock, Enniskillen is an operational base serving the Erne Warden and the Waterways Ireland Operations Team. The sheds on this site house essential resources to enable Waterways Ireland to carry out its statutory duties on the Erne System.

Boxing Clubs: North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on possible additional funding for boxing clubs in North Down.

(AQW 18582/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The consultation on the draft Boxing Investment Programme will close on the 8 February 2013. The Programme, and subsequent allocation of funding to boxing clubs, including clubs in North Down, will be finalised when all consultation responses have been considered.

Tranche 1 of the programme is the provision of boxing equipment. It is intended that, depending on delivery timescales, eligible clubs, will receive equipment from late February through to March 2013.

Tranches 2 and 3 will deal with minor and major repairs in boxing clubs. The procurement of technical consultants for these tranches will commence before the end of this financial year and calls for formal applications will commence in October 2013.

Sports Development: North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action she is taking to encourage sports development in North Down.

(AQW 18585/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I refer the member to my response to AQW 18425/11-15.

Olympic and Paralympic Games: Tickets

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games tickets her Department purchased; and at what cost.

(AQW 18667/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department did not purchase any 2012 Olympic or Paralympic tickets.

Re-Imaging Communities Programme

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the timescale for applications to the Re-imagining Communities programme.

(AQW 18686/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The opening of applications for funding through the Building Peace through the Arts - Reimagining Communities programme will coincide with the launch of the programme which takes place on 28th February. This will be a rolling programme.

Belfast City Council: Boxing Strategy

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, given that Belfast City Council's Boxing Strategy states that 78 percent of Belfast boxing clubs are exclusively or predominantly Catholic in their composition and engagement of coaches, what plans her Department has to promote boxing within the Protestant community and address the imbalance in the sport.

(AQW 18838/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Responsibility for the promotion of boxing across all sections of the community rests in the first instance with the governing body, the Irish Amateur Boxing Association.

One of the aims of the Boxing Investment Programme, however, is to help the sport promote inclusivity, so that anyone, regardless of their community background, has the opportunity to take part in boxing at participative and competitive levels. To that end, under the Boxing Investment Programme a Club Development Manager will be appointed within the Ulster Provincial Boxing Council (UPBC). The Club Development Manager will be responsible for promoting and developing boxing in all areas and across all communities in the north, including areas where there is interest in the sport but limited opportunities to participate.

Department of Education

Delivering Social Change Signature Project: Improving Literacy and Numeracy

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education on what grounds will schools be able to apply for funding from the £12m available under the Improving Literacy and Numeracy Delivering Social Change Signature Project.

(AQW 18232/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): I warmly welcome the announcement by the First and deputy First Ministers of investment in the employment of 230 graduate teachers not currently in employment, over two years, to provide support for the literacy and numeracy interventions in primary and post-primary schools. Not only does this provide employment opportunities for graduate teachers, it is intended to have a positive impact on my raising standards agenda by improving the educational outcomes for pupils who are most at risk of underachieving.

The arrangements to identify schools to participate in the scheme are ongoing. However, it is intended that the resources will be targeted towards those schools who are struggling to meet the current targets for Key Stage 2 assessment in primary schools and GCSE targets in post-primary schools. Consideration is also being given to targeting schools with high numbers of pupils entitled to free school meals and/or in areas of social disadvantage.

The employing authorities have agreed that Western Education Library Board will take the lead on the delivery of this project and they are working through the detail as to how schools will apply to the scheme and be selected for participation.

Early Years Education: Support Clusters

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education for an update on the plans to create pilot Early Years Education Support Clusters in nursery schools and playgroups.

(AQW 18483/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Learning to Learn – A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning which I launched on 4 December 2012 proposes the creation of pilot support clusters. The actions in the Framework are currently the subject of focused consultation to consider if any of them require further refinement.

The focused consultation concludes on the 31 January 2013 and I will consider the comments received during consultation and their impact on the current proposals before finalising the way forward. I would intend that further guidance on the pilot support clusters will be prepared in consultation with stakeholders.

Education and Library Boards: Goods and Services

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what is the value of the goods and services procured in each of the Education and Library Boards in each of the last five years.

(AQW 18552/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The value of the goods and services procured in each of the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) in each of the last five years is as follows:

	2007-08 £'000	2008-09 £'000	2009-10 £'000	2010-11 £'000	2011-12 £'000
BELB	24,343	25,899	26,877	37,499	40,155
NEELB	30,938	33,526	30,822	29,765	29,555
SEELB	19,035	23,772	23,574	23,176	29,401
SELB	33,682	33,417	33,945	35,027	33,057
WELB	29,399	32,466	31,951	37,194	39,720
Totals	137,397	149,080	147,169	162,661	171,888

Note: These figures relate to recurrent expenditure only, they do not include capital expenditure or schools delegated budgets.

Education and Library Boards: Goods and Services

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what level of savings have been achieved on goods and services procured by Education and Library Boards, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 18553/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Savings on goods and services by Education and Library Boards have only been monitored since the Savings Delivery Plan was established in 2011/12. The savings achieved by Education and Library Boards in 2011/12 are set out in the table below.

ELB	2011/12 £'000s
BELB	420
NEELB	732
SEELB	776
SELB	873
WELB	428
Total	3,229

Notes: These savings relate to Education and Library Board block grant recurrent expenditure only, and do not include capital expenditure or schools delegated budgets.

Central Procurement Directorate: Goods and Services

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what consultation took place prior to his decision to transfer responsibility for the procurement of goods and services to the Central Procurement Directorate.

(AQW 18557/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department has carried out a major project to consider and develop options for the future delivery of procurement services in the education sector. The two major areas of procurement, supplies and services and construction, were taken forward as separate work streams within the project to ensure that the most appropriate solution was developed for each type of procurement. The project included significant engagement with other government departments and agencies.

The Procurement Board has mandated the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) to aggregate government demand for goods and services, to develop common procurement arrangements across the public sector and seek out collaborative opportunities. My decision to outsource supplies and services procurement to CPD will ensure that the education sector is at the heart of pan government collaboration. Consequently, the decision has been warmly welcomed by the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

In addition, CPD has indicated that it will deliver for the education sector, a minimum 3% savings on annual procurement spend.

Central Procurement Directorate: Goods and Services

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what additional savings will be achieved by the transfer of the procurement of goods and services to the Central Procurement Directorate.

(AQW 18558/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department has carried out a major project to consider and develop options for the future delivery of procurement services in the education sector. The two major areas of procurement, supplies and services and construction, were taken forward as separate work streams within the project to ensure that the most appropriate solution was developed for each type of procurement. The project included significant engagement with other government departments and agencies.

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In addition, CPD has indicated that it will deliver for the education sector, a minimum 3% savings on annual procurement spend.

Centre of Procurement Expertise

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education why he has abandoned his stated policy on the development of a single Centre of Procurement Expertise for the education sector.

(AQW 18559/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department has carried out a major project to consider and develop options for the future delivery of procurement services in the education sector. The two major areas of procurement, supplies and services and construction, were taken forward as separate work streams within the project to ensure that the most appropriate solution was developed for each type of procurement. The project included significant engagement with other government departments and agencies.

The Procurement Board has mandated the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) to aggregate government demand for goods and services, to develop common procurement arrangements across the public sector and seek out collaborative opportunities. My decision to outsource supplies and services procurement to CPD will ensure that the education sector is at the heart of pan government collaboration. Consequently, the decision has been warmly welcomed by the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

In addition, CPD has indicated that it will deliver for the education sector, a minimum 3% savings on annual procurement spend.

Education and Library Boards: Expenditure

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to outline expenditure on (i) maintenance; and (ii) minor works by each Education and Library Board in each of the last three years up to 31 December 2012.

(AQW 18560/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The expenditure on (i) maintenance; and (ii) minor works in each of the education and library board areas in each of the last three years up to 31 December 2012 is as follows:

		BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB
2010/11 (£000s)	(i) Maintenance	9,689	7,075	8,046	7,628	6,477
	(ii) Minor Works	12,327	6,451	5,538	5,856	8,613
2011/12 (£000s)	(i) Maintenance	10,875	5,946	7,089	5,354	3,613
	(ii) Minor Works	20,529	6,067	8,275	11,113	10,138
1 April to 31 December 2012	(i) Maintenance	12,045	3,530	4,809	5,917	5,881
	(ii) Minor Works	9,027	6,907	4,837	7,961	4,461
Total	(i) Maintenance	32,609	16,551	19,944	18,899	15,971
	(ii) Minor Works	41,883	19,425	18,650	24,930	23,212

The estimate of anticipated expenditure on (i) maintenance; and (ii) minor works in each education and library board area in the 2012/13 financial year is as follows:

£000s	BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB
(i) Maintenance	14,160	8,188	8,516	6,882	7,778
(ii) Minor Works*	20,259	9,735	9,976	13,225	11,072

* Minor works figure does not include anticipated voluntary sector expenditure from 1 January to 31 March 2013. Funding will continue to be allocated as projects progress through planning stages up until 31 March 2013.

Education and Library Boards: Anticipated Expenditure

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for an estimate of the anticipated expenditure on (i) maintenance; and (ii) minor works by each Education and Library Board in the 2012/13 financial year.

(AQW 18561/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The expenditure on (i) maintenance; and (ii) minor works in each of the education and library board areas in each of the last three years up to 31 December 2012 is as follows:

		BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB
2010/11 (£000s)	(i) Maintenance	9,689	7,075	8,046	7,628	6,477
	(ii) Minor Works	12,327	6,451	5,538	5,856	8,613
2011/12 (£000s)	(i) Maintenance	10,875	5,946	7,089	5,354	3,613
	(ii) Minor Works	20,529	6,067	8,275	11,113	10,138
1 April to 31 December 2012	(i) Maintenance	12,045	3,530	4,809	5,917	5,881
	(ii) Minor Works	9,027	6,907	4,837	7,961	4,461
Total	(i) Maintenance	32,609	16,551	19,944	18,899	15,971
	(ii) Minor Works	41,883	19,425	18,650	24,930	23,212

The estimate of anticipated expenditure on (i) maintenance; and (ii) minor works in each education and library board area in the 2012/13 financial year is as follows:

£000s	BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB
(i) Maintenance	14,160	8,188	8,516	6,882	7,778
(ii) Minor Works*	20,259	9,735	9,976	13,225	11,072

* Minor works figure does not include anticipated voluntary sector expenditure from 1 January to 31 March 2013. Funding will continue to be allocated as projects progress through planning stages up until 31 March 2013.

Civil Servants: Unrest

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of Civil Servants from his Department who have left work early since 3 December 2012 due to the civil unrest associated with the flag protests; and (ii) the associated financial cost to his departmental budget.

(AQW 18605/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department of Education (DE) has not issued any general advice or instruction to staff to leave early as a result of recent civil unrest. DE staff can seek approval from their line manager to leave work early within the rules of the Flexible Working Time - Code of Practice. There has been no associated cost to the departmental budget.

Education: Cross-border

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Education to outline the work his Department is undertaking to encourage, support and facilitate shared education across the border between west Fermanagh and south Donegal.

(AQW 18626/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department is involved in the North South Ministerial Council survey on cross-border education. Officials from the respective Departments are at present working towards a joint analysis of the responses received to the survey and the results will be announced over the coming months.

I am also awaiting the outcome of the Ministerial Advisory Group's report on advancing shared education which is due in February.

Programme for Government Commitments: Shared Education

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Education to detail the practical guidance and support that is available to schools that wish to pursue the Programme for Government commitments on shared education and advance models such as federations, confederations and joint-faith schools.

(AQW 18627/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department has not issued any guidance, provided support or incentives in relation to the Programme for Government commitments on shared education. It would be premature to do so in advance of the report of the Ministerial Advisory Group on Shared Education which is due in early February. I expect that the report will be a catalyst for debate on advancing shared education.

Guidance issued by my Department in relation to Area Planning encouraged identification of realistic, innovative and creative solutions to address need, including opportunities for shared schooling as well as maximising the use and sharing of the existing schools estate.

Schools interested in exploring shared education models can discuss options with the relevant Education and Library Board and/or CCMS in the first instance.

Programme for Government Commitments: Shared Education

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Education to detail the (i) incentives; and (ii) support that his Department provides to schools that wish to explore shared education models, including joint faith schools.

(AQW 18629/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department has not issued any guidance, provided support or incentives in relation to the Programme for Government commitments on shared education. It would be premature to do so in advance of the report of the Ministerial Advisory Group on Shared Education which is due in early February. I expect that the report will be a catalyst for debate on advancing shared education.

Guidance issued by my Department in relation to Area Planning encouraged identification of realistic, innovative and creative solutions to address need, including opportunities for shared schooling as well as maximising the use and sharing of the existing schools estate.

Schools interested in exploring shared education models can discuss options with the relevant Education and Library Board and/or CCMS in the first instance.

School Newbuilds: Holywood Area

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education for an update on the proposed new school build for Holywood.

(AQW 18676/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Priory Integrated College, Holywood Primary School and Holywood Nursery will be disappointed not to be included in my capital investment announcement of 22 January, however this in no way implies that they will not be considered at a later date.

I visited the Holywood Schools in November 2012 and am aware of the site issues around the new build proposals, and enrolment concerns that require further clarity for Priory Integrated College.

I have agreed to further engagement with the schools and local representatives on new build proposals.

Education and Library Boards: Budget

Ms McGahan asked the Minister of Education what percentage of his departmental budget is spent on (a) children; and (b) young adults with (i) learning disabilities; and (ii) severe learning disabilities in the Southern and Western Education and Library Board areas.

(AQW 18706/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The percentage of the Department of Education's budget spent on children and young people (3-19 years of age) in the 2011/12 financial year is as follows:

	SELB	WELB
Learning Disabilities (excluding Severe Learning Disabilities)	1.30%	1.02%
Severe Learning Disabilities	0.42%	0.63%

Food in Schools Policy

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Education for an update on discussions between his Department and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety regarding the development of a joint Food in Schools policy; and to outline the significance of such a policy for young people in the years ahead.

(AQW 18718/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Officials from my Department have been working with colleagues from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) to finalise the Food in Schools policy. As this is a joint policy with DHSSPS the Executive's approval will be required before it can be published.

Research demonstrates that there is a strong link between poor health, nutrition and low school achievement and that diet often has a profound effect on children's social skills, behaviour and self-esteem. Consequently, the policy recognises the important contribution which a healthy, balanced diet makes to children's growth and development, to educational performance and attainment and, ultimately, to their long-term health and well-being.

The Food in Schools Policy is an overarching policy advocating a 'whole school approach' to all food provided and consumed in schools and developing knowledge and skills in relation to healthy eating and lifestyles. It aims to ensure that children and young people are only provided with healthy food while in school and that they develop the knowledge and skills to allow them to eat healthily and make healthy choices not just within school but outside as well.

The effective implementation of the Food in Schools policy will ensure that schools provide a supportive learning environment which facilitates enhanced health and educational outcomes for current and future generations.

I intend, along with the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, to seek Executive agreement on the policy soon. Subject to that agreement, it is intended to publish the policy during this school year.

Schools: Enrolment

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education to detail, for the current academic year, the number of (i) primary schools with enrolments of 50 pupils or fewer; (ii) post-primary schools with enrolments of 200 pupils or fewer.

(AQW 18734/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Information collected through the 2012/13 school census exercise indicates that there are 89 primary schools with an enrolment of 50 pupils or fewer and 17 post-primary schools with an enrolment of 200 pupils or fewer. This information is provisional. Finalised figures from the 2012/13 school census exercise will be available at the end of February.

Note: These figures relate to total school enrolments. For primary schools, this includes children in nursery, reception and Year 1 – 7 classes and, for post-primary schools, children in Year 8 – 12, as well as in sixth form. Pupils with a statement of special educational needs are also included.

Schools: Classrooms

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number and location of temporary classrooms in (a) primary schools; and (b) post-primary schools; and (ii) how many years these temporary classrooms have been in use at their current location.

(AQW 18735/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have arranged for the information requested to be placed in the Assembly Library.

Computer-based Assessments

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what is the legal requirement for primary schools to complete the computer-based assessments.

(AQW 18749/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education (Assessment Arrangements) (Foundation to Key Stage 3) Order (NI) 2007 (the 2007 Order) provides for the assessment of pupils in Years 4 to 7 during the autumn term, using a computer-based method specified by the Department.

Under that Order, the Department specified two Computer Based Assessment tools to be used by schools when carrying out those autumn term assessments in 2012:

- The literacy assessment developed by Tribal Education Ltd; and
- The numeracy assessment developed by Rising Stars UK Ltd.

The Order also requires the outcomes of these assessments to be recorded and notified to the pupil's parents by the end of that term.

Preschool Places

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to increase the number of pre-school places for 2013/14.

(AQW 18751/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Programme for Government commits my Department to ensuring that at least one year of pre-school education is available to every family that wants it.

I have increased the budget (4.13% higher than in 2012/13) available for the pre-school education programme and my Department has liaised with Education and Library Boards (ELBs) so they can secure the estimated number of funded places required.

Nearly 600 additional places (in statutory and non-statutory settings) have been secured for 2013/14 as a result of development proposals brought forward by Education and Library Boards, and decisions made by Pre-School Education Advisory Groups within Education and Library Boards.

As the admissions process progresses my officials will work closely with ELBs to respond to demand for funded places in each area as a result of the expressing of parental preference.

Nursery School Places: First Preference

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education (i) how many children in the Derry City Council area did not receive their first preference nursery school place, in the first round of places awarded, for the 2012/13 academic year; and (ii) how many places are still available, broken down by electoral ward.

(AQW 18778/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Western Education and Library Board have advised that 309 children in the Derry City Council area did not receive their first preference nursery school, in the first round of places awarded (i.e. at the end of Stage 1 of the pre-school admissions processes), for the 2012/13 academic year. Of these, 198 were placed in second or further preference schools leaving 111 unplaced at the end of Stage 1. Further preferences were requested from parents and all but 16 children were subsequently placed. The 16 children remain unplaced as their parents declined to nominate further preferences. There are no nursery places currently available, however, places could be made available to voluntary / community providers, if they have the capacity.

Schools: Newbuild Projects

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education (i) why Millburn Primary School, Coleraine was omitted from the list of new build projects; (ii) when the school will be included on the list; and (iii) why no new build projects for schools in East Londonderry were included on the list.

(AQW 18779/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The projects I announced on 22 January were determined as priorities by the relevant Managing Authority and as certain to perform part of area solutions for the future schools estate.

The criteria adopted to assess projects were, to effect rationalisation; to address serious accommodation inadequacies and schools operating on split sites; and to address undue reliance on temporary accommodation.

While the recent announcement I have made in no way implies that other schools, including Millburn Primary School and others within the East Derry area, will not be considered at a later stage, I will only announce capital projects which I believe can be delivered within a reasonable timeframe.

Moving forward I will work with the Managing Authorities to identify priority projects emerging from area plans.

Home-to-School Transport Policy

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Education whether the policy for home to school transport for children attending special education schools is the same as it is for those attending mainstream primary schools.

(AQW 18794/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The school transport policy for children attending grant-aided special education schools is the same as that for children attending other grant-aided schools, unless such children are in possession of a statement of special education needs which specifies a particular form of assistance with transport.

Somme Battlefields

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education what support and encouragement his Department offers schools for visits to the Somme battlefields.

(AQW 18797/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The revised curriculum provides a range of opportunities for schools to explore the Somme and related issues.

At Key Stage 2 there are opportunities for pupils to explore areas such as causes of conflict and appropriate responses. At Key Stage 3 all post-primary schools are required to provide pupils with the opportunities to investigate both Irish and British historical periods.

While such opportunities exist, the revised curriculum is less prescriptive, giving teachers the flexibility to decide how they deliver the curriculum and the resources they use. Educational visits are a matter for each school/teacher to determine.

In line with this the Department delegates as much funding and decision-making as possible to schools which are best placed to assess the needs of their pupils.

A levels and AS levels

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education what action he plans to take in view of Education Secretary's announcement that A levels will return to a two year course with an examination at the end, and that AS levels will not count towards the final A level grade.

(AQW 18812/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: It is disappointing that Mr Gove continues to make such announcements about A levels, a brand which is jointly owned and used by 3 jurisdictions, without consulting with me or Wales in advance.

I have commissioned two separate pieces of work, both of which are in progress. One is on these proposed short term changes to A levels and my officials have been discussing the details with school leaders. This consultation is due to end on 8 March 2013. The other is the fundamental review of GCSEs and A levels which I asked the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) to take forward and I am expecting a full report by the end of June this year.

Both reviews provide us with an opportunity to challenge the qualification landscape here and to potentially determine our own path, if we feel that is appropriate and is in the long term interests of learners and the economy.

It is by no means certain that I will want to follow Michael Gove's proposal to make the AS level a qualification in its own right. Indeed, I will make my decisions, following the consultation on short-term changes to A levels.

Portability and comparability of qualifications across the 3 jurisdictions is vitally important and I believe the qualifications system is robust enough to withstand small variations in policy, should that be necessary.

Russell Group of Universities

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education what action he plans to take in light of the announcement by the Education Secretary regarding the role that the Russell Group of Universities will have in supervising the content of A Levels from 2015, especially since Queen's University Belfast is a member of the Russell Group.

(AQW 18813/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have commissioned two reviews of qualifications and both are currently in progress. My officials are working with schools leaders to determine their views on these potential short term changes to A Levels and I will be interested in hearing stakeholders' views on this particular aspect of change.

I will make my decisions on these proposals following my own consultation on short term changes to A levels which ends on 8 March. I am determined that whatever we produce going forward will be comparable to other equivalent qualifications offered not only across these islands but also internationally, now and for the foreseeable future.

A levels and AS levels

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education what contact he had with the Department for Education concerning, and prior to, the announcement on A Levels and AS Levels by the Education Secretary.

(AQW 18814/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My officials take part in quarterly meetings with officials in the Department for Education in England. The most recent meeting took place on 11 December. No details were shared by the Department for Education in terms of its likely direction of travel in this area and DfE officials did not make any contact with either me or my officials prior to the letter from Michael Gove to Glenys Stacey being issued.

A levels and AS levels

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education what contact he had with his counterpart in Wales concerning the announcement on A Levels and AS Levels by the Education Secretary.

(AQW 18815/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I liaise regularly with my counterpart Leighton Andrews and my officials have been in contact with their Welsh counterparts in relation to this announcement.

It is clear that the Welsh Minister is disappointed with both the policy direction and tactics chosen by Michael Gove including the on-going lack of communication with the devolved administrations.

Mr Andrews' department has conducted its own fundamental review of qualifications and he will be making his own decisions on the recommendations arising from that review.

A-level System

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education what steps he plans to take to protect the interests of Northern Ireland students applying for places in English universities under the new A-level system which begins in 2015.

(AQW 18816/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have commissioned two reviews of qualifications and both are currently in progress. My officials are working with schools leaders to determine their views on potential short term changes to A Levels. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) is taking forward a fundamental review of GCSE and A level qualifications.

The options and recommendations which flow from those reviews will inform my thinking on what is appropriate and is in the long term interests of learners and the economy here. Portability and comparability of qualifications across the 3 jurisdictions are vitally important and I believe the qualifications system currently in place is robust enough to withstand small variations in policy, should that be necessary.

Roddensvale School, Larne

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education how much funding his Department has allocated to Roddensvale School, Larne since 2000; and for what purposes the money was used.

(AQW 18818/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Funding relating to recurrent expenditure is not allocated directly to Special Schools from my Department.

Special schools operate under a different funding regime to controlled and maintained mainstream schools. All staffing costs, (including sick and maternity absence) and school maintenance costs, are met directly by the Board from a non-delegated budget albeit a small budget is delegated to the Board of Governors under Article 60 of the 1998 Education (Northern Ireland) Order to meet other costs, eg heating, lighting, cleaning. The items to be covered by Article 60 budget are included in a scheme agreed on a 5 Board basis and approved by the Department of Education.

Table 1 shows the funding that has been allocated to Roddensvale School, Larne, by the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB), the notes provided detail the purpose for which the funding is used.

Table 1 - Roddensvale Special School Budget Allocations

Financial Year	£'s					
	Carry Over	Delegated		Centrally Held		Total Budgets
		Earmarked Allocation	Block Grant Core Budget	Staffing Core Budget	Non Staffing Core Budget	
2006/07	1,461	20,878	50,919	895,632	2,660	971,550
2007/08	17,250	19,810	55,775	913,460	44,774	1,051,069
2008/09	2,112	19,568	81,767	994,915	3,834	1,102,196
2009/10	1,925	10,057	102,445	1,033,777	7,468	1,155,672
2010/11	493	6,220	89,207	1,067,773	9,233	1,172,926
2011/12	929	6,198	92,515	1,132,055	5,132	1,236,829
2012/13	-120	7,000	98,117	1,188,130	8,589	1,301,716

Notes:

- Information is only available from 2004-05 onwards as records prior to this period are not required to be held.
- Carry Over represents surplus/deficit balance on the delegated budget which provides the special school with a degree of budgetary flexibility from one year to the next.
- Earmarked funding relates to various initiatives supported by my Department e.g.: SENCO (SEN Co-ordinators), Extended Schools, Direct additional funding to Special Schools and EMAs(Educational Maintenance Allowances)
- Centrally held budgets are not allocated to schools; costs are a charge to the NEELB and include staffing and non-staff costs (landlord maintenance etc)
- Non-earmarked delegated budget relates to both premises running costs (e.g. utility costs/rates/minor maintenance etc) and pupil related costs (e.g.: small equipment purchases and general pupil costs applicable in all school).

Roddensvale School, Larne

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education how much funding he has earmarked for Roddensvale School, Larne, over the next three years.

(AQW 18819/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Funding is not allocated directly to Special Schools from my Department as outlined in my response to AQW18818/11-15. The planned funding for allocation to Roddensvale School, Larne over the next three years is set out in the table below.

The basis of this funding, in terms of amounts delegated to the school and amounts managed centrally by North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) were explained in my response to AQW18818/11-15.

Financial Year	Earmarked Allocation £	Delegated Block Grant Core Budget £	Centrally Held		Total Budgets £
			Staffing Core Budget £	Non Staffing Core Budget £	
2013/14	7,000	101,582	1,205,351	8,847	1,332,780
2014/15	7,000	105,178	1,217,403	9,112	1,338,693
2015/16	7,000	108,908	1,228,109	9,385	1,353,402

Notes:

- 1 Earmarked funding relates to additional support to special schools recognising the higher than average costs for supporting pupils with SEN.

Post-primary Schools

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQWs 18051/11-15, 18052/11-15 and 18054/11-15, how many children in the BT29 area travel to each post-primary school listed.

(AQW 18891/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The North Eastern and South Eastern Education and Library Boards (NEELB and SEELB) have informed me of the following numbers of pupils eligible for transport assistance in the BT29 area travelling to each post-primary school listed in the response to AQWs 18051/11-15, 18052/11-15, and 18054/11-15:

Schools	NEELB	SEELB
Antrim Grammar School	120	7
Aquinas Grammar School	14	20
Ashfield Boys School	1	0
Ballyclare High School	7	0
Ballyclare Secondary School	6	0
Ballymena Academy	5	0
Belfast Girls Model School	2	0
Belfast Royal Academy	20	0
Cambridge House Grammar	12	0
Christian Bro Sec. School	4	0
Colaiste Feirste	8	0
Crumlin Integrated College	38	5
De La Salle College	16	23
Dominican College	61	11
Edmund Rice College	1	0
Fort Hill Integrated College	3	13
Friends School	4	12
Hazelwood College	1	0
Hunterhouse College	4	7
Laurelhill Comm. College	2	7
Lismore Comp. College	0	1
Little Flower Girls School	2	0
Lurgan Junior High School	0	2
Methodist College	10	4
Parkhall Integrated College	32	2

Schools	NEELB	SEELB
Rathmore Grammar School	111	53
RBAI	7	3
Slemish Integrated College	2	0
St Benedict's College	1	0
St Colm's High School	1	1
St Dominic's High School	74	60
St Genevieve's High School	16	8
St Louis' Grammar School	14	1
St Louises Comp. College	70	32
St Malachy's College	81	24
St Mary's Cbs Grammar	46	22
St Marys High School	0	2
St Michael's Grammar	0	1
St Patrick's Academy	113	47
St Patrick's Academy Unit	2	1
St Patrick's College	4	0
St Paul's Junior Hs	0	0
St Roses High School	3	1
Victoria College	2	1
Wallace High School	4	22

The NEELB has also indicated that since providing a list in response to AQWs 18051/18052/18054 a further five pupils have been assisted to the following post-primary schools:

Belfast Boys' Model	1
Malone College	1
Newtownbreda HS	1
St Catherine' College	1
St Catherine's College Irish Medium Unit	1

Advertising Campaigns

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail the advertising campaigns carried out by his Department since 2011, including the costs involved.

(AQW 18892/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The 'Education Works' campaign, which began in September 2012, is projected to cost £224,151 this financial year. The Department of Education has carried out no other advertising campaigns since 2011.

Classroom Sizes

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education what cap on classroom sizes is in place within each Education and Library Board area, broken down by age group.

(AQW 18931/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: It is the Department of Education that sets policy, including policy relating to class sizes.

There has been considerable research carried out on the effect of class sizes on the teaching and learning of pupils. While evidence suggests that smaller class sizes in early years can have a positive impact on outcomes, it has also consistently highlighted that the quality of teaching and the flexibility to teach in different ways are important.

In view of the evidence surrounding the early years, it is the Department's policy to keep classes for our youngest pupils, (Years 1-4), to a maximum of 30 pupils. It is a school's Board of Governors that has responsibility for determining their

school's staffing complement and for managing the school's education budget and this would include taking decisions on class sizes, taking account of the parameters set for Years 1-4.

Approval for a class size in excess of 30 pupils must be approved by the relevant Education and Library Board (ELB) which administer this policy. Such exceptions can apply if a school has to comply with a direction of an admissions appeal tribunal, a school attendance order or a statement of special educational needs. ELBs can also take into account the need to avoid unreasonable public expenditure.

Ultimately, what is essential for good quality provision is high quality teaching, a curriculum that is matched to the needs, interests and abilities of the pupils and a relentless focus on improvement and raising standards.

In the north of Ireland the Revised Curriculum has been in place since 2009/10. This allows our teachers to tailor the curriculum to suit the needs of their pupils and to adapt their teaching. Furthermore, the effective use of data to track pupil progress allows teachers to identify those pupils at risk of not achieving their full potential and enabling them to adapt the strategies they use in their delivery of the curriculum, customising it to best effect. The recent findings of the Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS) and Trends in Mathematics and Science (TIMMS) studies of Year 6 pupils shows that our Key Stage 2 outcomes show high attainment at primary level education.

Classroom Sizes

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education why there is no cap on classroom sizes for primary 5 to primary 7 pupils in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area.
(AQW 18932/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The setting of policy in relation to class sizes is a matter for the Department of Education.

There has been considerable research carried out on the effect of class sizes on the teaching and learning of pupils. Evidence suggests that smaller class sizes in early years can have a positive impact on outcomes. There is no evidence to demonstrate that smaller class sizes positively affect outcomes for pupils in Years 5-7. The research consistently highlights the quality of teaching and the flexibility to teach in different ways are the most important factors in determining educational outcomes, key factors which are reflected in core Departmental policies.

In view of the evidence surrounding the early years, it is the Department's policy to keep classes for our youngest pupils, (Years 1-4), to a maximum of 30 pupils.

In line with the Department's policy to give schools as much autonomy as possible it is a school's Board of Governors that has responsibility for determining their school's staffing complement and for managing the school's education budget and this would include taking decisions on class sizes, taking account of the parameters set for Years 1-4.

Ultimately, what is essential for good quality provision is high quality teaching, a curriculum that is matched to the needs, interests and abilities of the pupils and a relentless focus on improvement and raising standards.

In the north of Ireland the Revised Curriculum has been in place since 2009/10. This allows our teachers to tailor the curriculum to suit the needs of their pupils and to adapt their teaching. Furthermore, the effective use of data to track pupil progress allows teachers to identify those pupils at risk of not achieving their full potential and enabling them to adapt the strategies they use in their delivery of the curriculum, customising it to best effect. The recent findings of the Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS) and Trends in Mathematics and Science (TIMMS) studies of Year 6 pupils shows that our Key Stage 2 outcomes show high attainment at primary level education.

Education and Skills Authority: Chairperson

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education what remuneration package will be applicable to the Chairperson of the Education and Skills Authority.
(AQW 18940/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have agreed that the ESA Chairperson's remuneration will be £33,000 per annum for an associated time commitment of 3 days per week and subject to review after the first term of appointment. This was based on research undertaken with a number of comparator bodies and was considered to be on a par with that paid elsewhere and proportionate to the responsibilities and commitment required (e.g. the Chairs of the Regional Health bodies were remunerated at £33,000 p.a.). The agreed rate also took into consideration the high profile of ESA; the size of the new organisation; the budget that the ESA board will be required to manage; and the fact that the Chair is being asked to lead the board of a single Authority at a time when fundamental changes in processes are being undertaken, including welding together the many responsibilities of all of the outgoing organisations. The appointment is non-pensionable. Travel and incidental expenses will also be payable to the Chairperson in respect of expenditure incurred in relation to ESA business.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education which departmental functions will be transferred to local government under the Review of Public Administration.
(AQW 18953/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There will not be any Departmental functions transferring to local government.

Education and Skills Authority: Skills and Further Education

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education how the Education Bill, and subsequently the Education and Skills Authority, will deal with skills and further education.

(AQW 18962/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The clauses within the Education Bill that are relevant to Further Education are:

- Clause 2, which will give the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) the power to carry out administrative functions on behalf of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL);
- Clause 21, which will give ESA the function of paying superannuation benefits to retired Further Education lecturers;
- Clause 47, which sets out DEL's inspection powers;
- Clauses 49 to 54, which set out the functions of the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), including functions relating to Further Education;
- Clause 60, which revises the general duty of DEL;
- Clause 61, which re-enacts a DEL grant-making power;
- Schedule 7, which amends Article 100 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986, which deals with the resolution of disputes between ESA and Further Education Colleges; and
- Schedule 7, which inserts a new Article 101A into the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986, giving DEL the power to direct Further Education Colleges.

ESA will have no direct role in relation to the provision of Further Education. In carrying out its functions in relation to grant-aided schools, ESA will take into account the role of schools in delivering skills-based courses as part of the curriculum.

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of whether the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment should be held to account by an external regulator, as is the case in England and Wales.

(AQW 18987/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am currently content with the effectiveness and independence of the local Regulator. The CCEA Regulatory team works closely with the Regulators in England and Wales on a three jurisdiction basis, to ensure the integrity of the qualifications frameworks, and to protect the interests of learners. This role is completely separate from the functions of CCEA as an Awarding Organisation and advisory body.

Post-primary Area Plan Review

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the post-primary area plan review.

(AQO 3240/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: At the end of December each of the Education and Library Boards submitted to the Department a report on the key findings of their public consultation and a revised draft area plan for post-primary provision. These are currently being considered by my officials.

I am keen to ensure that full consideration is given to the 47,000 responses that were received by the Boards. I will also be determining to what extent the revised plans meet the Terms of Reference for area planning.

It is vital that we learn the lessons and listen to the views of those who responded to the post-primary consultation and tailor the approach to ensure it is appropriate for the primary school sector.

It is my intention to address the House regarding area planning in the coming weeks and I also intend to outline how we will progress with the Primary Area Planning process.

Teachers: Discipline

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education whether schools are required to have a policy in place for the discipline of teachers.

(AQW 19023/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: A Disciplinary Procedure for Teachers was agreed by the Teachers' Negotiating Committee in 2007 (TNC Circular 2007/5) and issued to schools by Employing Authorities. This was followed in 2008 by agreed guidance for Governors and Principals on application of the procedure (TNC 2008/4).

Boards of Governors were advised to adopt the procedure as soon as practicable and ensure that all teaching staff received a copy.

Disruptive Pupils: Discipline

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education whether schools are required to have a policy in place for the discipline of disruptive pupils.

(AQW 19024/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: By law, all grant-aided schools must have a discipline policy which outlines the behaviour it expects from registered pupils and the sanctions which it will impose for breaches in discipline. The day to day operation of the discipline policy is a matter for the school Principal and Board of Governors.

The relevant legislation is Article 3 of the Education (NI) Order 1998 as amended by Article 19 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 2003.

Internet: Dangers Associated with

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Education what actions are being taken to create awareness among children and young people of the dangers associated with the Internet.

(AQW 19025/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Teaching children and young people of the dangers associated with the internet is a matter for each school. Parents also have a key role to play, if children are given access to the internet at home.

The revised curriculum which has been taught to all pupils of compulsory school age since 2009/10, provides teachers with greater flexibility to use their professional skills and adapt their teaching to meet the needs of individual pupils. In addition to the statutory Areas of Learning, the curriculum also includes the cross-curricular skills of Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT and Other Skills such as problem solving. These skills are an integral part of, and are developed through, the statutory Areas of Learning.

Many schools are already assessing ICT skills through the voluntary ICT Accreditation Scheme. 2012/13 is the last year of the voluntary scheme as from 2013/14, assessment of the Using ICT cross-curricular skill will become statutory with the introduction of the Using ICT Levels of Progression. At a level appropriate to their ability, pupils should be enabled to develop skills in Using ICT and be provided with opportunities to develop knowledge and understanding of e-safety and acceptable online behaviour.

The Department provides all grant-aided schools with a managed ICT service via the C2k system. C2k provides teachers with resources and support which will impact on pupil learning. These include a number of Safer Internet eSafety seminars in local C2k Centres to support and inform principals and Senior Leaders. The C2k Exchange forum has an eSafety Zone and has a range of suitable resources for teachers.

C2k directly reaches pupils through the C2k Newsdesk which provides appropriate articles, activities and resources for Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 teachers and pupils for Safer Internet Day each year. Also throughout the year, the Newsdesk frequently raises issues of pupils' online safety, through writing of news articles, highlighting current issues and providing Online Safety fact files and appropriate web resources for school use.

On 5th Feb 2013, the Newsdesk will publish an article focusing on the Safer Internet Day 2013 theme – "Online Rights and Responsibilities" which encourages users to connect with respect.

Special Educational Needs Review

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the special educational needs review; and when he expects the process to be completed.

(AQW 19035/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The policy memorandum paper on a revised SEN and inclusion framework was agreed by the Executive on 5th July 2012.

The Office of the Legislative Counsel is currently considering draft instructions for the SEN Bill. Work has commenced on the development of supporting regulations and statutory code of practice to support the new framework. On current timescales, it is anticipated that a draft Bill will be introduced to the Assembly in September 2013. The operative date of the new SEN Bill is planned for September 2014. Implementation of the new framework will commence during the 2014/15 school year with arrangements in place for a 5 year transitional period.

Primary School Enrolment: South Belfast

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of enrolments in (i) controlled; (ii) maintained; (iii) integrated; and (iv) Irish Language primary schools in South Belfast, in each of the last five years, and their current enrolment capacity.

(AQW 19047/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information requested is detailed in the table below.

Primary schools located in the South Belfast constituency– Enrolments and capacity figures (Reception – year 7 only) – 2008/09 – 2012/13

School name	Type	IM school	Enrolments					Capacity
			2008/ 09	2009/ 10	2010/ 11	2011/ 12	2012/ 13	2012/13
Belvoir Park Primary School	Controlled	No	230	216	206	208	216	370
Blythefield Primary School	Controlled	No	94	93	85	83	82	513
Botanic Primary School	Controlled	No	189	178	180	176	176	210
Cairnshill Primary School	Controlled	No	439	458	429	429	429	583
Carryduff Primary School	Controlled	No	164	167	166	171	171	333
Donegall Road Primary School	Controlled	No	153	144	140	157	175	316
Fane Street Primary School	Controlled	No	137	135	152	167	187	495
Finaghy Primary School	Controlled	No	433	422	416	415	423	465
Harding Memorial Primary School	Controlled	No	227	203	195	185	195	210
Knockbreda Primary School	Controlled	No	136	168	162	156	160	225
Nettlefield Primary School	Controlled	No	205	218	243	248	268	375
Newtownbreda PS	Controlled	No	78	-	-	-	-	0
Rosetta Primary School	Controlled	No	151	147	165	179	190	413
Stranmillis Primary School	Controlled	No	400	406	407	403	402	408
Taughmonagh Primary School	Controlled	No	153	177	171	166	170	160
Holy Rosary Primary School, Belfast	Catholic Maintained	No	276	260	273	255	312	508
St Anne's Primary School, Belfast	Catholic Maintained	No	800	768	794	804	811	860
St Bernard's Primary School, Belfast	Catholic Maintained	No	393	400	393	403	406	446
St Bride's Primary School, Belfast	Catholic Maintained	No	786	776	788	807	817	809
St Ita's Primary School, Belfast	Catholic Maintained	No	397	427	453	483	508	510
St Joseph's Primary School, Carryduff	Catholic Maintained	No	388	392	378	381	392	436
St Malachy's Primary School, Belfast	Catholic Maintained	No	211	202	230	248	263	350
St Michael's Primary School, Belfast	Catholic Maintained	No	417	413	415	416	416	409
Forge Integrated Primary School	Controlled Integrated	No	223	231	248	265	273	250

School name	Type	IM school	Enrolments					Capacity
			2008/ 09	2009/ 10	2010/ 11	2011/ 12	2012/ 13	2012/13
Cranmore Integrated Primary School	GMI	No	189	195	183	185	188	203
Loughview Integrated Primary School	GMI	No	393	395	401	406	412	406
Scoil An Droichid	Other Maintained	Yes	105	99	113	118	120	145

Source: School census

Note:

- 1 Primary enrolments include pupils in reception - year 7 only.
- 2 For the purpose of this exercise the 2008 constituency boundaries have been applied to all years included.
- 3 Figures for 2012/13 are provisional at this time and may be subject to minor revision once the Education and Library Boards' auditing process is complete. Finalised figures will be available at the end of February.
- 4 Pupils admitted to Year 1 on appeal and pupils with a statement of special educational needs are included in primary enrolments but do not count towards the capacity figures.

Parkhall Integrated College, Antrim

Mr Girvan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the rebuilding of Parkhall Integrated College, Antrim. (AQO 3245/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: On 22 January I made a statement to the Assembly indicating that I propose to Advance in Planning twenty two school building projects as part of a £220million investment.

The projects announced are aimed at either addressing serious or substandard accommodation inadequacies, or at effecting agreed rationalisation of the schools estate.

Parkhall Integrated College was included in that announcement.

Authorisation to proceed with construction on each project will be based on the level of capital funding availability at that time and all necessary approvals being obtained.

School Starting Age

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Education whether he has considered allowing greater flexibility in the school starting age. (AQO 3246/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have no plans to introduce flexibility to the school starting age at this time. Whilst I am aware that we have one of the lowest school starting ages in Europe, the introduction of the Foundation Stage curriculum for pupils in Years 1 and 2 is already helping to address concerns about the very young age at which our children start school.

The Foundation Stage curriculum is designed to allow teachers the freedom to reassert what has always been regarded as best practice i.e. that very young children should be allowed to learn at their own pace. At Foundation Stage it is not recommended that a child begins formal learning until teachers believe the child is ready. This focus on matching learning to a child's readiness is designed to ensure that every child can indeed fulfil his or her full potential.

The foundation stage also provides teachers with greater flexibility to use their professional judgement and adapt their teaching to best meet the needs of their pupils and to provide for diagnostic assessment, which will provide greater opportunities for teachers to pick up earlier on pupils with particular difficulties.

I would also refer the member to the recently published Trends in International Maths and Science (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS) Studies which show our pupils are performing significantly above the international averages in literacy, numeracy and science. I believe that the revised curriculum is having a positive effect on how our children are learning and that the Foundation Stage is a good basis for that learning.

Early Years 0-6 Strategy

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister of Education to outline any discussions he has had with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety regarding the development of the Revised Early Years 0-6 Strategy. (AQO 3247/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I meet on a regular basis with Minister Poots regarding a range of matters of common interest and the revised early years framework has been and will continue to be a key item for discussion.

Each department needs to be clear about the contribution it makes to improving outcomes for children and families, and how that contribution helps achieve the wider and collective aims of the Executive. I am committed to working with Ministerial colleagues to enhance the delivery of early years and early intervention services.

Learning to Learn is set within the main priorities for education, while recognising the importance of multi-disciplinary and multi-agency working, particularly with health services.

Both Minister Poots and I have agreed that officials will continue to work together on key issues which are relevant to our respective early years services for the benefit of children and families.

DHSSPS officials were actively engaged during the development of the revised framework for early years education and learning particularly around proposed actions directly linked to health provision.

Officials will also liaise directly around the implementation of relevant actions in the Framework, for example Minister Poots has agreed to my request that our respective officials work closely on the review of Sure Start proposed in 'Learning to Learn' subject to the outcome of my consideration of responses to the consultation.

Preschool Programme

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Education what additional resources have been allocated to voluntary and private settings in the pre-school programme that meet the criteria for extended schools funding.

(AQO 3248/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I launched 'Learning to Learn – A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning' in December 2012. The proposed actions are currently the subject of focused consultation which concludes on 31 January 2013.

Included in the framework is an action to review how early years education and learning services are effectively targeted to address barriers to learning and enhance access and equity. I propose establishing criteria, similar to that used for Extended Schools, for voluntary and private settings in the Pre-School Programme to access additional resources proportionate to the amount they receive per place.

Extended schools funding is available to schools that meet the published criteria. In terms of pre-school provision it is currently only available to statutory nursery schools and nursery units in primary schools that meet the set criteria.

Information which is used to determine eligibility for Extended Schools is currently not available in the same format for voluntary and private settings in the pre-school programme. Subject to any refinement on the proposed actions following consultation, the data collection system for voluntary and private providers in the pre-school programme will be revised, which will enable resource requirements and allocations to be determined.

Grammar Schools: Funding

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education, in relation to the Education Bill, for his assessment of whether the system for funding grammar schools should be maintained and made available to other schools which meet the Department's criteria as effective organisations.

(AQO 3249/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education Bill will make no change to the arrangements for funding voluntary grammar schools, other than to transfer the function of paying grants from my Department to the Education and Skills Authority.

The report of the independent Review of the Common Funding Scheme includes a recommendation to extend grant-based funding arrangements to a broader range of schools. I intend to consider carefully the report, and the views of stakeholders, before deciding on the way forward.

ERASMUS

Mrs McKeivitt asked the Minister of Education to outline his Department's plans to encourage individuals and educational institutions to avail of the opportunities which will become available as part of the EU Erasmus For All programme in 2014.

(AQO 3250/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department has not been formally consulted regarding Erasmus For All Programme. My understanding is that the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (DfBIS) is leading on the tendering exercise to appoint an Agency / Agencies to take forward the Programme. DfBIS is planning to consult devolved administrations. I am aware that the tendering exercise is due to commence in March / April with a closing date of May for submissions. It is expected that the winning tender will be awarded in July with the successful Agency / Agencies carrying out any marketing / promotion etc.

Key Stage 2 Pupils: Class Size

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education, given the importance of Equality of Educational Provision, whether he has any plans to review the maximum class size for Key Stage 2 pupils.

(AQO 3251/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have no plans to review the maximum class size for Key Stage 2 pupils at this time.

Considerable research has been conducted on the effect of class sizes on teaching and learning. Evidence suggests that smaller class sizes in early years can have a positive impact on outcomes but the quality of teaching is the most important factor.

Therefore, it is policy to keep classes for our youngest pupils, (Years 1-4), to a maximum of 30 pupils.

What is essential is high quality teaching, a curriculum that is matched to needs, interests and abilities of pupils and a focus on improvement and raising standards.

The Revised Curriculum provides teachers with flexibility to tailor the curriculum and adapt their teaching to suit the needs of pupils. Furthermore, effective use of data facilitates identification of pupils at risk of not achieving their full potential. Teachers can adapt their delivery of the curriculum, customising it to best effect. Recent findings of the Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS) and Trends in Mathematics and Science (TIMMS) studies of Year 6 pupils shows that our Key Stage 2 outcomes show high attainment at primary level education.

School Inspectors

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education what steps he is taking to ensure that school inspectors have recent classroom and school management experience.

(AQO 3252/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Inspectors are appointed on the basis of having extensive classroom and school management experience.

In addition inspectors are in classrooms and other training and education settings almost every day they are open and as a result they are up to date with and apprised of what constitutes effective learning and teaching and exemplary practice both within the classroom and within the structures of leadership and management.

Inspecting in itself demands great skill and ETI's inspectors bring to each inspection, consistency and system wide knowledge and expertise gleaned from the many inspections and visits they carry out. The inspectors' extensive understanding and experience of inspection is complemented by the associate assessors who are current practitioners in our schools and providers.

In addition, the ETI has a comprehensive and highly regarded staff development programme for its full-time inspectors.

Special EU Programmes Body

Ms Boyle asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) the nature of the discussions that have taken place between officials from his Department and the Special EU Programmes Body on the possibility of an Educational theme being included in a future Peace IV Programme; and (ii) the outcome of these discussions and how the issue will be taken forward.

(AQW 19068/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Senior officials from my Department have met with SEUPB at their request for preliminary high level discussions as part of their consultation for the new European Territorial Co-operation programme cycle (2014-20). Discussions focused on what role an education theme might play in any Peace IV programme and relevant educational policy.

It is understood that SEUPB are engaged in the analysis of a range of proposals for any Peace IV programme received from a wide range of stakeholders during their first public consultation (August- November 2012). SEUPB are expected to hold further discussions with the NI Executive and the Irish Government over the coming months and a draft Operational Programme will be subject to a further public consultation during 2013. No requests for further meetings with DE officials have been received at this stage.

Department for Employment and Learning

Training for Success Scheme

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQW 17073/11-15, how many young people have left the Training for Success scheme and gained employment.

(AQW 18231/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): The Training for Success programme is designed to move young people closer to the labour market by providing them with an opportunity to attain skills and qualifications; it is not an employment programme. The programme targets and monitors the achievements and qualifications and progression mainly in the context of further education and training.

It has three strands and provides a guaranteed training place for all eligible unemployed young people aged 16 and 17, with extended eligibility for those with a disability up to age 22 and up to age 24 for those from an in-care background. Two strands, Skills for your Life and Skills for Work, focus on those young people who have barriers, and the training and support offered aims to address these and to help the young people to benefit from training.

The third strand is offered through a Programme-Led Apprenticeship and it is aimed at those young people who are closer to the labour market with a focus on helping them to gain qualifications at level 2 (equivalent to 5 GCSE at levels A*-C) and also Essential Skills in literacy, numeracy and ICT.

The aim of Training for Success is to give young people the training and allow them to attain the qualifications they need to best equip themselves for the world of work. Consequently, and in common with other education and training initiatives, primary data collection is concentrated on achievement of qualifications.

Agrifood Industry

Mrs Overend asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether there is any provision for developing skills relevant to the Agri-Food industry in order to consolidate and grow this sector?

(AQW 18377/11-15)

Dr Farry: I fully recognise the importance of the Agri-Food sector to our economy. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) has the central authority under the Agriculture Act (1949) to provide formal education and training for the agricultural sector. However, to add value and provide support I have identified the food and drink manufacturing and processing sub sector as one of a number of priority industries for employment and skills provision.

Employers are concerned about a perceived shortage of food technologists and engineers and the need to increase the management and leadership skills within the industry. In June 2012 I launched a Skills Action Plan, which outlines how these challenges will be addressed by the department, employers, education providers, Improve (the Sector Skills Council) and colleagues in DARD and Invest NI working together, in a coordinated manner. I have placed a copy of the Plan in the Assembly Library and it is also available on my department's website at <http://www.delni.gov.uk/>. A number of actions within the plan have already been taken forward.

I met recently with the Agri-Food Strategy Board and although its initial report is not yet published, it is likely that the skills and capability of the workforce will form a major strand of its work and I envisage the actions contained in the Action Plan will make a major contribution to this

Finally, it is also important to note that in addition to the training provision offered by government departments, the sector also benefits from provision at the three campuses of the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise and at both Queen's University and the University of Ulster. Work is ongoing with all of these institutions to ensure that they continue to work closely with industry to meet their requirements.

Unemployment: North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action his Department is taking to address unemployment issues for young people from working class communities in North Down.

(AQW 18426/11-15)

Dr Farry: Addressing youth unemployment, in all areas of Northern Ireland including North Down, is a priority.

In the period April to November 2012 my Department helped 564 young people move into work in North Down (the area served by Bangor and Newtownards Jobcentres). This is 17% above target for those areas for the period. (The target for Bangor was 241 and for Newtownards, 240).

Steps to Work is the Department's main return to work provision and in the North Down area (served by Bangor and Newtownards JobCentres) 487 young people are currently availing of this programme. This is a flexible programme which tailors provision to the individual's need with the aim of assisting participants to find and sustain employment.

In March the Executive agreed a package of new measures – “the Youth Employment Scheme” - to help young people gain experience, acquire new skills and find employment.

My Department is actively working with employers to secure as many opportunities as possible as quickly as possible across Northern Ireland. I have been encouraged by the response of employers so far and I expect many more to come forward to offer opportunities for young people in the coming months.

A new initiative has recently been implemented within the StW programme known as 'First Start'. Between now and 2014 First Start will support 1,700 waged employment opportunities across Northern Ireland, each lasting a minimum of six months, for young people aged 18 to 24 who have been in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance for at least six months. Young people in North Down will be able to avail of these.

The Department's Pathways to Work programme assists people with health conditions and disabilities move into employment and presently 70 young people in the North Down area (served by Bangor and Newtownards JobCentres) are involved in this programme.

In terms of other initiatives my Department is undertaking, I secured Executive endorsement of 'Pathways to Success', the cross-departmental NEET strategy for Northern Ireland.

'Pathways to Success' Strategy

My Department is now implementing several new initiatives under the 'Pathways to Success' strategy, to complement existing and developing programmes of intervention to tackle youth unemployment as follows:

- a Community Family Support Programme working with disadvantaged families as opposed to individual young people. Ultimately this will be rolled out to provide support to some 500 families across Northern Ireland..
- a Community Based Access Programme which will enable non-statutory organisations to provide learner support to young people aged 16 to 18 and commences enrolments in September 2013.
- a training allowance for young people participating in projects funded by the European Social Fund on 15 October 2012. This allowance has been designed to ensure there are effective incentives for young people to progress from provision which re-engages them with learning to programmes that provide the skills and qualifications to support progression and success in work; and.
- a new Collaboration and Innovation Fund into help those young people most marginalised in our society engage effectively with the world of work. Four out of the 18 successful projects from the Collaboration and Innovation Fund are located in North Down. The four schemes will be delivered by Fit4life, South Eastern Regional College, Training for Women Network and the South Eastern Health and Social Services.

Careers Service

Finally, the Department's Careers Service provides an all-age, impartial careers information, advice and guidance service to clients throughout Northern Ireland. In addition to services provided to young people in school, and adults through JobCentres and Jobs and Benefits Offices, careers advisers actively case-manage all young people aged 16 and 17 who do not have a positive destination when they leave school or who drop out of provision early. The aim is to help them to secure and sustain suitable employment, education or training provision.

I trust that this answers your question.

University Colleges: Non-departmental Public Body Status

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in the event of St Mary's University College winning its appeal against non-Departmental Public Body Status, to detail what variation there would be between Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College in terms of the regulatory burden placed on the respective colleges and the checks and balances applied by his Department to each.

(AQW 18461/11-15)

Dr Farry: As a Non Departmental Public Body (NDPB), Stranmillis University College is subject to the regulatory framework which currently applies to all government departments. This requires the College to comply with Dear Accounting Officer letters, Managing Public Money Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Public Procurement Policy. The Principal is formally designated as the College's accounting officer. The College is also subject to the public sector pay remit process and is currently within the department's budgetary boundary. From 2014/15, the College's accounts will be consolidated with the department's resource accounts.

St Mary's on the other hand would be subject to those requirements set out in its Financial Memorandum and to the terms and conditions attached to grants provided by the Department.

In the case of either college, the department exercises the degree of control appropriate to its status.

It is not my intention to make a difference between the two colleges but circumstances beyond the control of both my department and the Northern Ireland Executive, has resulted in this situation which requires that a different approach is adopted with respect to each college.

University Colleges: Non-departmental Public Body Status

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning why a financial memorandum has not been issued to Stranmillis University College following its designation as a non-Departmental Public Body, and whether his Department will permit the college to spend the money it raises.

(AQW 18464/11-15)

Dr Farry: A valid Financial Memorandum currently exists between my Department and Stranmillis University College. As a consequence of the College's designation as a Non Departmental Public Body, this will be replaced in due course by a combined Management Statement and Financial Memorandum.

I can confirm that the College will continue to be permitted to spend money which it raises, providing it requests and secures appropriate budget cover from the Department.

Universities: Counselling

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many counsellors have been trained by each university, in the last 5 years.

(AQW 18508/11-15)

Dr Farry: As the Department does not hold the information requested, my officials contacted Queen's University, the University of Ulster and the Open University. The universities have indicated that a total of 902 students have completed counselling courses in the last 5 years.

I have placed details of the universities responses in the Assembly Library and on my department's website <http://www.delni.gov.uk>.

Counselling Courses

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many counselling courses are offered by (i) further education colleges; and (ii) higher education institutes.

(AQW 18509/11-15)

Dr Farry: As the Department does not hold the information requested, my officials contacted Queen's University, the University of Ulster and the Open University. The universities currently offer a total of 8 courses.

Regarding further education, my officials have contacted colleges to confirm their counselling provision at all levels. I can confirm that in the current academic year there are 1,589 enrolments on Professional and Technical courses that include counselling. There are currently 31 courses across all campuses, with provision ranging from level 2 to level 7. Level 4 and above is deemed equivalent to Higher Education.

Information provided by the universities and details of the courses held across the further education campuses have been placed in the Assembly Library and is available on my department's website . <http://www.delni.gov.uk/>.

Higher Education Students: Financial Assistance

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the financial assistance available to higher education students who wish to enrol in courses outside Northern Ireland, England, Wales, Scotland or the Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 19030/11-15)

Dr Farry: I can advise that under European Union (EU) law, Northern Ireland undergraduate students who wish to study in the EU can apply to the host country for help with their tuition fees. Any additional financial help is optional and a matter for the host country. There are reciprocal arrangements for EU students studying in Northern Ireland.

There is no student financial support under the Regulations or other legislation for Northern Ireland domiciled undergraduate students who wish to study internationally, outside the United Kingdom (UK) or EU, other than as an integral part of a course of study at a UK or Republic of Ireland higher education institution.

Pathways to Success: Rural Areas

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline how the Pathways to Success Collaboration and Innovation Fund will help equip disadvantaged young people in rural areas for employment.

(AQO 3259/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Collaboration and Innovation Fund is a key element of the Pathways to Success strategy for meeting the needs of young people not in education, employment or training; often referred to as NEET. I have provided £9million to the fund over the period December 2012 to March 2015, to finance initiatives that will equip disadvantaged young people throughout Northern Ireland to find and sustain employment.

Following a competitive procurement process, 18 successful organisations drawn from the community, voluntary and educational sectors have been chosen to provide support to over 5,500 disadvantaged young people in the NEET category. These organisations will provide a service throughout Northern Ireland including specific rural areas around Bangor, Newtownards, Downpatrick, Newry, Lisburn, Banbridge, Omagh, Dungannon, Mourne, Derry City Council area and counties Armagh and Fermanagh.

A range of innovative approaches will be used to support these young people, including individual assessment of need, bespoke training and development plans, work placements, mentoring and in some cases the offer of full-time employment. A key point will be to encourage progress in the development of key skills in order to bring the young people closer to the labour market.

I have established a NEET Advisory Group with membership drawn from across the Executive Departments, business, the voluntary and community sectors, local Government, and from the NEETs Strategy Forum. The NEET Advisory Group had its first meeting on 22 January 2013 and will meet to monitor the effectiveness of the programme on a regular basis throughout the year.

Essential Skills: Information, Communication and Technology

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how he is working to improve the number of Essential Skills enrolments in Information, Communication and Technology subjects.

(AQO 3260/11-15)

Dr Farry: Since its launch in 2002, the overall Essential Skills Strategy has been extremely successful, with nearly 340,000 enrolments and almost 169,000 qualifications achieved in literacy, numeracy and ICT.

ICT, was piloted from 2007/08, and introduced as a third essential skill in August 2009. Between then and July 2012 there were over 42,000 enrolments, with almost 20,000 qualifications in ICT being achieved. In each academic year the number of enrolments in essential skills of ICT has increased, as has the number of qualifications achieved. So, considerable momentum has already been established.

However, I am not complacent, and my Department continues to work with a wide range of organisations, including further education colleges, training suppliers, public sector bodies, employers and trades unions to actively encourage and promote the uptake and delivery of all Essential Skills provision, including ICT. All of these courses are free to all learners.

Engaging with hard to reach groups in a wide variety of settings remains a priority. In addition, qualifications in essential skills are promoted through all departmental programmes for young people and for adults.

The department also funds the provision of Entry Level ICT qualifications through the further education colleges. This was introduced to assist learners to develop basic skills and knowledge in ICT, to facilitate and encourage progression into the main essential skills ICT courses, and to gain a recognised qualification in the process.

My Department will continue to run an advertising campaign, now called "Get the Know How". This is designed specifically to encourage adults to improve their skills in literacy, numeracy and ICT in order to enhance their lives, increase their employability, and contribute to the growth of the Northern Ireland economy.

Therefore, while more remains to be done, the Essential Skills Strategy, including the ICT strand, has been a success story in Northern Ireland.

Employment and Learning: East Belfast

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the work his Department is undertaking to improve employment and learning in East Belfast.

(AQO 3261/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department is responsible for the Steps to Work programme which provides a range of support measures to help the unemployed find and sustain employment. In the period April to November 2012, my Department helped 992 people move into work in East Belfast. At present, 515 people from the East Belfast area are participating in the Steps to Work programme.

In addition, 376 people from East Belfast are participating in Pathways to Work, a programme that helps people with health conditions and disabilities to prepare for, secure, and sustain employment.

My Department has recently appointed 18 providers to deliver the Collaboration and Innovation Fund throughout Northern Ireland. I have agreed to the allocation of just under £4m over the period up to March 2015, to fund six organisations in the greater Belfast area, to provide support to 1,500 young people in the NEET category. Fit4Life will target 550 youth unemployed in East Belfast among other areas.

My Department also provides a guarantee of a training place on its Training for Success programme for all unemployed young people in the 16 to 17 age group. As of 3 January 2013, 348 young people from East Belfast are currently participating on the programme.

The Community Family Support Programme pilot commenced in January 2013 and will focus on the needs of the most disadvantaged families to support parents, help prevent younger family members falling into the NEET category and help other young family members already in this situation to re-engage with education, training or employment.

The pilot will work initially with 44 disadvantaged families in East and West Belfast, Strabane, Cookstown and Newtownabbey before being rolled out across Northern Ireland.

I would like to emphasise that many of these programmes have been specifically designed for Northern Ireland and are not available in the wider UK.

Steps to Work

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on Steps to Work.

(AQO 3262/11-15)

Dr Farry: A recent evaluation of my Department's Steps to Work programme found that it has met its employment targets and was an effective employment intervention. The current target for Steps to Work participants moving into sustained employment for 13 weeks or more is 25%. The latest performance statistics available show that from September 2008 to March 2012 the programme has achieved 29% into sustained employment for 13 weeks or more.

Steps to Work continues to show itself to be a flexible and dynamic programme that performs well in a very challenging economic climate.

The additional funding my Department has received through the Executive's Economy and Jobs Initiative has enabled me to introduce First Start and Step Ahead 50+. These are two new employment strands within the Steps to Work programme which will help address the increase in unemployment

The First Start initiative was introduced in November 2012 to provide an immediate and direct response to the latest increase in long term unemployment, particularly the rising jobless rate among long term unemployed young people.

This is a targeted intervention for 18 to 24 year olds which will provide supported employment for 1,700 young people over the next three years.

The Step Ahead 50+ employment strand, introduced in January 2013, provides those aged 50 or over with work experience and a recent employment history, which will enable them to compete more effectively for jobs in the current economic climate.

This intervention will provide 1,100 supported employment opportunities for this age group over the next three years.

As well as providing valuable experience in the workplace and in some cases permanent jobs, these initiatives will also prepare people for job opportunities when the downturn ends.

Employment: Science-related Careers

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline what action is being taken by his Department to ensure that more young people are choosing science related employment as a choice of career.

(AQO 3263/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Strategy, 'Success through STEM', sets out how Government and business will encourage more people to gain skills in these increasingly sought after subjects. My Department has an important role to play in its implementation.

Firstly, we must ensure that there are enough places at our colleges and universities for people to study these economically relevant courses.

I have announced previously that by 2015, there will be an additional 1200 undergraduate places in STEM related subjects and 300 PhD places, focussed on areas of economic relevance to Northern Ireland, available at our universities. I have also launched a Public/Private Sector information and communication technology Apprenticeship, a Higher Level Apprenticeship pilot in information and communication technology and a second cohort of the Software Testers Academy. Furthermore, our universities are now offering a Masters in information and communication technology, specifically aimed at non information technology graduates.

All of this provision, in addition to that already available at our colleges and universities, will help to increase the supply of people with relevant STEM skills into the workforce.

Secondly, young people need to be encouraged to study STEM subjects at school, college and university and go on to pursue a career in these areas. While Government will play its part, it is employers who need to do more to highlight the attractiveness of their professions.

My Department's Careers Service recognises the importance of raising young people's awareness of industries which are likely to offer positive employment prospects and the relevant skills and entry requirements. Our universities and colleges are also promoting STEM through the likes of the South West College's STEM Centre and Queen's University's STEM bursaries.

However, all too often, young people inadvertently close doors by their subject choices. The Careers Service continues to work with schools to highlight the importance of subject choices to ensure that career options are kept open, particularly in respect of STEM.

Graduates: Employment

Mr Anderson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in light of the current increase in the number of undergraduate student places, for his assessment of the adequacy of future degree-related employment opportunities for graduates.

(AQO 3264/11-15)

Dr Farry: Higher level skills, including those at graduate level, will become increasingly critical to our economy over the coming years.

This is recognised in the Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland, 'Success through Skills – Transforming Futures'. That overarching strategy is underpinned by comprehensive research which sets out the future skill needs of the Northern Ireland economy. It emphasises the importance of helping people to progress up the 'skills ladder'. In particular, it shows that around half the jobs in 2020 will require higher education level qualifications, up from 37% in 2012.

This requirement for higher level skills, particularly skills in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths, was confirmed in further work that I commissioned to look at skill needs in a lower corporation tax environment.

It is important, therefore, to continue to invest in skills, including those at the higher level, so that we can deliver the Executive's vision for future economic success. This is why I have announced recently an additional 1,200 economically-focussed undergraduate student places in Northern Ireland.

Nevertheless, I recognise that the current labour market is challenging for graduates and for others. I can assure members that my Department remains focussed on supporting people into employment while also building the skills base to secure sustained economic growth.

For example, my Department's Graduate Entry to Management Programme has been offered since 2007, operating under the INTRO brand. The programme is designed to provide well equipped managers for businesses in Northern Ireland, while at the same time easing graduate unemployment pressures.

Apprentices: Financial Assistance

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the financial assistance available to enable apprentices to complete their training.

(AQO 3265/11-15)

Dr Farry: ApprenticeshipsNI is my Department's flagship training programme for those in employment. Employers meet all salary costs for apprentices.

The apprenticeship training package on offer to employers is attractive, in that direct training costs are met by my Department. This can range between £1,300 and £10,800 depending on the age of the apprentice and the level and occupational area of study.

On successful completion of training, an incentive bonus of up to £1,500 is also paid to the employer.

There are almost 11,000 people undertaking apprenticeship training at the moment. This figure is testimony to the value that employers place on ApprenticeshipsNI training.

I plan to make a statement in the Assembly in February on a fundamental review of the future of the apprenticeships and youth training provision.

Education: Preparation for Employment

Mr McAleer asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline what action his Department is taking to encourage education providers to ensure that young people are equipped and educated to meet the demands of employers.

(AQO 3266/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department ensures that further education colleges and higher education institutions provide services which meet the needs of the local economy.

It is essential that we understand the current and future needs of employers. My Department's Skills Strategy, which has been informed by research and forecasting work, sets out the direction to 2020. The study advocates the need to promote training that can equip the workforce with recognised qualifications that meet employers' needs.

In support of the Economic Strategy, I have recently identified a number of economic sectors that will be the focus of my Department's employment and skills provision, and I am actively supporting the demands of employers in those sectors.

For example, I chair information and communication technology and advanced engineering services working groups. These bring together business, government and local colleges and universities, to consider how the current and future skills needs of these important sectors can be met.

Second, most of the further education and training delivered in Northern Ireland leads to qualifications on the Qualifications and Credit Framework. These qualifications are based on National Occupational Standards, into which employers have a major input. This ensures that young people are following courses of study that meet employers' needs.

In addition, employers always stress the importance of young people having a range of "softer" employability skills. Therefore, all further education and training provision is based on individual programmes of learning which include a range of employability skills, which address young people's personal and social development needs, and which include the essential skills of literacy, numeracy and ICT where necessary.

Further education colleges have an important role in being flexible and responsive to the very specific needs of small employers. My Department's Skills Solutions Service works in tandem with colleges, brokering bespoke solutions where no existing training and development product will meet the employer's specific needs.

Counsellors: Training

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how his Department is ensuring that the level of trained counsellors meets demand.

(AQO 3267/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department sets high level targets in respect of the curriculum in further education colleges, and agrees broad targets with individual colleges through the annual college development planning process.

While the Department sets this strategic direction for the sector, each College is responsible for its own curriculum offer, including the provision of courses in relation to counselling. Decisions on whether specific courses such as counselling are provided, are informed by the level of demand from employers and learners in college areas.

My officials have contacted the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety regarding the demand for trained counsellors. While that Department does not hold this information, it published a "Strategy for the Development of Psychological Therapies" in June 2010.

This Strategy highlights the need to ensure the quality of service provision in the statutory, voluntary and independent sectors. It recommends that practitioners are properly trained in the therapies they are providing, which is a key measure of a safe and effective service.

I can confirm that the courses currently provided by further education colleges include certificates in counselling from level two to level four, as well as foundation degrees. The subject areas covered are diverse, ranging for example from an introduction to counselling skills, to areas such as working with trauma, bereavement, mental health and self harm.

Therefore, it is for employers, professional bodies and other parts of government to identify and articulate their education and training requirements, which colleges will make every effort to meet.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Down Business Park

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to list the companies who own or rent premises in Down Business Park.

(AQW 18101/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Invest NI, in line with its intervention criteria, provides property to qualifying businesses across Northern Ireland in support of approved economic development projects.

The table below details those companies that have purchased property within Down Business Park directly from Invest NI. You will note that there is only one property within the Park owned by the Agency that attracts a rent; this factory is currently occupied under licence.

Invest NI does not maintain records of any onward property transactions that may have taken place since the completion of the original sale.

You will note that amongst the transactions listed in the table is a property sale to Jobspace (NI) Limited in May 2000. This site was subsequently developed as Down Business Centre. Invest NI does not hold records of businesses that are located within the Centre.

Name	Date	Form of Agreement - Lease/Licence	Size of Site (in acres)
Ashvale Engineering	Dec 2007	999 year lease	1.21
Kennedy Fish	Apr 2006	999 year lease	1.56
Quinn Piling	Dec 2005	999 year lease	3.74
NIE (large substation)	Mar 2003	999 year lease	0.18
Crossgar Meats	Mar 2001	999 year lease	2.95
Jobspace (NI) Ltd	May 2000	999 year lease	4.99
Lynn's Country Foods	Sep 2011	Licence	1.63 (11,388 sq ft factory)

Business: Flag Protests

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether her Department has carried out an assessment on the impact the recent protests and riots have had on the local economy and investor confidence in Belfast.

(AQW 18293/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The recent protests and associated disorder have had a detrimental impact on business in Belfast, particularly on the retail and hospitality sectors.

Economic and political stability are crucial for our economy to grow and for us to attract investment, create jobs and bring prosperity to all the people of Northern Ireland.

Selective Financial Assistance

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in light of the Selective Financial Assistance rates being due for reduction, what action is being taken to support and encourage investment in the Agri-food sector.

(AQW 18376/11-15)

Mrs Foster: While the draft Regional Aid Guidelines for the period 2014-20 indicate that the rates of support to business across much of Europe may be reduced in future, it is important to note that Regional Aid will continue across the EU post 2013. Given ongoing consultation between EU member states, it is not yet possible to conclude how this will impact Northern Ireland. The Executive acknowledges the importance of Regional Aid and SFA to businesses in Northern Ireland. We are in ongoing, active discussions with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) in London and with representatives of the European Commission with a view to optimising Northern Ireland's position post 2013 and we expect Regional Aid to continue in Northern Ireland.

Last year my Department, through Invest NI, made 93 offers of Selective Financial Assistance to assist the Agri-Food Sector. This totalled over £4.4 million of support leveraging over £37 million investment into the sector. This builds on the previous year highlighting nearly £100 million planned investment by the food industry from April 2010 to March 2012. The latest statistics on the food processing sector continue to show growth with turnover increasing by 6.7% from £3.7 billion in 2010 to nearly £4 billion in 2011.

My Department is also working with DARD and the recently appointed Agri-Food Board to develop a longer term strategy for the Agri-Food Industry.

Foyle Cup Tournament

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, considering the economic appraisal conducted by Cogent on the Foyle Cup Tournament, to detail (i) whether the baseline figures are correct; and (ii) whether the allocation from the Northern Ireland Tourist Board reflects the economic impact to the city and district.

(AQW 18379/11-15)

Mrs Foster:

- (i) The report undertaken in July 2011, as a condition of The Northern Ireland Executive funding, found a possible return to the Northern Ireland economy from the event of £269,711 and an economic return to the secondary economy of £541,694. These figures are correct and therefore stand.

This figure has no bearing in relation to the current funding application or award received through the Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

- (ii) The allocation from the Northern Ireland Tourist Board is not based on the economic appraisal, but is based on key tourism criteria such as visitor numbers and spend, and representing Northern Ireland as a tourism destination, as the scheme is designed to increase tourism.

The scheme also reflects the four main principles which underpin financial support. These principles cover additionality, leveraging of other funding, partnership working and significance.

EU-Canada Free Trade Agreement

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the benefits that will result from the pending Free Trade Agreement between the EU and Canada.

(AQW 18408/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Canada-EU Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) will assist Northern Ireland companies to better access the Canadian market. Canada offers Northern Ireland companies a sophisticated, stable and growing marketplace for the broad range of products and services produced in Northern Ireland. CETA also reinforces Northern Ireland's position as a destination for investment.

Canada is a developed and sophisticated market providing many opportunities across multiple sectors. In September 2011, Invest NI appointed an in-market advisor to help Northern Ireland companies maximise the trade and investment opportunities that exist in Canada. More recently, Invest NI has developed an initiative known as GoCanada which is a dedicated export development programme designed to help Northern Ireland companies win business there. Twelve companies are currently on the first phase of the programme and are scheduled to visit Canada as part of a multi-sector trade mission in March this year.

In addition over 30 companies met with the in-market advisor during 2012 to discuss their strategies for the Canadian market and 10 companies have had tailored research conducted for them on the Canadian market through Invest NI's Trade Advisory Service.

Together with our investment in additional resources in the marketplace, the elimination of duties, common standards, improved access to Canadian Government procurement projects and simpler regulations will help our companies to sell more and sell better in this important market.

For Canadian companies with investments already in Northern Ireland like Bombardier, BTI Systems and McCloskeys, as well as potential new investors, CETA offers additional reasons for investing in Northern Ireland.

Natural Gas Network

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail why east and north Antrim have not been included in her Department's plans for the extension of the natural gas network.

(AQW 18441/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Natural gas is already available in towns such as Ballymena, Ballymoney, and Larne in North and East Antrim.

Responses to my Department's 2011 consultation on extending the natural gas network in Northern Ireland agreed that the main towns in the West and North West of Northern Ireland and those in East Down, represent the key remaining areas in which the natural gas network might feasibly be developed at this time.

Provision of new gas networks to further areas will depend on the availability of suitable gas loads in such areas, interest by a gas company in developing new gas networks, and the commitment of consumers in new areas to connect to natural gas in the event of it becoming available. In November 2012, the Utility Regulator approved additional development plans for firmus energy which will see the gas network extended to Bushmills and to quarries in the Ringsend and Slemish electoral wards.

Foyle Cup Tournament

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the reason for the further 50 percent reduction in funding for the Foyle Cup Tournament for the second consecutive year.

(AQW 18465/11-15)

Mrs Foster: A key condition of Government funding is the principle of additionality. NITB has assessed that the grant offered is the minimum level of Government assistance required to enable the event to take place.

I would advise you that grants can only be paid out against eligible expenditure and NITB has confirmed to me that their support only relates to a portion of the predicted total Foyle Cup budget.

Fuel Prices

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 17776/11-15, whether her Department uses wholesale oil and wholesale gas price forecasts in its assessments and decision making, and if so, what forecasts does the Department use.

(AQW 18545/11-15)

Mrs Foster: While my Department has no direct role in setting or forecasting fuel prices, it makes use of information such as that provided in the Sutherland Tables for comparison of retail energy costs between different fuel sources.

The Department also engages in energy tariff reviews led by the Utility Regulator which involves consideration of movements in wholesale energy prices. The Utility Regulator uses direct market information on the price of future wholesale gas prices at the National Balancing Point (this is the price at which gas is traded in Great Britain) in making decisions related to tariff setting.

When necessary, the Department also makes use of other publically available sources for assessment of wholesale and retail oil and gas prices, and has access to analysis provided by the Department of Energy and Climate Change in London.

Movements in wholesale energy prices are very difficult to predict and are influenced by many international factors including economic activity, changes in technology, commodity trading, and the political environment.

G8 Summit

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the economic boost that will be brought about by hosting the G8 Summit.

(AQW 18578/11-15)

Mrs Foster: A report for the Scottish Executive assessed the economic impact of hosting the G8 summit in Gleneagles during 2005. It identified short term benefits such as the expenditure by delegates, by international media organisations, by visitors from other events related to the G8, and also the benefits from the additional public expenditure directed towards running and servicing the event. In addition, the media coverage provided a platform for further economic benefits from tourism and investment brought about by Scotland's increased international profile.

Having been selected as the venue for the G8 in 2013, Fermanagh and Northern Ireland have a tremendous opportunity to attract many of the same types of economic benefits enjoyed by Scotland back in 2005. In addition a recent report from the University of Toronto suggests that smaller communities and cities tend to gain enhanced benefits from hosting these types of events compared to already high profile capital cities.

So, in the short term, there will be economic benefits for our local businesses, particularly those involved in accommodation, event management, catering and transport related activities. In order to maximise the longer term economic impacts for business, Invest NI is working with government and partners to showcase our key inward investment and export sectors. In addition NITB and Tourism Ireland are working to promote Northern Ireland and generate publicity in key overseas markets to maximise benefits for tourism.

Civil Servants: Unrest

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the number of Civil Servants from her Department who have left work early since 3 December 2012 due to the civil unrest associated with the flag protests; and (ii) the associated financial cost to her departmental budget.

(AQW 18604/11-15)

Mrs Foster: No formal record of numbers was maintained and therefore (ii) the financial cost to the Department is not known.

Crescent Capital

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of InvestNI's intervention in the technology sector through Crescent Capital, and the value for money it provided.

(AQW 18633/11-15)

Mrs Foster: There are two Crescent Capital funds. Crescent Capital I was a £14 million fund into which DETI invested £7 million on a subordinated basis. The balance of fund investment was from the private sector. It invested in 12 companies. This fund closed in 2007. The successor fund is Crescent Capital II. It was set up in 2004 with a 10 year term. It is a £22.5 million fund with Invest NI providing £7.5 million on a subordinated basis. It has invested in 14 companies.

My assessment is that Invest NI's intervention in the technology sector through the Crescent funds has been excellent. The Crescent funds have invested in 26 companies of which 22 are considered to be in the technology sector. The venture capital funds addressed market failure for development capital. The Invest NI intervention in both funds was £14.5 million. This attracted a further £21 million of private investment into the funds themselves. The Invest NI intervention pumped venture capital to assist in stimulating growth in the economy. These technology companies would not otherwise have been able to attract funding. In turn, this funding has led to increased competitiveness, increased exports and job creation. Of the 26 companies, there have been seven profitable exits to date and one stock exchange listing. The investee companies experienced overall increases in sales, profits and employees although it is always difficult to determine the extent to which economic impacts are a direct result of Crescent interventions. The funds delivered wider and regional benefits including raising awareness of Venture Capital, meeting the demonstrable need and providing non financial supports to investee companies.

The appointment of fund managers to such funds is through the Open Journal European Union, an open tender process. Tenders are evaluated on the basis of methodology and cost. This process ensures that value for money for the management of the funds is achieved.

Crescent Capital

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail how Crescent Capital helped to stimulate the venture capital industry and accelerate the quality and quantity of venture capital available to small and medium enterprises.

(AQW 18634/11-15)

Mrs Foster: There are two Crescent Capital funds. Crescent Capital I was a £14 million fund into which DETI invested £7 million on a subordinated basis. The balance of fund investment was from the private sector. It invested in 12 companies. This fund closed in 2007. The successor fund is Crescent Capital II. It was set up in 2004 with a 10 year term. It is a £22.5 million fund with Invest NI providing £7.5 million on a subordinated basis. It has invested in 14 companies. The Crescent funds have therefore invested in 26 companies. The venture capital funds addressed market failure for development capital. Without these funds, there would have been little venture capital available to SMEs.

Both of the funds were the subject of independent evaluations in 2009. Crescent Capital I was a final evaluation and Crescent Capital II was an interim evaluation. For the Crescent Capital II evaluation, the output was to provide a review of the progress the fund was making. It was considered to be on track to meet its objectives.

Findings from the evaluations confirm that the Crescent funds:

- Introduced Venture Capital as a mainstream funding mechanism and educated SMEs to this source of finance;
- Contributed to stimulating growth in the economy, funding projects, which would not otherwise have been capable of accessing finance;
- Increased competitiveness leading to increased export sales and job creation; and
- Providing non financial supports to investee companies.

The evaluations reported that the Crescent investee companies have experienced overall increases in sales, profits and number of employees although it is always difficult to determine the extent to which these commercial impacts are a direct result of the Crescent interventions.

Crescent Capital

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail how Crescent Capital operated a cost-effective fund achieving returns for investors.

(AQW 18635/11-15)

Mrs Foster: There are two Crescent Capital funds. Crescent Capital I was a £14 million fund into which DETI invested £7 million on a subordinated basis. The balance of fund investment was from the private sector. It invested in 12 companies. This fund closed in 2007. The successor fund is Crescent Capital II. It was set up in 2004 with a 10 year term. It is a £22.5 million fund with Invest NI providing £7.5 million on a subordinated basis. It has invested in 14 companies. The Crescent funds have therefore invested in 26 companies with a government intervention of £14.5 million attracting £22 million of private money into the funds. The venture capital funds addressed market failure for development capital.

Both of the funds were the subject of independent evaluations in 2009. Crescent Capital I was a final evaluation and Crescent Capital II was an interim evaluation. For the Crescent Capital II evaluation, the output was to provide a review of the progress the fund was making. It was considered to be on track to meet its objectives.

Private investors in Crescent Capital I achieved a rate of return of 7.9% per annum just below the target rate of 8%. DETI was a subordinated investor and wrote off its £7 million investment. In comparison to other UK regional funds, Crescent Capital I performed well. The British Venture Capital Association reported an Internal Rate of Return of -10.3% over a 5 year period for early stage regional funds.

The interim evaluation of Crescent Capital II confirmed that the fund had met its fund raising objective and was on track to operate a cost effective fund and achieve returns for investors. It went on to state that it was too early to say whether Crescent Capital II will achieve the target Internal Rate of Return.

Management fees were benchmarked during both evaluations. Fee levels were reported to be consistent with industry standards.

Sustainable Energy Programme

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what funding for home insulation is available through the Sustainable Energy Programme.

(AQW 18637/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme (NISEP) is run by the independent Utility Regulator. However, the Department understands that for the current 2012/13 schemes a figure of £2,333,178 has been allocated to home insulation (cavity wall and loft) only schemes.

A further £4,560,109 has been allocated to domestic schemes which provide whole house solutions to priority (vulnerable) customers i.e. a full package of heating system, cavity wall and loft insulation and hot water cylinder jacket. It is not possible to identify at this stage how much of this funding will be spent on the insulation measures as some properties will already have adequate insulation.

Credit Unions

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether she has had any discussion with local banks on enabling Credit Unions to obtain better interest rates on their holdings.

(AQW 18668/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I have not had any discussion with local banks on enabling credit unions to obtain better interest rates on their holdings. The range of financial products that a credit union can invest in is a matter for the Financial Services Authority as the regulator of all UK credit unions.

Broadband Access

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the level of (i) broadband; and (ii) fibre optic broadband provision in Moyle.

(AQW 18745/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department does not hold details of broadband provision to the level requested.

Basic broadband services are currently available to 100% of premises across Northern Ireland, delivered via a mix of technologies. Ofcom's Infrastructure Report 2012 Update identifies that Superfast broadband services delivered over platforms that include fibre and cable are available to 95% of premises across Northern Ireland.

I understand that the mapping associated with this report provides details of coverage to District Council level. The mapping data is accessible at the following link: <http://maps.ofcom.org.uk/broadband/broadband-data/>

EU Electricity and Gas Directives

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the costs to the Executive for not fully transposing the EU Electricity and Gas Directives.

(AQW 19019/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The vast majority of the work to transpose the Directives was completed by the original deadline and, as already notified to the European Commission, it is the intention to complete the remaining work by April 2013. It is not, therefore, anticipated that there will be any costs to the Executive.

Business: Flag Protests

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 18293/11-15, what is her Department's estimated financial impact on local businesses.

(AQW 19088/11-15)

Mrs Foster: It is not possible to estimate the impact of current local events on regional economic performance. However there have clearly been impacts on local businesses, particularly those in the retail and hospitality sectors.

Quinn Group

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline any discussions she has had with (i) senior management of the Quinn Group; (ii) Irish Bank Resolution Corporation; and (iii) Minister of Finance Michael Noonan TD, regarding the news that further jobs are to go within the Quinn Group and that a voluntary redundancy scheme has been opened for all employees based in the Derrylin/Ballyconnell area.

(AQW 19146/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My response to AQW17967/11-15 sets out detail of meeting dates involving both myself and Invest NI with senior management of the Quinn Manufacturing Group. A further operational meeting took place at Derrylin on 7 January.

Quinn Manufacturing employs approximately 1,170 people in the Derrylin/Ballyconnell area. As a result of a strategic review the Company has proposed a net reduction of 13 jobs in the Derrylin area. The referenced jobs directly support the Radiator business located in Newport, Wales. There will be an opportunity for a number of the affected job holders to relocate to Wales. Recognising that relocation may not be desirable nor practical for some individuals, the company has offered a voluntary redundancy scheme to the wider Quinn Manufacturing businesses within the Derrylin/Ballyconnell area, in anticipation that this initiative may create some job opportunities for the 13 affected job holders.

It should be noted that employment levels across the Quinn Manufacturing Group currently stands at 2,812, an increase of 80 jobs since the company was restructured. Employment levels in the Derrylin area have increased marginally over the same period.

The Quinn Manufacturing Group is committed to the development of its various businesses and in the last year has made significant capital investments within its Glass and Cement divisions, the latest being a €15.7 million investment announced in December 2012.

Senior executives from Invest NI will continue to work closely with the top management team in the Quinn Manufacturing Group.

Department of the Environment

National Parks

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how many representations his Department has received on the proposed national parks; and what proportion of the representations were (i) supportive of; (ii) opposed to; and (iii) neutral on, the concept of national parks.

(AQW 17166/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): Since I came to office, a total of 248 representations have been made to my Department in relation to national parks. This figure includes responses to the Department's consultation on enabling legislation that was held last year. Of these, 54 were supportive of the concept of national parks, 189 were opposed, and five were neutral. The figure of 189 opposed includes 164 identical campaign letters from people living in the Mourne area.

Downpatrick Planning Office

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to list all the enforcement cases dealt with since 2005 by the member of staff who was recently dismissed from the Downpatrick planning office.

(AQW 17766/11-15)

Mr Attwood: A planning officer who worked in Rathkeltair House, Downpatrick was suspended and subsequently dismissed from the NICS in September 2012. This dismissal followed an internal investigation and a review of numerous case files dealt with by this officer or in which he may have had an involvement.

The Department considers that to list all the cases dealt with by this officer since 2005 could lead to the identification of this officer. As the disciplinary process is ongoing and not yet concluded, the Department is of the view that this would be inappropriate and a breach of its responsibilities under the Data Protection legislation.

Right of Way Legislation

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what legislation exists to prevent an established right of way from being blocked by the erection of a gate by one of the owners.

(AQO 3098/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The power for erection or removal of gates along a right of way is contained within the Access to the Countryside (Northern Ireland) Order 1983 (the Access Order).

Under Article 3 of the Access Order a district council has the duty to assert, protect and keep open and free from obstruction or encroachment any public right of way. Any dedicated public right of way is subject to the limitations imposed by existing gates, stiles or similar structures that are in place at the time of dedication.

There is no legislation that empowers the Department to be involved in this process.

Renewable Energy Projects

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment what he is doing to create consistency across planning divisions on decisions relating to renewable energy projects.

(AQW 17932/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department welcomes the contribution that renewable projects make to the reduction of carbon emissions and acknowledges the importance of processing these types of applications in a consistent and timely manner.

In order to improve consistency in decision making I have established a Sub Group of the Planning Forum to look at measures to improve planning performance for renewables and to consider issues such as licensing requirements, resources and structures.

To date this work has resulted in the majority of renewable applications being redirected from Strategic Planning Division to the Area Office network which has increased capacity to speed up the decision making process. Prior to the redistribution of this work training was rolled out across the Area Offices to ensure consistency in decision making.

Performance within each area office is carefully monitored and a Performance Action Plan has been put in place in order to improve and manage performance. This action plan identifies a number of initiatives and allows for the monitoring and active management of performance within agreed timescales.

However, applications for wind turbines differ in complexity and in quality of submission and are attracting increasing levels of objection. Consultation with a number of statutory and non-statutory bodies is required to inform the decision making process and all of these issues may prolong the processing of an application.

To improve the consultation process and to reduce the number of consultations staff have been provided with additional training to ensure consistency in consultation and reminded that they should only consult in the correct circumstances and avoid unnecessary consultations and delays.

I will continue to work with key stakeholders to ensure that Planning delivers in an efficient and timely manner and continue to monitor performance to ensure consistency across the area office network.

Street Naming

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment which organisations and public bodies must give their approval before a street or road can be renamed.

(AQW 17954/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Article 11 of The Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 describes the powers district councils have in relation to street naming and signage. In exercising those powers, legislation requires that a council shall have regard to any views on the matter expressed by the occupiers of premises in that street.

A council is not required to obtain approval from any other organisations or public bodies when exercising its powers in relation to the naming of streets.

The 1995 Order does not make specific provision about the renaming of streets.

A consultation on councils' powers in relation to street naming will issue in the near future. This will present an opportunity for interested parties to give their views on any changes that may be required in relation to councils' powers in relation to street naming, including the issue of the renaming of streets.

Craigantlet Hills Area

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment what protection his Department provides to the Craigantlet Hills area.

(AQW 17957/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Craigantlet Woods, which are located in the Craigantlet Hills, were declared an Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) on the 25 June 1997 and it covers 21.4 hectares. It is of special scientific interest because of the woodland flora and fauna; and consists of three small, calcicolous valley-woods on the southern flank of the Craigantlet Hills.

Together they represent the largest block of semi-natural woodland remaining in the north Down region. The woodland flora includes a number of rare plants such as Wood Millet, Wood Fescue and Toothwort.

Ash Dieback Disease

Mr Frew asked the Minister of the Environment (i) how his Department, and in particular the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), is working with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) to combat and help eradicate Ash Die Back; (ii) whether any actions undertaken by DARD have been approved by the NIEA; and (iii) when was contact made by DARD with the NIEA or his Department.

(AQW 17970/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Officials in my Department have been working closely with colleagues in Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) over several years with respect to diseases of plants with a potential nature conservation or landscape impact. Specifically with respect to Chalara Ash die back, NIEA scientists have been liaising closely with DARD on a review of plant health policy since March 2012; have been on the Incident Management Team established in Oct 2012, attend a daily "bird table" meeting to receive updates and are also present on a Chalara Policy and Strategy Group. NIEA scientists have also provided technical support to DARD with respect to development of evidence-based policy response options at a UK, GB and island-of-Ireland basis.

Currently DARD, specifically Forest Service, is taking the lead on eradication of the Chalara in NI. Infected trees are young, recently planted, saplings on sites planted from stock imported from Scotland. Surveillance is also being carried out by Forest Service, related to recently planted sites. NIEA have offered support to expand the surveillance operation to the wider countryside and is currently exploring appropriate methodology and equipment requirements. In addition, NIEA has provided input to facilitate disposal of diseased trees.

My Department continues to work closely with DARD on this issue. We are being fully consulted and are supportive of the actions currently being taken.

Plastic Bag Tax

Mr Allister asked the Minister of the Environment why biodegradable bags will be subject to the plastic bag tax.

(AQW 18008/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The primary purpose of the carrier bag levy is to reduce or eliminate the unnecessary use of single use carrier bags in Northern Ireland – regardless of the materials from which they are made. This objective has driven the current legislative provision for exemptions, which is largely consistent with the position in Wales.

The speed at which biodegradable bags degrade can vary considerably, depending upon both the composition of the bag and the environmental conditions to which it is subjected. The "ideal" conditions cited by bag manufacturers are unlikely to be replicated in a landfill site. Moreover, even bags which are capable of rapid degradation have an environmental impact through their production, transport and disposal.

An exemption from the levy for degradable bags – without further qualification – would therefore be unclear and open to misinterpretation. As a minimum, the exemption would need to focus on the constituent materials of the bag and the likely time period over which degradation can be expected to occur.

However even if this could be achieved, such an exemption is also likely to mean that PFG targets for significant reductions in single use carrier bag consumption could not be achieved. Many retailers could simply switch to using a carrier bag that qualifies for that exemption – and can therefore be issued free of charge. This would effectively remove the incentive for consumers to change their shopping behaviour by avoiding the unnecessary use of single use carrier bags.

I should point out that the levy applies to bags used to carry goods purchased. While this means that the levy will apply to degradable single use carrier bags, it will not apply to categories of degradable bags which are designed and used for other purposes, such as food waste bags, biodegradable nappy bags and caddy liners.

I have already made a commitment to keep charging arrangements under review as implementation progresses. In doing so, I will take into consideration any representations that are received.

Plastic Bag Tax

Mr Allister asked the Minister of the Environment (i) for an estimate of the cost of administering the plastic bag tax; (ii) how many staff have been engaged, or will be engaged in the public sector in administering the tax; and (iii) for an estimate of the number of jobs in the private sector that will be lost as a consequence of the tax.

(AQW 18009/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Subject to specific exemptions in the Regulations, the Carrier Bag Levy will apply to new single use carrier bags, regardless of the material from which they are made.

The annual cost of administering the levy is estimated at £630k. This includes the staff, administration and ICT costs associated with enforcing the levy and collecting the anticipated revenue. Revenue from the levy is expected to cover these costs and provide funds for Departmental environmental programmes and activities.

Administration of the levy will not commence until 8 April 2013. However, the Carrier Bag Levy Team, which will administer the levy, was established in October 2012 to engage with retailers and their representative bodies in advance of the introduction of the levy. This in-house solution was identified as the most cost effective from a range of options and affords maximum flexibility should a change in approach be required at a future date. In addition to its compliance role, the team provides retailers with information and guidance on the levy. The team consists of 10 staff and the structure and composition of the team will be reviewed in 2015.

For disclosure reasons, the Department of Enterprise, Trade & Investment is unable to release information on manufacturers, importers and distributors of carrier bags in Northern Ireland. However, the Regulatory Impact Assessment identified 16 businesses in Northern Ireland potentially engaged in the manufacture, import or distribution of plastic and paper bags. Based on a number of assumptions, these businesses are estimated to employ around 90 people locally, with half of these dependent on carrier bag sales. Of these, around one quarter were estimated to depend on sales within Northern Ireland. Therefore, based on an anticipated 83% reduction in single use carrier bag consumption, the introduction of the levy could result in the loss of up to 10 jobs in the private sector.

Some of the estimated job losses may be offset if manufacturers diversify into other products. A dramatic reduction in single use carrier bag consumption will also strengthen Northern Ireland's clean and green credentials which are so important to our tourist industry.

Wildfowl

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of wildfowl deaths as a result of lead poisoning since the ban on lead shot was introduced in 2009; and whether there has been a reduction in lead poisoning rates in wildfowl since the ban.

(AQW 18020/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Unfortunately my Department does not collect this detailed information on wildfowl deaths for Northern Ireland that you requested. The Environmental Protection (Restriction on use of lead shot) Regulations (NI) 2009 to which you refer bans the use of lead shot from a shot gun over areas of wetland (Wetlands as defined by the 'Ramsar convention' 1976). This legislation was primarily designed to reduce the build up of toxic lead in sensitive wetland environments to protect ecosystems and drinking water supplies.

There would be no economical way of collating aggregate data. Instead, specific post mortems are carried out where deemed necessary such as where a criminal offence or outbreak of disease is suspected.

Department for Transport, Whitehall: Consultation Paper

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of the Environment, in light of the consultation paper issued by the Department of Transport in Whitehall, if he has any plans to scrap the counterpart paper section of the driving licence.

(AQW 18030/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The counterpart to the Northern Ireland licence is required for the purposes of recording endorsements ordered by courts or made by fixed penalty clerks. It is also used by my Department to record restrictions on licences, and to indicate provisional entitlements not shown on plastic photocard licences.

Before the counterpart could be abolished, it would be necessary to have in place alternative methods of enabling those with a legitimate interest in the data, including licence holders, to have access to information about endorsements, restrictions and provisional entitlements. Since such methods are not yet available in Northern Ireland, I have no plans at present to abolish the counterpart.

Drink-driving and Drug-driving

Ms Lo asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the risk that greater enforcement of drink-driving will decrease enforcement of drug-driving.

(AQW 18039/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) is responsible for enforcing drink and drug driving laws and for detecting people who drive while impaired.

On coming to office, I reinstated the Ministerial Road Safety Group to oversee the delivery of the Road Safety Strategy to 2020 and provide a top-level forum for discussion of road safety and related matters of interest. As a key road safety partner, the PSNI sits on that Group and enforcement is often discussed.

In conducting checks, the police look for impairment whatever the underlying cause and an officer will take the appropriate action against any person suspected of driving whilst impaired, whether that is through alcohol or drugs or a combination of both. Therefore, as driving while impaired through drink and drugs are typically enforced together, any increase would be in enforcement of both drink and drugs driving rather than one or the other.

In 2011, consumption of alcohol/drugs by drivers or riders was the most common single cause of fatal and serious injuries on our roads accounting for almost 11% of all deaths serious injuries. In the five years from 2007 to 2011, 76 people were killed and 598 seriously injured as a result of alcohol or drugs by driver or rider.

The problems caused by drink drivers are well known and there is an increasing awareness of the dangers of driving while unfit through drugs. Penalties for drivers convicted of being impaired through drugs are just as severe as those for drink driving – fines, disqualifications and imprisonment, not to mention the effects such a conviction will have on future insurance costs.

However, drug driving is a much more complex issue with a wide variety of drugs possibly being consumed, including prescription and illicit drugs, and with varying intoxicating and impairing effects. Unlike drink driving, we currently have no drug testing device equivalent to the breathalyser and, when dealing with a driver who has taken drugs, the police have to demonstrate impairment under the current law.

I am therefore bringing forward legislation to tackle drink driving in a Road Traffic (Drink Drive) (Amendment) Bill to be introduced to the Assembly by April 2013. I also plan to bring forward a further Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill in 2014 and I would envisage new drug drive legislation forming part of that Bill. Progress in this second Bill is dependent on the Department for Transport delivering on the scientific underpinning for the drugs to be specified in new offences, at what levels the law will be set and in bringing forward the equipment necessary to detect them.

Legislation is already in place to allow drug testing to be conducted by means of such a device, type-approved by the Department and this will, in time, complement the current field impairment tests. I understand that the development and approval of a device remains at least two years away and continuing impairment testing for drug driving is essential if we are to apprehend drug drivers in the interim. PSNI has advised that a programme of training in field impairment testing is ongoing which includes refresher training to keep officers' skills up to date.

I have no doubt that well thought out, robust legislation to strengthen the existing impaired driving laws will certainly assist future enforcement against drug drivers.

Speed Limit: Rural Secondary Roads

Ms Lo asked the Minister of the Environment why less emphasis is being placed on reducing the speed limit on rural secondary roads from 60mph to 50mph compared to reducing the drink-drive limit.

(AQW 18040/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department of the Environment is responsible for co-ordinating a strategic approach to improving road safety in Northern Ireland, primarily through delivery of the Road Safety Strategy to 2020.

I therefore have an interest in all measures with the potential to reduce casualties on our roads. Responsibility for their prioritisation and delivery, however, rests with the implementing department or agency.

The Strategy contains over 200 measures to be delivered over a ten-year period; those relating to the roads network, including reviewing speed limits, lie with the Department for Regional Development.

On coming to office, I reinstated the Ministerial Group to oversee the delivery of the Strategy and provide a top-level forum for discussion of road safety and related matters of interest. As a key road safety partner, the Minister for Regional Development sits on that Group and speed limits have been discussed on a number of occasions.

The relevant Strategy commitment is for DRD to undertake a review of all upper tier rural roads. I understand that review is ongoing. If the review indicates that, due to the nature of individual roads, a majority require lower limits, then consideration would be given as to whether the best way to progress would be to lower the national speed limit to 50 mph on rural single carriageway roads. Higher class roads, which would allow for safe driving at higher speeds might then, in those circumstances, be signed to 60 mph.

As you know, introducing measures to tackle drink driving is one of a number of initiatives to which I have given priority. This is because of the high levels of casualties on our roads that result from collisions in which drink is a factor. I can assure you that the necessary work is ongoing to bring to the Assembly, as soon as possible, the Bill that will enact those measures.

Hydraulic Fracturing: Fermanagh

Ms Lo asked the Minister of the Environment, given the recent resumption of hydraulic fracturing in England, what impact this will have on his assessment of the forthcoming planning application from Tamboran in Fermanagh.

(AQW 18074/11-15)

Mr Attwood: As I stated in my Press Release on 13 December 2012, I note the further position of the London government. However, decisions on fracking in Northern Ireland are strictly for the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly and I have repeatedly warned against a head long rush in to fracking.

Tamboran have not made any planning applications nor given any indication of timescale or the likely locations where they might apply to establish well pads. In the meantime Departmental Officials are continuing to supplement knowledge of this process through reviewing and engaging with emerging research, studying case studies from other parts of the world and liaising with counterparts in other Environment Agencies in Britain and Ireland, and other countries where fracking is currently proposed or taking place.

The DOE is also planning to part finance the Southern Government's Environmental Protection Agency's research programme into fracking. There is also ongoing research being carried out by the US Environmental Protection Agency into fracking. All relevant information will be in the public domain in the future when the various research projects are complete.

Finally, all relevant Northern Ireland Government Departments including DOE, participate in a local Shale Gas Regulators Forum and NIEA officials participate with similar groups at an EU and National level.

I have personally met with Tamboran senior management to reinforce to them that there are stringent legislative, procedural and policy requirements that apply to fracking and any associated exploratory activities and to confirm that my Department will robustly assess any proposals against these stringent requirements taking full account of the findings of the relevant research which is currently being undertaken.

North Down Borough Council: Disciplinary Issues and Grievances

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment (i) how much has been spend on legal fees in relation to staff disciplinary issues and grievances in North Down Borough Council over the last two years; and (ii) how much senior management time has been spent in dealing with staff disciplinary issues and grievances.

(AQW 18294/11-15)

Mr Attwood: My Department does not hold the information you have requested. It is specific and relevant only to one council, and in these circumstances it would be more fitting that you contact North Down Borough Council directly.

Commercial Vehicles

Mr Newton asked the Minister of the Environment whether representations have been made to his Department regarding the levels of damage to commercial vehicles as a result of poorly maintained hedges and other roadside obstructions.

(AQW 18391/11-15)

Mr Attwood: No representations have been received by my Department on this issue.

Environmental Issues: North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment what his Department can do to further promote environmental issues in North Down.

(AQW 18414/11-15)

Mr Attwood: There is no doubt that we can do more, not just to promote environmental issues in North Down, but all of Northern Ireland. Six of the top ten visitor attractions are our built and natural heritage. Growing tourism from a £500m to a £1 billion a year industry will revolve around the positive protection and development of this heritage. We must do so, given that there are over 60,000 out of work.

Last year I commissioned economic research into the contribution made by our historic environment to the economy. It accounts for £532 million of output every year and generates up to 10,000 jobs. For every £1 of public sector money invested in the sector, £3 to £4 of spending by the private sector is generated. These figures are impressive but they are not as high as other jurisdictions, suggesting more potential here. I am making the argument with my Executive colleagues that we need to invest further in this sector.

Specifically, with regard to North Down, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency's (NIEA) primary outreach to the general public is delivered through Crawfordsburn Country Park where the Visitor Centre has been remodelled with a new entrance opening directly into the exhibition area. As resources permit NIEA runs events at which environmental messages are presented to visitors.

Redburn Country Park will also receive new interpretive signage which will allow visitors to navigate around the park and highlight key environmental issues. In addition, a new guide card will be designed and produced in 2013/14 financial year.

NIEA's Built Heritage has contributed to the promotion of environmental issues in North Down such as through European Heritage Open Days. These are held each year, usually in September, and we have seen increases over recent years in public participation at these events

Within the North Down district there are several important historic monuments that are frequently opened to the public including the State Care Monument at Grey Point Fort. NIEA is contributing to the conservation of some of the most important Christian Heritage sites in the area for example the conservation of 'Malachy's Wall', one of the last upstanding parts of the great monastery of Bangor. DOE has worked closely with North Down Borough Council and NITB to develop and promote the St Patrick's Trail and work on this is set to continue.

A wide mix of marketing tools and partnerships, particularly with NITB, councils and Translink, are being developed and enhanced that will directly benefit the important environmental messages to be delivered for North Down. These include a strong presence of NIEA events, sites and properties on the NITB 'discovernorthernireland' website; a continuing programme of events in North Down, including European Heritage Open Days, living history events, nature walks and tours and the Autumn Festival at Crawfordsburn Country Park; regular and wide reaching news releases, social media posts and a 'daysoutni' text messaging service.

In March 2013 a lecture will be given by staff of Built Heritage as part of the Bangor 400 series organised by the Bangor Historical Society.

The Department provides grant aid to Outdoor Recreation NI to promote areas where people can enjoy walking in the natural environment across Northern Ireland, including areas in North Down.

75% of North Down Constituency's schools are registered Eco-Schools, the International Programme, funded and promoted by the DOE, which encourages and recognises young people in taking an active role in reducing the environmental impact of their schools by awarding them the internationally recognised Green Flag Award.

Two schools from the North Down Constituency (Priory College and Bangor Academy and Sixth Form College) participated in a pilot training course for the Young Reporters for the Environment Programme, hosted by the Minister at Crawfordsburn Country Park in September 2012. This international programme encourages young reporters, aged between 12 and 21 years to investigate environmental issues and propose solutions through published investigative reporting, photographic and video journalism.

Four new education booklets are currently in development and planned for publication during 2013: Geo-Garden at Crawfordsburn; Kilyner Woods Activity Booklet for Key Stage 2; Crawfordsburn Woodland Trail Activity Booklet – Glen Woodland for Key Stage 1; and Crawfordsburn Woodland Trail Activity Booklet – Skelly's Hill Woodland for Key Stage 2.

With regard to promoting the protection of the environment, the NIEA aims to achieve a reduction in the number of high and medium severity water pollution incidents, through a number of proactive initiatives which include advisory publications, site meetings and working closely with Stakeholders. NIEA's Water Environment Community Awards (2011 & 2012) were open to organisations/groups within the Catchment Stakeholder Group areas. Cloughey and District Community Association were awarded £1000 each to take forward a project to test the quality of their local bathing water and to raise awareness of protecting their local water environment.

Car Lights: Correct Use of

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of the Environment what action his Department has taken to educate people about the correct use of the lights on their cars, particularly using headlights, main beams, hazard warning lights and fog lights. (AQW 18431/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The requirements relating to the proper fitting, maintenance and use of lamps, reflectors, rear markings and devices are set out in the Road Vehicles Lighting Regulations (NI) 2000.

Education on the correct use of lights begins at the earliest opportunity. The Northern Ireland driving test process as a whole is designed to test all aspects of learning to drive in a logical and structured manner. It is intended to ensure that learner drivers have a broad range of both theoretical and practical driving knowledge, understanding and skills.

The current theory test questions are designed to test candidates on a broad range of driving related topics, including the legal requirement and correct use of lights. The Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA), who are responsible for the theory test in Northern Ireland, provide a list of recommended learning material to help candidates prepare for the test. These include the official Highway Code for Northern Ireland and the official Driving Standards Agency Guide to Driving – the essential skill.

When preparing for the theory test, DVA recommends that candidates study the learning material available. All publications include information and guidance relating to the legal requirement and use of lights.

The practical driving test is developed to assess a candidate's practical skills and understanding of the Highway Code. At the start of the test candidates are asked "show me", "tell me" type questions which include the candidate demonstrating how to operate the lights. During the test, candidates will also be expected, if necessary, to operate the lights and will be assessed accordingly.

Education does not end with the passing of the driving test. The Department issues advice to road users on a regular basis. It encourages motorists to take responsibility for their driving behaviour and to adapt it accordingly when required. Likewise, motorists are advised to ensure their vehicle is roadworthy at all times.

The Department is consistent in its message to road users to refer to the current edition of the Highway Code for Northern Ireland that addresses all road safety issues. In particular it outlines vehicle lighting requirements together with advice for drivers and riders on the most appropriate and effective use of lights in different situations.

Rules 113 to 116 of the Highway Code sets out the most important legal requirements contained in the Road Vehicles Lighting Regulations (NI) 2000 relating to the use of headlights, hazard warning lights and fog lights. It includes detail on when headlights must be used, advice on the appropriate use of dipped headlights and, importantly, advice on when headlights, hazard warning lights and fog lights must not be used.

The Highway Code dedicates a section to driving in adverse weather conditions (Rules 226 to 237) that includes advice on the proper and appropriate use of headlights and fog lights when visibility is seriously reduced together with the need to ensure that lights are clean.

The Department has and continues to promote the Highway Code as essential reading for everyone and not just for young learner and novice drivers. It is important that all road users remain aware of the rules in the Code including the need for proper, considerate use of vehicle lighting.

To promote the continuous use of the Highway Code, the Department has made it available to download free of charge from NI Direct at: <http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/index/information-and-services/motoring/the-highway-code.htm>

It is also available in six alternative languages through NI Direct, and remains widely available to buy at local bookshops.

The proper maintenance and appropriate use of lighting is key to safe motoring and I will continue to take every opportunity to educate all road users of their responsibility in this matter.

The Department also supports similar advice issued by its road safety partners including the Police Service for Northern Ireland, whose leaflet 'Making for a safer winter drive' includes advice on the need to check that all lights are clean and in working order before setting off on a journey.

Drive Safe Initiative

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of the Environment, in light of figures showing that in 25 percent of all people killed in recorded road traffic collisions in 2012 were between the ages of 16 and 24 years, does he plan to develop an initiative to encourage this age group to drive safely.

(AQW 18432/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department is already progressing major road safety initiatives aimed at helping to reduce road deaths and serious injuries from collisions involving new drivers, the majority of whom are aged 16 to 24. With the planned introduction of a system of Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL), these initiatives include changes to driver training and testing and the way drivers gain experience once they pass their practical test.

When fully implemented, the revised regime for learner and novice drivers will establish the most radical advances in driver training and improvements in new driver safety anywhere in these islands.

On 29 May 2012 I announced my intention to introduce a package of 'new driver' measures and on 5 July 2012 the Executive agreed in full to the policy and to the drafting of the necessary legislation. The provisions are currently being drafted in a Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill, which is intended to be introduced into the Assembly by April 2013. The Bill will also provide for another key element of GDL in the form of a lower drink drive limit of 20mg of alcohol per 100ml of blood for learner/novice and professional drivers compared with 50mg/100ml for all other drivers.

The package of 'new driver' measures includes:

- The age at which young people can start to learn to drive or ride (i.e. obtain a provisional licence) will go down from 17 years of age to 16½.
- Learners will have to hold their provisional licence for a minimum of 12 months before they can sit their first practical test.
- The combined effect of reducing the provisional licence age by six months and the introduction of a minimum learning period of 12 months means that the earliest age at which someone will be able to get a full licence will be 17½.
- All learners will have to follow a new, structured, 'Learning to Drive' syllabus and before they take their first practical test they will have to produce evidence – in the form of compulsory student logbook signed off by their Approved Driving Instructor (ADI) and/or supervising driver – that they have completed it.
- The 45mph speed restriction on learner and restricted drivers and riders will be removed – this will allow changes to be made to the driving test to include driving on a wider range of roads at up to the posted speed limits.
- Learner drivers will be allowed to take lessons on motorways when accompanied by an Approved Driving Instructor in a dual-controlled car.
- Young new drivers (up to age 24) will not be allowed to carry young passengers (aged 14 to 20, except immediate family members) during their first six months after they have passed their driving test and got their first full licence. The restriction will not apply if there is a supervising driver (aged 21 years or older and who has held a full driving licence for three years) in the front seat and there will be exemptions for emergency services drivers with appropriate training.
- R plates will be replaced by N (for 'New' driver/riders) plates which will have to be carried for two years.
- During the first two years of driving, novices will be subject to a lower drink drive limit and, under the New Drivers Order, will continue to risk revocation of their licence if they accumulate six or more penalty points.
- Remedial courses will be developed for new drivers at risk of having their licence revoked because they have accumulated six or more penalty points.

The primary objective and expected outcome of these measures is to reduce the rate at which new drivers – and particularly young new drivers – are killed and seriously injured, and at which they kill and seriously injure other road users.

Another initiative which the Department is developing is about the potential to encourage young driver safety through the use of 'pay how you drive' data monitoring systems ('telematics'). There is emerging evidence of the effectiveness of telematics in improving road safety particularly among young drivers, fleet drivers and those who drive for work. There may be an additional benefit in the form of lower insurance premiums. The Department is, therefore, currently engaging with insurers to establish a pilot study of the impacts of telematics and its potential effectiveness in changing driver behaviour.

Local Government Reform

Ms Lo asked the Minister of the Environment to publish the cost-benefit analysis of the current proposals for the reform of local government.

(AQW 18480/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The economic appraisal of local government service delivery, carried out by PricewaterhouseCoopers on behalf of and published by the Department in October 2009, indicated that under the preferred option (i.e. Transformation with Regional Collaboration), implementation of the local government reform programme could involve expenditure of up to £118 million over five years and achieve savings of £438 million over twenty-five years.

The Regional Transition Committee has commissioned the senior local and central government officers and officials in the Finance Working Group to re-examine the costs and benefits of the local government reform programme.

Work is ongoing with the existing councils and the Voluntary Transition Committees in developing the detailed costs and benefits of the key reform work-streams, identified by the Finance Working Group.

The group's findings and recommendations will be presented to the Regional Transition Committee in March 2013.

Planning Applications

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of the Environment how many Article 31 and Article 33 planning applications are under consideration.

(AQW 18505/11-15)

Mr Attwood: There are 37 current Article 31 applications. I have recently announced my decision on a further 9 and these will issue in due course. The effect of this will be to reduce the number of current cases from 60 in May 2011 when I took up my Ministerial position to 28 (this includes 8 new cases in that period).

Article 33 appeals are decided by the PAC. Records indicate that there are 12 Appeals yet to be decided.

Community Places: Funding

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of the Environment how much funding his Department has awarded to Community Places in each of the last three years.

(AQW 18603/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The following grants have been provided by the Department to Community Places for the last three financial years to ensure people from disadvantaged areas have equal access to, understanding of, and participation in the planning system.

Financial Year	Amount Awarded (£)
2009-10	177,000
2010-11	88,500
2011-12	80,000

Civil Servants: Unrest

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the number of Civil Servants from his Department who have left work early since 3 December 2012 due to the civil unrest associated with the flag protests; and (ii) the associated financial cost to his departmental budget.

(AQW 18608/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Similar to other NICS Departments the Department of Environment has a Flexible Working Time facility which allows staff flexibility in the way they arrange their working hours. With the approval of their line manager, staff can leave work in the afternoon within the agreed flexible working hours band (3.30pm to 6pm). There is no cost to the Departmental budget when using Flexible Working Time arrangements.

The Department therefore has no record of staff leaving the office early during the civil unrest associated with the flag protests.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Net Fiscal Balance Report: Corporation Tax

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the calculation used by his officials to estimate the amount of corporation tax generated locally, which was published in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11.

(AQW 18172/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I refer the Member to my responses to AQW 17701/11-15 and AQW 17994/11-15 respectively.

Capital Valuation List: New Houses

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of new houses entered onto the Capital Valuation List in each of the last five years, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 18311/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The number of new houses added to the Capital Valuation List in each of the last 5 years, including this year up to 31st December 2012, broken down by Westminster constituency is set out in the table overleaf.

Constituency	April 08 to March 09	April 09 to March 10	April 10 to March 11	April 11 to March 12	April 12 to Dec 12
Belfast East	389	434	317	410	109
Belfast North	602	822	702	253	146
Belfast South	856	686	527	457	204
Belfast West	299	281	121	127	312
East Antrim	639	562	331	225	127
East Londonderry	659	535	592	227	257
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	904	709	459	592	391
Foyle	396	396	404	391	116
Lagan Valley	966	1182	733	497	451
Mid Ulster	625	503	384	400	351
Newry & Armagh	664	998	571	341	298
North Antrim	913	896	502	427	299
North Down	468	448	325	219	230
South Antrim	948	557	381	362	242
South Down	915	961	700	517	286
Strangford	1054	668	422	384	331
Upper Bann	1465	793	595	424	197
West Tyrone	669	412	334	631	335

Energy Efficiency Directive

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) how he intends to meet Article 5 of the Energy Efficiency Directive (Directive 2012/27/EU) to renovate public buildings to high energy efficiency standards; and (ii) how he intends to meet Article 6 of the Energy Efficiency Directive (Directive 2012/27/EU) to ensure that central government purchases only energy efficient buildings, products and services.

(AQW 18459/11-15)

Mr Wilson: In relation to Article 5 (Exemplary role of public bodies' buildings) DFP will, as part of its on-going Accommodation Plan, renovate 3% (or more) of the DFP office estate in line with the requirements in this Article. DFP will also ensure that Departments which manage their own properties are aware of the requirements of the Directive and will encourage them to implement the requirements within their estate, including the need to produce an energy performance rating for each of their appropriate buildings.

In relation to Article 6 (Purchasing by Public Bodies) Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) in DFP already includes a requirement in its procurement specifications to comply with the Government Buying Standards. These standards, administered by DEFRA, are designed to make it easier for government buyers to buy sustainably. They include mandatory (minimum) and best practice standards for energy efficiency. Further, the current Sustainable Construction Action Plan agreed by CPD and the other Centres of Procurement Expertise (CoPEs), includes Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) targets for the procurement of new and refurbished public buildings. The BREEAM scoring methodology typically results in energy efficiency standards that are more onerous than the requirements of the NI Building Regulations. The UK Building Research Establishment (BRE) has estimated that achieving an 'Excellent' BREEAM rating can increase capital costs by 2.5%-3.4% (for naturally ventilated buildings) and 3.3%-7% (for air-conditioned buildings). While much of this additional up-front investment will generate longer term operational savings, some of the additional costs, aimed at generating wider sustainability benefits will not generate direct savings.

University Colleges: Non-departmental Public Body Status

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) why non-Departmental Public Body status was imposed on Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College; (ii) what regard was given to the level of Stranmillis' self-generated income; and (iii) what regard was given to the resulting regulatory burden and the loss of the right to hold and spend surplus funds on the college.

(AQW 18467/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Taking account of governance and control arrangements, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) classification of these bodies as Central Government led to their designation as non-Departmental Public Bodies.

In arriving at its determination on Stranmillis University College, the ONS found that the Colleges of Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 brought the College under the control of the Department for Employment and Learning, removed any freedom that might have existed for the College to borrow and made it subject to public sector approval. It found the majority of its income came from Funding Grants, and concluded that it is a non-market entity. In addition, it noted that the College's Governing Body is directly appointed by the Employment and Learning Minister. Against this background and taking account of all relevant issues, the ONS concluded that these governance and control arrangements are relevant to Central Government.

University Colleges: Non-departmental Public Body Status

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, should St Mary's University College, Belfast succeed in reversing its non-Departmental Public Body status, whether his Department will consider the designation of Stranmillis University College, Belfast as a non-Departmental Public Body, given the competitive advantage which will result to St Mary's and the level of self-generated income that Stranmillis can sustain.

(AQW 18468/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The case for St Mary's University College was put to my Department by the Department for Employment and Learning and we are awaiting the outcome of the Office for National Statistics' deliberations on the matter. However, my Department has not been provided with a case that would allow for a review of the status of Stranmillis University College.

University Colleges: Non-departmental Public Body Status

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in light of the legislative steps taken in Great Britain to exempt Further Education colleges from non-Departmental Public Body status, whether his Department will consider a similar initiative and include Stranmillis University College, Belfast and St Mary's University College, Belfast in such an exemption.

(AQW 18469/11-15)

Mr Wilson: My Department will consider any proposals from the Department for Employment and Learning that could impact on the status of its bodies.

Nevin Economic Research Institute

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the report by the Nevin Economic Research Institute entitled Policy Options for Investment in Infrastructure in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 18491/11-15)

Mr Wilson: This report contributes to the ongoing debate on alternative funding options for infrastructure investment which is an important issue for the Executive. The types of schemes outlined in the report such as alternative funding for energy efficiency and demand management in the water industry here would need further consideration. As indicated in the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-21, the Executive is considering affordable means of raising up to £1.09 billion of alternative finance over the period in health, roads and education infrastructure. The report notes that there may be alternatives in future which do not rely on public bodies (as used in Great Britain) such as access to the Green Investment Bank or private sector funding vehicles in the energy sector which may allow for the sort of access locally to the wider financial markets envisaged in the report for these types of investment.

The ISNI makes reference to the Executive's commitment that all funding options will be considered to increase the levels of investment needed to deliver much needed infrastructure. But this must be done in a manner that protects the public interest, protects frontline services to users, facilitates greater efficiency and offers genuine long-term value for money. Alternative finance for certain projects will be used where it is affordable and offers value for money. Options in this regard, including those associated with retrofitting - which is a key focus of the Nevin Institute report - are being considered. This is complex work which is ongoing.

Net Fiscal Balance Report: Rates

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the calculation used by his officials to estimate the amount of domestic and non-domestic rates generated in 2010-11, which was published in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11.

(AQW 18529/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Annex B of the Northern Ireland Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11 outlines the approach used to estimate the various sources of revenue generated in Northern Ireland (NI).

As indicated, NI domestic and non-domestic rates revenues for 2006-07 & 2007-08 were provided by DFP officials and required no further estimation. For the financial years 2008-09 onwards the split between domestic and non-domestic rates has not been available. Therefore, the respective shares of total rates in 2007-08 have been applied to the 2008-09, 2009-10 and 2010-11 total regional rates data.

The UK figure for other taxes and royalties is comprised of a number of small revenues. Separate apportionment methods are used to allocate these revenues to NI.

- 1 Consumer Credit Act fees are apportioned to NI on a population share basis.
- 2 UK revenues paid to levy funded bodies are apportioned to NI according to its share of UK agricultural GVA.
- 3 Regulatory fees are apportioned to NI on a population share basis.
- 4 UK TV licence revenue is apportioned based on NI's share of UK private households.
- 5 National lottery revenues are apportioned according to NI's share of UK expenditure on gambling.
- 6 Renewable energy obligations are apportioned using the NI share of UK electricity consumption.
- 7 Fishing licence fees are apportioned to NI on a population share basis.

UK betting and gaming duty revenue is apportioned to NI based on regional household expenditure data. Average weekly household expenditure is scaled up by the number of households to estimate total weekly expenditure in NI and the UK. The NI/UK ratio of total weekly expenditure on gambling is used to apportion UK betting and gaming duty revenue to NI.

I must re-emphasise that this report has been developed applying the methodology originally designed to produce the "Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland" (GERS) publication and is not intended to provide an accurate estimate of individual revenue items. The report provides an overall assessment of Northern Ireland's aggregate fiscal position, and as such, the report indicates that individual estimates should be interpreted with caution.

Net Fiscal Balance Report: Taxes and Royalties

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the calculation used by his officials to estimate the amount of other taxes and royalties generated in 2010-11, which was published in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11.

(AQW 18531/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Annex B of the Northern Ireland Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11 outlines the approach used to estimate the various sources of revenue generated in Northern Ireland (NI).

As indicated, NI domestic and non-domestic rates revenues for 2006-07 & 2007-08 were provided by DFP officials and required no further estimation. For the financial years 2008-09 onwards the split between domestic and non-domestic rates has not been available. Therefore, the respective shares of total rates in 2007-08 have been applied to the 2008-09, 2009-10 and 2010-11 total regional rates data.

The UK figure for other taxes and royalties is comprised of a number of small revenues. Separate apportionment methods are used to allocate these revenues to NI.

- 8 Consumer Credit Act fees are apportioned to NI on a population share basis.
- 9 UK revenues paid to levy funded bodies are apportioned to NI according to its share of UK agricultural GVA.
10. Regulatory fees are apportioned to NI on a population share basis.
11. UK TV licence revenue is apportioned based on NI's share of UK private households.
12. National lottery revenues are apportioned according to NI's share of UK expenditure on gambling.
13. Renewable energy obligations are apportioned using the NI share of UK electricity consumption.
14. Fishing licence fees are apportioned to NI on a population share basis.

UK betting and gaming duty revenue is apportioned to NI based on regional household expenditure data. Average weekly household expenditure is scaled up by the number of households to estimate total weekly expenditure in NI and the UK. The NI/UK ratio of total weekly expenditure on gambling is used to apportion UK betting and gaming duty revenue to NI.

I must re-emphasise that this report has been developed applying the methodology originally designed to produce the "Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland" (GERS) publication and is not intended to provide an accurate estimate of individual revenue items. The report provides an overall assessment of Northern Ireland's aggregate fiscal position, and as such, the report indicates that individual estimates should be interpreted with caution.

Net Fiscal Balance Report: Betting and Gaming Duty

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the calculation used by his officials to estimate the amount of betting and gaming duty generated in 2010-11, which was published in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11. (AQW 18536/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Annex B of the Northern Ireland Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11 outlines the approach used to estimate the various sources of revenue generated in Northern Ireland (NI).

As indicated, NI domestic and non-domestic rates revenues for 2006-07 & 2007-08 were provided by DFP officials and required no further estimation. For the financial years 2008-09 onwards the split between domestic and non-domestic rates has not been available. Therefore, the respective shares of total rates in 2007-08 have been applied to the 2008-09, 2009-10 and 2010-11 total regional rates data.

The UK figure for other taxes and royalties is comprised of a number of small revenues. Separate apportionment methods are used to allocate these revenues to NI.

15. Consumer Credit Act fees are apportioned to NI on a population share basis.
16. UK revenues paid to levy funded bodies are apportioned to NI according to its share of UK agricultural GVA.
17. Regulatory fees are apportioned to NI on a population share basis.
18. UK TV licence revenue is apportioned based on NI's share of UK private households.
19. National lottery revenues are apportioned according to NI's share of UK expenditure on gambling.
20. Renewable energy obligations are apportioned using the NI share of UK electricity consumption.
21. Fishing licence fees are apportioned to NI on a population share basis.

UK betting and gaming duty revenue is apportioned to NI based on regional household expenditure data. Average weekly household expenditure is scaled up by the number of households to estimate total weekly expenditure in NI and the UK. The NI/UK ratio of total weekly expenditure on gambling is used to apportion UK betting and gaming duty revenue to NI.

I must re-emphasise that this report has been developed applying the methodology originally designed to produce the "Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland" (GERS) publication and is not intended to provide an accurate estimate of individual revenue items. The report provides an overall assessment of Northern Ireland's aggregate fiscal position, and as such, the report indicates that individual estimates should be interpreted with caution.

Net Fiscal Balance Report: Air Passenger Duty

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the calculation used by his officials to estimate the amount of air passenger duty generated in 2010-11, which was published in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11. (AQW 18537/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Annex B of the Northern Ireland Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11 outlines the approach used to estimate the various sources of revenue generated in Northern Ireland (NI).

UK air passenger duty revenue is apportioned to Northern Ireland (NI) according to its share of the UK population.

Likewise, UK insurance premium tax is apportioned to NI according to its share of the UK population.

UK Landfill tax is apportioned to NI according to its share of UK waste sent to landfill. The quantity of municipal waste sent to landfill is recorded in annual Municipal Waste Management reports produced by NI Environment Agency, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and the Environment Protection Agency (England and Wales). These surveys are used to calculate the total quantity of municipal waste sent to landfill in the UK. The NI/UK ratio of UK waste tonnage is used to apportion UK landfill tax (as published by ONS) to NI.

I must re-emphasise that this report has been developed applying the methodology originally designed to produce the "Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland" (GERS) publication and is not intended to provide an accurate estimate of individual revenue items. The report provides an overall assessment of Northern Ireland's aggregate fiscal position, and as such, the report indicates that individual estimates should be interpreted with caution.

Net Fiscal Balance Report: Insurance Premium Tax

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the calculation used by his officials to estimate the amount of insurance premium tax generated in 2010-11, which was published in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11. (AQW 18538/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Annex B of the Northern Ireland Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11 outlines the approach used to estimate the various sources of revenue generated in Northern Ireland (NI).

UK air passenger duty revenue is apportioned to Northern Ireland (NI) according to its share of the UK population.

Likewise, UK insurance premium tax is apportioned to NI according to its share of the UK population.

UK Landfill tax is apportioned to NI according to its share of UK waste sent to landfill. The quantity of municipal waste sent to landfill is recorded in annual Municipal Waste Management reports produced by NI Environment Agency, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and the Environment Protection Agency (England and Wales). These surveys are used to calculate the total quantity of municipal waste sent to landfill in the UK. The NI/UK ratio of UK waste tonnage is used to apportion UK landfill tax (as published by ONS) to NI.

I must re-emphasise that this report has been developed applying the methodology originally designed to produce the "Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland" (GERS) publication and is not intended to provide an accurate estimate of individual revenue items. The report provides an overall assessment of Northern Ireland's aggregate fiscal position, and as such, the report indicates that individual estimates should be interpreted with caution.

Net Fiscal Balance Report: Landfill Tax

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the calculation used by his officials to estimate the amount of landfill tax generated in 2010-11, which was published in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11.
(AQW 18539/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Annex B of the Northern Ireland Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11 outlines the approach used to estimate the various sources of revenue generated in Northern Ireland (NI).

UK air passenger duty revenue is apportioned to Northern Ireland (NI) according to its share of the UK population.

Likewise, UK insurance premium tax is apportioned to NI according to its share of the UK population.

UK Landfill tax is apportioned to NI according to its share of UK waste sent to landfill. The quantity of municipal waste sent to landfill is recorded in annual Municipal Waste Management reports produced by NI Environment Agency, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and the Environment Protection Agency (England and Wales). These surveys are used to calculate the total quantity of municipal waste sent to landfill in the UK. The NI/UK ratio of UK waste tonnage is used to apportion UK landfill tax (as published by ONS) to NI.

I must re-emphasise that this report has been developed applying the methodology originally designed to produce the "Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland" (GERS) publication and is not intended to provide an accurate estimate of individual revenue items. The report provides an overall assessment of Northern Ireland's aggregate fiscal position, and as such, the report indicates that individual estimates should be interpreted with caution.

UK Corporation Tax

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the impact that the reductions in UK corporation tax will have on Northern Ireland as an investment location, should corporation tax be devolved and lowered.
(AQW 18549/11-15)

Mr Wilson: A reduction in the UK main rate of corporation tax prior to the devolution of responsibility for the tax would be expected to increase the attractiveness of Northern Ireland as an investment location, relative to international competitors.

Following the devolution of responsibility for corporation tax, the impact of further lowering the rate in respect of companies operating in Northern Ireland will depend on the scale of the reduction from the national rate, as well as wider economic conditions.

This is in the context that the Programme for Government 2011-15 does not specify the rate at which the Northern Ireland Executive would intend to set devolved corporation tax.

Civil Servants: Unrest

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the number of Civil Servants from his Department who have left work early since 3 December 2012 due to the civil unrest associated with the flag protests; and (ii) the associated financial cost to his departmental budget.
(AQW 18606/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Since 3 December 2012 a total of 74 DFP staff in city centre offices left early due to the civil unrest associated with the flag protests.

The associated financial cost to the departmental budget was £3492.

Departmental Performance

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel why, according to its own published data, his Department is the worst in forecasting performance in both capital and ring fenced resource; and for an explanation for the figures revealed in the November 2012 position on forecast outturns.
(AQW 18615/11-15)

Mr Wilson: My department has a relatively small capital budget, which is spread across a large number of small projects. This means that variances that are small in absolute terms and can be caused by minor delays across a number of these

projects nevertheless produce large percentage variances. It is worth noting that none of the variances reported in the period in question exceeded £1m in absolute terms and on all but one occasion the variance was below £0.5m.

I am more concerned about the performance in forecasting ring-fenced resource, which, as it mainly relates to the depreciation of assets, should be more predictable. The major contributing factor in the abnormally large variance is due to a timing issue regarding the recording of actual depreciation against forecast on the accounting system. My officials will ensure that the two are fully aligned in future.

Expenditure: Departments

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the (i) level; and (ii) proportion of administrative expenditure on (a) staff pay; (b) procurement of goods and services; (c) accommodation; and (d) travel by each Department, in each of the last three financial years.

(AQW 18707/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The level and proportion of administrative expenditure on the listed categories by the Department of Finance and Personnel in each of the last three financial years is as follows:

	2011-12		2010-11		2009-10	
	Level	%	Level	%	Level	%
Staff Pay	£67.3m	36%	£85.3m	41%	£84.7m	38%
Procurement of goods and services	£55.5m	30%	£61.3m	29%	£59.2m	27%
Accommodation	£51.5m	28%	£55.0m	26%	£51.6m	23%
Travel	£0.8m	0%	£0.7m	0%	£0.9m	0%

The proportion is reflected by the percentage of total administrative spend and the categories of spend are not mutually exclusive (for example elements of accommodation expenditure are also included as procurement of goods and services).

This response is provided for the Department of Finance and Personnel only, as information on spend across the wider Civil Service is not held centrally. Individual departments should be contacted directly for their information.

Net Fiscal Balance Report: Expenditure

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the proportion of expenditure, for which the Executive was responsible in 2010 and 2011 which was derived from the Total Expenditure on Services Framework, which was employed by his Department in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11.

(AQW 18708/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Total Expenditure on Services (TES) may be disaggregated into two components: identifiable and non-identifiable expenditure. Our identifiable expenditure is taken from the October 2011 Public Expenditure Statistical Analysis (PESA) publication.

As per table 9.21 in PESA, in 2009-10 the Executive were responsible for £17.1 billion of expenditure, which includes both Departmental Expenditure Limit and Annually Managed Expenditure. Likewise, in 2010-11 the Executive was responsible for £16.8 billion of expenditure. In both years the proportion managed by the Executive is 89% of the total.

Net Fiscal Balance Report: Gross Operating Surplus

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail in full the calculation used to estimate the Gross Operating Surplus in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11, including references to the source data.

(AQW 18710/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I refer the Member to my responses to AQW 18847/11-15, AQW 18848/11-15, AQW 18849/11-15 and AQW 18850/11-15 respectively.

Net Fiscal Balance Report: Rent

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail in full the calculation used to estimate rent and other current transfers in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11, including references to the source data.

(AQW 18711/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I refer the Member to my responses to AQW 18847/11-15, AQW 18848/11-15, AQW 18849/11-15 and AQW 18850/11-15 respectively.

Net Fiscal Balance Report: Public Sector Revenues

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail in full the procedure used to estimate the value of public sector revenues generated in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11, including references to the source data. (AQW 18712/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I refer the Member to my responses to AQW 18847/11-15, AQW 18848/11-15, AQW 18849/11-15 and AQW 18850/11-15 respectively.

Net Fiscal Balance Report: EU Payments

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail in full the procedure used to estimate the proportion of payments to the EU in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11, including references to the source data. (AQW 18713/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I refer the Member to my responses to AQW 18847/11-15, AQW 18848/11-15, AQW 18849/11-15 and AQW 18850/11-15 respectively.

Law Commission: Review of the Law on Apartments

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the Law Commission's consultation paper on apartments. (AQW 18720/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The paper was eagerly awaited and I think those who are affected by the problems which have arisen in respect of multi-unit developments will welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Commission's review. It is clear that the Commission has formed some preliminary views, for example in relation to strata title. However, the paper confirms that it is keen to test those views and to try and cast its net as wide as possible and I welcome that. It will be interesting to see what recommendations emerge from the consultation.

Law Commission: Review of the Law on Apartments

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the protection afforded to the current owners of properties in multi-unit developments by the proposals within the Law Commission's consultation paper on the Review of the Law Relating to Apartments. (AQW 18721/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Commission's paper poses a number of questions, which are designed to elicit information which will help to inform its final recommendations. It has endeavoured in those questions to cover the main issues which are of concern to current unit owners, including the transfer of common parts, maintenance/sinking funds, regulation of managing agents and unfinished developments. However, during the consultation, additional issues of concern could be raised with the Commission. The Commission has previously assured me that the pressing problems of existing owners will be dealt with and I have welcomed that assurance.

Law Commission: Review of the Law on Apartments

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what lessons have been learnt from the Law Commission's Review of the Law on Apartments paper that will be of benefit to current multi-unit developments. (AQW 18723/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The benefits can only be assessed when the Commission's final recommendations have been made and I do not think it would be appropriate for me to comment in advance of the completion of the review project.

Multi-unit Developments: Regulatory Framework

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether his Department would support a new regulatory framework for multi-unit developments similar to those in the Republic of Ireland or Scotland. (AQW 18724/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Republic of Ireland and Scotland have adopted different approaches and have introduced provisions which are designed to address the difficulties which have emerged in their respective jurisdictions. I think it is important that any solutions in Northern Ireland should be similarly tailored. I know the Commission is assessing developments in other jurisdictions and, if appropriate, it can draw on those developments when making recommendations for Northern Ireland.

Emigration: County Antrim

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of people from (i) East; and (ii) North Antrim who have emigrated to find employment in each of the last three years, broken down by (a) council area; (b) age group; and (c) the country to which they emigrated. (AQW 18737/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The table overleaf shows the estimates of out-migration to (a) Great Britain and (b) to all other countries for the years (i) mid-2008 to mid-2009, (ii) mid-2009 to mid-2010 and (iii) mid-2010 to mid-2011. It is only possible to distinguish between out-migration to Great Britain and out-migration to all other countries.

The table is split into the six Local Government Districts (Ballymena, Ballymoney, Carrickfergus, Larne, Moyle and Newtownabbey) which cover the East and North Antrim constituencies and is broken down by the four broad age bands noted. There are no estimates made of the reason for out-migration.

(i) Out Migration Estimates Mid 2008-Mid 2009

(a) Out Migration to Great Britain							
Age	Ballymena	Ballymoney	Carrick-fergus	Larne	Moyle	Newtown-abbey	Northern Ireland
0-15	25	29	24	20	10	21	934
16-39	249	142	205	151	96	267	8,144
40-64	23	22	27	22	7	18	956
65+	4	2	3	2	7	2	164

(b) Out Migration to all other countries							
Age	Ballymena	Ballymoney	Carrick-fergus	Larne	Moyle	Newtown-abbey	Northern Ireland
0-15	26	13	26	14	9	76	1,772
16-39	239	26	74	27	28	485	7,609
40-64	66	3	29	6	6	59	1,598
65+	6	0	6	0	5	6	250

(ii) Out Migration Estimates Mid 2009-Mid 2010

(a) Out Migration to Great Britain							
Age	Ballymena	Ballymoney	Carrick-fergus	Larne	Moyle	Newtown-abbey	Northern Ireland
0-15	27	12	19	14	16	49	1,213
16-39	242	147	185	176	104	313	8,704
40-64	43	13	30	24	17	48	1,156
65+	9	3	8	8	3	3	206

(b) Out Migration to all other countries							
Age	Ballymena	Ballymoney	Carrick-fergus	Larne	Moyle	Newtown-abbey	Northern Ireland
0-15	40	11	9	1	5	63	1,525
16-39	220	30	52	22	24	592	7,918
40-64	63	10	19	7	6	81	1,601
65+	1	1	2	5	5	0	218

(iii) Out Migration Estimates Mid 2010- Mid 2011

(a) Out Migration to Great Britain							
Age	Ballymena	Ballymoney	Carrick-fergus	Larne	Moyle	Newtown-abbey	Northern Ireland
0-15	31	6	16	25	15	44	1189
16-39	265	115	201	176	118	303	8580
40-64	40	16	42	25	17	40	1124
65+	9	6	8	6	5	4	228

(b) Out Migration to all other countries							
Age	Ballymena	Ballymoney	Carrick-fergus	Larne	Moyle	Newtown-abbey	Northern Ireland
0-15	39	3	21	10	4	55	1813
16-39	260	27	85	23	37	630	9869
40-64	53	5	34	17	5	51	1860
65+	5	0	4	3	3	12	282

Executive Budget

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what is the maximum amount that can be retained within the Executive budget, from the sale of an asset, before the money must be surrendered to Treasury.

(AQW 18747/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The income from asset sales provides additional spending power for the Northern Ireland Executive. Capital asset disposals may generate impacts in both the Capital DEL and Resource DEL budgets. On disposal of a capital asset the 'book value' scores as a benefit in the Capital DEL budget. If the actual sale value exceeds the 'book value' the department will register a profit and the opposite scenario generates a loss. Profits and losses score in the Resource DEL budget.

There is currently no limit imposed by HM Treasury as to the amount of Capital DEL receipts that can be retained by the Executive.

However, profits scoring in the Resource DEL budget are limited to £20 million or 5 per cent above the 'book value' (whichever is lower). Even this scenario does not necessarily mean that HM Treasury will claw back profits above the limit. Instead, it is likely that it will insist that profits above the limit be retained in the NI Executive's Capital DEL budget. Significant profits realised on disposal is a very rare occurrence due to the need for regular revaluation of assets.

Rate Relief Schemes

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail, for each of the last five years, the amount of (i) Small Business; (ii) Empty Premises; (iii) Residential Homes; (iv) Industrial Derating; (v) Non-Domestic Vacant Rating; and (vi) Hardship Relief rate relief scheme (a) applications; (b) successful applications; (c) financial relief granted in total and on average; and (d) cases in which Land and Property Services determined that exceptional circumstances warranted a write-down or write-off and the total cost of these write-downs or write-offs, for properties with a Net Asset Value of (i) less than £2000; (ii) between £2000 and £5000; (iii) between £5000 and £10000; and (iv) more than £10000, broken down by (a) each existing local council district; and (b) the eleven proposed local council districts.

(AQW 18840/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Information is not available in the form requested and could only be produced at disproportionate cost.

Rate Relief Schemes

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail, for each of the last five years, the number of (i) Small Business; (ii) Empty Premises; (iii) Residential Homes; (iv) Industrial Derating; (v) Non-Domestic Vacant Rating; and (vi) Hardship Relief rate relief scheme cases that (a) Land and Property Services has brought to Court; (b) resulted in bankruptcy and what this figure represents as a percentage of the cases taken; (c) taken for bankruptcy that were settled prior to the completion of the cycle of litigation; and (d) were paid in full or part as a full and final settlement to cease bankruptcy proceedings, for properties with a Net Asset Value of (i) less than £2000; (ii) between £2000 and £5000; (iii) between £5000 and £10000; and (iv) more than £10000, broken down by (a) each existing local council district; and (b) the eleven proposed local council districts.

(AQW 18841/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Information is not available in the form requested and could only be produced at disproportionate cost.

Net Fiscal Balance Report: Gross Value Added

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail in full the calculation used to estimate the public sector Gross Value Added in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11.

(AQW 18843/11-15)

Mr Wilson: As stated in Annex B of the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11, Public sector GVA is derived from the ONS 'Regional Accounts' – GVA industry groups 'Public administration and defence', 'Education', and 'Health and social work'.

I must re-emphasise that this report has been developed applying the methodology originally designed to produce the "Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland" (GERS) publication and is not intended to provide an accurate estimate

of individual revenue items. The report provides an overall assessment of Northern Ireland's aggregate fiscal position, and as such, the report indicates that individual estimates should be interpreted with caution.

Gross Value Added

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the proportion of public sector Gross Value Added received each year from 2005 to 2013.

(AQW 18844/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The proportion of public sector GVA attributable to Northern Ireland contributable to is detailed below for 2005 to 2010. This is the latest year for which data is available and is subject to revisions made by ONS.

Year	NI % Share of UK Public Sector GVA
2005	3.34%
2006	3.27%
2007	3.24%
2008	3.24%
2009	3.20%
2010	3.15%

Net Fiscal Balance Report: Interests and Dividends

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail in full the calculation used to estimate the interests and dividends in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11, including references to the source data.

(AQW 18845/11-15)

Mr Wilson: As stated in Annex B of the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11, the UK figure for interest and dividends to central government, local government and public corporation, as published by ONS, is apportioned to NI according to its share of UK public sector GVA. Public sector GVA is derived from the ONS 'Regional Accounts.'

I must re-emphasise that this report has been developed applying the methodology originally designed to produce the "Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland" (GERS) publication and is not intended to provide an accurate estimate of individual revenue items. The report provides an overall assessment of Northern Ireland's aggregate fiscal position, and as such, the report indicates that individual estimates should be interpreted with caution.

Net Fiscal Balance Report: Gross Operating Surplus

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail in full the separate figures for central government, local government and public corporations used to estimate the Gross Operating Surplus in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11

(AQW 18846/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The UK figures, taken from the PSAT2 database produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), and used to estimate Gross Operating Surplus are shown below. These were then apportioned to NI based on NI share of UK public sector GVA.

£ million	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Central Government	5951	6125	6488	6682	7193
Local Government	6474	6774	7164	7550	8037
Public Corporations	9618	9660	10722	8126	8030

Net Fiscal Balance Report: Gross Operating Surplus

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail in full the calculation used to estimate the Gross Operating Surplus in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11, including references to the source data.

(AQW 18847/11-15)

Mr Wilson: As stated in Annex B of the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11, to calculate Gross Operating Surplus (GOS) for NI separate figures for central government, local government and public corporations are taken from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) PSAT2 database. Each of these are then apportioned to NI according to its share of public sector GVA.

I must re-emphasise that this report has been developed applying the methodology originally designed to produce the "Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland" (GERS) publication and is not intended to provide an accurate estimate

of individual revenue items. The report provides an overall assessment of Northern Ireland's aggregate fiscal position, and as such, the report indicates that individual estimates should be interpreted with caution.

Net Fiscal Balance Report: Rent

Ms McGahan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail in full the calculation used to estimate rent and other current transfers in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11, including references to the source data.

(AQW 18848/11-15)

Mr Wilson: As stated in Annex B of the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11, the UK figure for rent & other current transfers is taken directly from GERS and is apportioned to NI according to its share of UK public sector GVA, as published by the ONS.

I must re-emphasise that this report has been developed applying the methodology originally designed to produce the "Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland" (GERS) publication and is not intended to provide an accurate estimate of individual revenue items. The report provides an overall assessment of Northern Ireland's aggregate fiscal position, and as such, the report indicates that individual estimates should be interpreted with caution.

Net Fiscal Balance Report: Public Sector Revenues

Ms Boyle asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail in full the procedure used to estimate the total value of the public sector revenues generated in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11, including references to the source data.

(AQW 18849/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The revenue estimates contained within the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11 are used to provide an overview of Northern Ireland's public sector finances and in particular to produce an estimate of our overall net fiscal balance position or fiscal deficit.

The majority of data is not available at a regional level and therefore various apportionment methodologies, as set out in Annex B, are employed to provide an estimate of individual revenue streams which are then collated to provide a total estimation of public sector revenue.

As indicated in the report, these are not intended to provide an accurate estimate of individual revenue items - many of these have been estimated, in the absence of actual regional data, on the basis of high level assumptions and apportionment factors. As such the report indicates that individual revenue estimates should be interpreted with caution.

Net Fiscal Balance Report: EU Payments

Mr Brady asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail in full the procedure used to estimate the proportion of payments to the EU in the Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11, including references to the source data.

(AQW 18850/11-15)

Mr Wilson: As stated in Annex C Net Fiscal Balance Report 2009-10 and 2010-11, UK payments to the EU are apportioned to NI according to its share of UK GVA (less extra regio), as published by the Office of National Statistics (ONS).

I must re-emphasise that this report has been developed applying the methodology originally designed to produce the "Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland" (GERS) publication and is not intended to provide an accurate estimate of individual revenue items. The report provides an overall assessment of Northern Ireland's aggregate fiscal position, and as such, the report indicates that individual estimates should be interpreted with caution.

Savings Delivery Plans

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how often each Department is submitting progress reports on savings delivery plans.

(AQW 18902/11-15)

Mr Wilson: In order that I can provide an update to both the Executive and Committee for Finance and Personnel, I seek bi-annual progress reports from departments on implementation of Savings Delivery Plans. The most recent exercise sought updates on progress to 30 September 2012. I will be seeking a further update to 31 March 2013.

Disappointingly, the Education Minister wrote to me advising that his department would not be participating in the Savings Delivery Plan monitoring exercises. As a consequence, in a time of constrained budget allocations it remains difficult for the Executive, Assembly and citizens of Northern Ireland to gain assurance that the Education Minister is making every effort to minimise the impact on frontline educational services.

Savings Delivery Plans

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel on what basis a Department would be able to report less frequently, or opt out of participation in, submitting savings delivery plans to his Department.

(AQW 18903/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The process established for publication and monitoring of Savings Delivery Plans is designed to provide transparency to the Executive and Assembly Committees in relation to savings identified by departments and their performance in delivering those savings. The monitoring process also aims to identify risks to the delivery of these savings plans and highlight implications for the delivery of frontline services.

I believe there are no circumstances under which a department should exempt itself from participating in the process established for publication and monitoring of Savings Delivery Plans.

I seek bi-annual progress reports from all departments on implementation of Savings Delivery Plans. My most recent progress report to the Executive and Committee for Finance & Personnel provided an update to 30 September 2012 and advised that all departments, with the exception of the Department of Education, have now published Savings Delivery Plans relating to the current budget period, noting that DHSSPS are publishing their plans on an annual basis.

Financial Assistance Act

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether the Financial Assistance Act will be utilised to provide businesses with financial assistance needed as a result of the disruption caused by the recent civil unrest; and on what grounds this assistance will be made available.

(AQW 18935/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Financial Assistance Act (Northern Ireland) 2009 provides the First Minister and deputy First Minister with the joint power to enable the Northern Ireland departments to provide financial assistance in certain 'exceptional circumstances'.

It is for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to determine whether 'exceptional circumstances' exist and whether it is desirable to provide financial assistance in those circumstances. Therefore, any queries on the utilisation of this Act should be directed to them.

I can assure you that Executive Ministers will continue to explore proposals to promote economic growth in Northern Ireland.

Executive: Revenue

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the range of revenue raising options currently available to the Executive.

(AQO 3270/11-15)

Mr Wilson: There are a number of revenue raising options available to the Executive, which includes items such as the Regional Rate, RRI borrowing and capital receipts.

Budget 2011-15 included nearly £900 million of additional spend over the four year period generated through revenue raising measures.

This included additional spend of some £200 million over the four year period from the Regional Rate increase.

There was also more than £440 million of capital receipts identified by departments and an additional £100 million of capital receipts to be identified by the Central Asset Management Unit.

Belfast Port was asked to contribute some £40 million, while there was to be a £80 million contribution in respect of the Housing Associations' increased contribution to housing starts and finally some £12 million from the new Plastic Bag Levy.

Rates: Debt Recovery

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action is being taken to ensure that Land and Property Services will be able to recover the £160 million outstanding rates debt.

(AQO 3274/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Debt arises because ratepayers have not paid their rate bills. It is important to set the outstanding £160 million rating debt in context. This debt is set against assessments raised to a value of over £4.7 billion over 4 years; in other words 3.5% of this money remains to be recovered. We must also accept that we are in tough economic times and many people are struggling to pay their bills. We are seeing increasing numbers of individuals and businesses facing bankruptcy, administration and liquidation.

I can assure you that LPS takes a serious view of non-payment of rates and rigorously pursues all debt. However, this must be balanced against assisting ratepayers who are genuinely struggling during this difficult period. There has been an increase in the amount of relief paid both to domestic and non-domestic ratepayers. In addition, LPS will allow ratepayers to pay smaller amounts, over a longer period of time. However this inevitably increases the level of rating debt at the end of the rating year.

While LPS will make efforts to support those who are struggling to pay, they must, and will, rigorously pursue those who don't pay. Where ratepayers fail to pay or do not enter into payment arrangements or break those arrangements, LPS will take Court action and seek to recover the debt through the Enforcement of Judgements Office or will instigate bankruptcy proceedings.

It is worth noting that the £160 million debt has remained fairly constant over the past 3 years, while the cash collected by LPS has risen by over £125 million since 2008/09. This means extra millions can be invested in front-line services such as education, healthcare, roads and District Council services from which all residents in Northern Ireland benefit.

EU Commission: Multiannual Financial Framework Proposals

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the possibility of Northern Ireland being considered as a transition region in the EU Commission's Multiannual Framework Proposals for 2014-2020.
(AQO 3275/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The creation of transition regions for European Structural Investment Funds in the 2014-2020 funding period will depend on the outcome of the discussions between EU Governments on the European Commission's Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) proposals, which are due to resume in February.

If the final settlement includes transition regions on the basis that is currently being proposed, then Northern Ireland meets the criteria and should be confirmed as a 'transition region'. I would welcome that – it should give us greater flexibility in programming and perhaps a higher allocation of funds.

However, so many of the budget proposals are still open in the negotiations that it would be foolish to count on anything at this point.

Construction: Subeconomic Tendering

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action he is taking to tackle the problem of sub-economic tendering in the construction industry.
(AQO 3276/11-15)

Mr Wilson: As I announced after the last meeting of the Procurement Board my department will bring forward measures to ensure that government contracts are not awarded to firms that have submitted sub-economic tenders.

The Public Contract Regulations (2006) permit abnormally low tenders to be excluded from public procurement competitions. Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) has agreed a voluntary arrangement with construction industry representatives, to use a formula to identify abnormally low tenders on government construction contracts.

These new arrangements will be introduced next month.

Rates: Orange Halls

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much the Loyal Orders saved as a result of the decision to provide rate relief for Orange Halls.
(AQO 3277/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Rate relief for Orange Halls and other bodies is provided under Article 41A of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977. Article 41A was inserted into the Rates Order from April 2006. Since that date it is estimated that £4.53 million has been saved through exemption under the terms of Article 41A by the Loyal Orders.

Prompt Payment: Arm's-length Bodies

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action he is taking to improve the performance of the arms-length bodies identified in the recent NI Audit Office report "Financial Auditing and Reporting" as having far from satisfactory performance in relation to prompt payment of invoices by Health and Social Care Trusts and Education and Library Boards.
(AQO 3278/11-15)

Mr Wilson: My department is responsible for issuing guidance and seeking assurance that guidance issued is being implemented. In regard to prompt payment, guidance was issued in 2008 and reissued in 2010 to reinforce the importance of prompt payment. I also wrote to Ministerial colleagues asking them to ensure that appropriate steps were being taken in their departments, agencies and arms-length bodies to action the guidance issued.

I note from the Northern Ireland Audit Office report that the performance of the Health and Social Care Trusts and the ELBs is not satisfactory and the reasons for this as explained by the respective Ministers. I understand that corrective action is currently being addressed by the responsible departments.

Business: Flag Protests

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what support his Department is offering to businesses that have experienced trading loss as a consequence of flag protests.
(AQO 3279/11-15)

Mr Wilson: This is a matter for wider Executive consideration in terms of what other Departments can do to offer help. My Ministerial Colleagues and I have held meetings with a number of retail organisations including the Northern Ireland Independent Retailers Association, Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce and Pubs of Ulster to discuss the matter and

look at the way forward. The focus of this is on remedies that will increase footfall, such as providing financial support for marketing campaigns.

This is rather than looking to the rating system. Rates relief will not get people back out shopping and socialising. In any case there is little or no scope within rates legislation to provide relief in these circumstances and it would take too long to develop a rates policy to deal with this, which would then require new legislation.

LPS, however, is prepared to consider flexibility in terms of payment arrangements for those badly hit by the current disturbances. Many will already have payment arrangements in place and will have paid all or most of their rates for the year. However, LPS will consider sympathetically any requests to defer a final payment to next year when it would be added to next year's instalments. I would urge anyone in real difficulty to talk to LPS as soon as possible. LPS cannot, however, waive rates nor can they terminate recovery of rate debt where ratepayers have made little or no effort to pay.

Civil Service: Recruitment

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he will ensure that continuous internal monitoring is undertaken so that recruitment to the Civil Service demonstrates equality of opportunity.

(AQO 3280/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) is committed to equality of opportunity in recruitment and employment and undertakes a range of monitoring activities.

Under Article 55 of the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, and through its Review of Gender, the NICS regularly reviews the composition of its workforce and employment practices. The reviews help to inform decisions on the approach to recruitment competitions and indicate when positive action advertising statements should be used to encourage applications from under-represented groups. In addition, the NICS monitors equality of opportunity in recruitment competitions and data on this is published annually in "Analysis of NICS Recruitment Competitions" by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

In the interests of achieving the most efficient service possible, I will continue to make sure that recruitment procedures ensure that the most suitable person for the job is appointed.

Small Business Rate Relief Scheme: North Down

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many businesses in North Down have benefited from the current Small Business Rate Relief Scheme.

(AQO 3281/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Information on the number of businesses in the North Down Constituency that have benefited from the Small Business Rate Relief Scheme is not available as data is collated at District Council and Ward level only.

The latest figures available, as at 31st December 2012, indicate that 1,163 non-domestic properties in the Ards District Council Area and 936 non-domestic properties in the North Down District Council Area have benefited from the Small Business Rate Relief Scheme.

Special Advisers

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how his October 2011 procedures for the appointment of Special Advisers to Ministers differ from the previous arrangements.

(AQO 3282/11-15)

Mr Wilson: There are two main differences from the arrangements which existed prior to 6 September 2011.

The first is that compliance with the previous Code of Practice on the Appointment of Special Advisers is now mandatory for each Minister and Departments must ensure that the necessary documentation is completed and retained, with Corporate HR in DFP reporting compliance with the Code to me.

Secondly, a new vetting / character checking process has been introduced to apply to the appointment of Special Advisers. A criminal record check is conducted on each prospective Special Adviser who is selected for appointment by Ministers and Corporate HR will make a recommendation to the Minister on the appropriateness of the appointment using the arrangements that are applied to all other civil servants. Uniquely for Special Advisers, appeals against those decisions will be heard by an external, independent panel whose decision will be final.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Fire and Rescue Service

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the capital value of stores belonging to the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 18319/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): The table details the capital value of all stores held by the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service for the last five years.

2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
£664,955.00	£667,739.00	£843,638.00	£747,378.41	£748,112.86

Changing Places Facilities

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what provision there is for Changing Places facilities in hospitals; and what plans he has to increase provision.

(AQW 18352/11-15)

Mr Poots: At present no hospitals in NI provide "Changing Places" Toilets (CPTs). All Hospitals within Northern Ireland currently provide public ambulant toilets and wheelchair accessible toilets, which allow a wheelchair user to independently use the facilities.

There are currently 9 CPTs across Northern Ireland and it is my intention that all new major hospitals and healthcare developments will consider the inclusion of such facilities.

Initially Phase B redevelopment within the Ulster Hospital, which will be complete in 2015 will incorporate this facility. Omagh Hospital, Ballymena Health and Care Centre and Banbridge Health and Care Centre, currently all in design phase, will also have CTPs facilities.

My officials are currently working with MENCAP (who are leading on this issue) to identify and agree further appropriate opportunities to incorporate CPTs across the province.

People with Special Needs: Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the Northern Health and Social Care Trust's plans to improve the health and well being of people with special needs in east and north Antrim; and how families and carers are included in these plans.

(AQW 18400/11-15)

Mr Poots: The consultation on Transforming Your Care, recently concluded, reinforced the need to help people with special needs to be supported at home, thus promoting their independence. The Northern Trust advise me that this principle underpins their current work with, and planning of services for, children and adults with special needs and is encompassed within services delivered through Children's Social Work Teams, Community Nursing Teams, Child Development Teams, the Autism Diagnostic Service, Challenging Behaviour Services, Speech and Language Therapy, Paediatric Physiotherapy Service, Children's Occupational Therapy, Dental Teams and Psychiatry Services.

Also Community Adult Learning Disability Teams and Day Services, in line with the Trust's delivery of its Day Services Strategy - Widening Choice and Opportunities, provide respite based on assessed need, health facilitation and health related programmes for people with learning disabilities. The Trust's broader Priorities and Plans are available on their website at <http://www.northerntrust.hscni.net/141.htm>

In addition, in support of the estimated 44,000 unpaid carers within the Trust area, recognising the vital role that carers play and the demands placed on them, the Trust has recently published its 2012-2017 Carer's Strategy. The priorities within that Strategy are in response to carers' needs, identified through consultation with representative groups (including those caring for people with special needs), and will be implemented in conjunction with those in the voluntary and community sector.

Diabetes: East Antrim

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what his Department is doing to combat the rise in the number of people diagnosed with diabetes in East Antrim.

(AQW 18402/11-15)

Mr Poots: The prevention of diabetes in the East Antrim area is a high priority for the Northern Trust. High risk individuals are screened and programmes are run to prevent obesity and highlight the importance of exercise. The Trust has supported two initiatives specifically targeting weight loss: the Managed Obesity Network which co-ordinates and oversees weight management programmes and; the Motivate Programme, a clinical treatment service targeting patients with a weight related co-morbidity, particularly diabetes. Proposals are in train to establish specific weight management services that will compliment current preventative programmes.

Integrated care teams also have a number of initiatives on their agenda including involvement of community Pharmacists in screening and educating people at high risk of developing diabetes. A community Diabetologist works with Primary Care colleagues to promote a healthy lifestyle and provide access to exercise programmes such as Health Matters. GPs refer newly diagnosed patients to clinics run by multi-disciplinary teams in either Whiteabbey or Moyle Hospitals. Diabetic Nurse Specialists and Practice Nurses review and educate patients in an appropriate setting.

Health and Social Care Trusts: Interpreter Fees

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 17753/11-15, (i) for which languages does the Health Service require interpreters most often; (ii) what processes are in place to determine whether a patient requires an interpreter; and (iii) given the growing costs of interpreter fees, whether Health and Social Care Trusts have considered appointing interpreters on a full-time salaried basis as Trust employees.

(AQW 18449/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) The latest available information shows that Polish is currently the language for which interpreter services are required most often.
- (ii) Interpreters are required for all patients who do not speak English as a first or second proficient language. Comprehensive and consistent training is delivered across the Health and Social Care sector to ensure that staff and professionals are cognisant of when an individual requires an interpreter. Examples of establishing proficiency in English include asking the individual to repeat back the instructions and the use of a "point-to-your-language" poster or a language identity card.
- (iii) A review of Interpreting and Translation Services across the Health and Social Care sector is currently underway and is considering the various options available for cost effective, sustainable and high quality language support. Recommendations from this review will be known later this year.

Pain Clinics: Waiting Times

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what his Department's target waiting time is for patients to be referred to a pain clinic.

(AQW 18568/11-15)

Mr Poots: Pain management services are provided either as an inpatient or an outpatient service depending on clinical need. I have set challenging waiting time targets for first outpatients appointments and inpatient/daycase treatment that cover not just this type of treatment, but all clinical specialties. These are as follows:

- From April 2012, at least 50% of patients wait no longer than nine weeks for their first outpatient appointment with no one waiting longer than 21 weeks; increasing to 60% by March 2013 and no one waits longer than 18 weeks;
- From April 2012, at least 50%, of inpatients and daycases are treated within 13 weeks with no one waiting longer than 36 weeks; increasing to 60% by March 2013, and no patient waits longer than 30 weeks for treatment.

Pain Clinics: Waiting Times

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the average waiting time for an appointment for patients referred to pain clinics in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust in each of the last five years.

(AQW 18569/11-15)

Mr Poots: Waiting times for a first outpatient appointment are collected by my Department on a quarterly basis by aggregate weekly timebands. It is therefore not possible to calculate average waiting time, but the median timeband, a similar statistical measure, can be provided. Comparable information, in weekly timebands, is only available for the last four years, as prior to the quarter ending June 2008, waiting time data was collected in monthly timebands. .

The number of people waiting for a first consultant-led outpatient appointment in the Pain Management specialty at the Belfast HSC Trust, and the median waiting time in weeks, is outlined in the table below. Data is presented for the waiting time position at 30th September 2012, the most recent quarter for which official statistics are available, and for the position at the 31st March in each of the last four years.

Quarter Ending	Total Waiting	Median Waiting Time
31st March '09	424	Waiting no longer than 6 weeks
31st March '10	634	Waiting no longer than 6 weeks
31st March '11	486	Waiting no longer than 6 weeks
31st March '12	391	Waiting no longer than 6 weeks
30th September '12	349	Waiting no longer than 6 weeks

Source: Departmental Return CH3

Promoting Healthy Living: North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what funding streams are available for community groups in North Down to promote healthy living.

(AQW 18583/11-15)

Mr Poots: The resource for health and social wellbeing improvement available from the Public Health Agency within the South Eastern area, including North Down, is provided in two ways. Firstly through the direct commissioning of services to address both the regional strategic programme priorities and local related needs, and secondly through the provision of a small grants programme targeted at key areas/issues of priority.

The PHA anticipates that in 2013/14 it will continue to make available a small grants scheme to encourage and support action within local communities. Groups within the North Down Area will be able to apply to deliver activities, services and programmes against the criteria and priorities of the programme to be determined nearer the time. All applications will be assessed on merit against the programme criteria.

Dental Health: North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what his Department can do to promote dental health in North Down.

(AQW 18584/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department has been very proactive in introducing evidence-based programmes to improve the oral health of the population of Northern Ireland including those in North Down. For maximum effect these are mainly directed at children but schemes are also targeted at adults from deprived areas and elderly patients in residential and nursing homes.

Since 2004, we have introduced the following measures:

- Fluoride toothpaste schemes for young children in the most deprived areas.
- Preventive fissure sealant scheme delivered through the General Dental Services for young people.
- Enhanced capitation payments for dentists providing care to children from certain deprived areas. (In North Down this includes the electoral wards of Bloomfield, Conlig, Crawfordsburn, Dufferin, Rathgael, Silverstream and Whitehill).
- Enhanced continuing care payments to incentivise dental care for adults in deprived areas with the highest decay rates. (In North Down this is Conlig).
- Focussing the work of the Community Dental Service (CDS) across the whole of Northern Ireland, including North Down, to improving the oral health of those with special care needs such as children from socially disadvantaged areas, the learning disabled, and housebound and residents in nursing and residential homes. In addition they deliver evidence-based oral health improvement programmes.

Since the implementation of these schemes, we have noticed a significant improvement in the oral health of our child population. We have noted a reduction in extractions under general anaesthetic from 39,682 in 2004 to 23,806 in 2010. North Down comes under the Eastern Area data where figures fell from 17,657 to 7727 over the same period. We have also recorded a large reduction in the number of fillings carried out in children under 18 over this period.

A dental practice was also opened by Oasis Dental Care in Bangor under my Department's Additional Dental Services tender to improve access to health service dental treatment. They also run practices nearby in Holywood and Dundonald to improve local access for patients.

Across Northern Ireland the Public Health Agency run a number of healthy eating initiatives, smoking cessation and alcohol reduction programmes to improve both general and dental health. .

The 2007 Oral Health Strategy stated that the greatest oral health gain is likely to be achieved through community water fluoridation. Water fluoridation ensures delivery of fluoride to 'hard-to-reach' groups such as those of lower socioeconomic status who are more likely to experience dental disease. I am giving consideration to fluoridation of the water supplies at present.

My Department is also supporting a large research trial to investigate the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of using fluoride varnish and fluoride toothpaste to prevent decay in young children.

We will continue to use these evidence-based programmes to further improve the oral health of all of our population.

Patient Referrals: Upper Bann

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of referrals for patients in the Upper Bann constituency to (i) occupational therapy; (ii) physiotherapy; and (iii) speech and language therapy who are awaiting (a) an initial appointment; and (b) treatment commencement broken down by age band.

(AQW 18602/11-15)

Mr Poots: This information is not held centrally by the Department but has been provided by the Southern HSC Trust. The Southern HSC Trust does not collate the information requested on the basis of electoral wards or constituencies. However the information is gathered on a geographical Trust locality basis. Table 1 below displays the figures for those patients awaiting

an initial assessment for physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech & language therapy at 18 January 2013. Patient information has been broken down into two age groups, adults and children.

Table 1

Craigavon & Banbridge No. awaiting initial assessment as at 18 January 2013		Total
Physiotherapy	Adult	1091
	Child	56
Craigavon & Banbridge Total - Physiotherapy		1147
Occupational Therapy	Adult	369
	Child	40
Craigavon & Banbridge Total - Ot		409
Speech & Language Therapy	Adult	45
	Child	128
Craigavon & Banbridge Total - Slit		173

Occupational therapy, physiotherapy and speech & language therapy initiate treatment at initial assessment. Treatment is delivered in a number of formats including individual, group, school visits advice and programmes, parent/carer training, advice and home programmes, equipment provision and housing and environmental adaptations. As such, the figure for those awaiting treatment aligns with the figures for those awaiting an initial assessment.

Myocardial Ischaemia National Audit Project

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when his Department will begin to submit the appropriate data on the relevant patients to the Myocardial Ischaemia National Audit Project.

(AQW 18611/11-15)

Mr Poots: At present, two Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts submit data to the Myocardial Ischaemia National Audit Project (MINAP). Funding has been approved for the remaining three HSC Trusts to recruit specialist nurses to this project and submission of data will commence thereafter.

Hair Loss Referrals

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people with conditions that cause them to suffer hair loss have been referred for wig fitting in each of the last five years, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 18616/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information requested is not collected centrally within the DHSSPS and was requested from the Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts. The response from each HSC Trust is listed below and cannot be disaggregated by geographical areas smaller than HSC Trust. Note the variances in both definitions and time frames provided.

Belfast HSC Trust:

Please see table below for number of Belfast HSC Trust patients referred for wig fitting in each of the last five years.

Year	Number of Belfast Trust patients referred for wig fitting
2008	926
2009	905
2010	872
2011	887
2012	1,052
Total	4,642

Northern HSC Trust:

The Northern HSC Trust has received the following number of referrals for wig fitting in the previous five year period.

Year	Number of referrals for wig fitting
2007/2008	193
2008/2009	253
2009/2010	252
2010/2011	272
2011/2012	318
Total	1,288

South Eastern HSC Trust:

The South Eastern HSC Trust confirm the following wigs were provided to patients as follows:

Year	Number of wigs provided
2008	196 wigs supplied to 151 people
2009	292 wigs supplied to 213 people
2010	460 wigs supplied to 290 people
2011	540 wigs supplied to 325 people
2012	395 wigs supplied to 308 people
Total	1,883 wigs supplied to 1,287 people

Southern HSC Trust:

Please see below figures for the Southern HSC Trust in relation to referrals for wigs for both alopecia and cancer patients.

Year	Number of referrals for wigs
2007/08	Unable to provide data
2008/09	289
2009/10	340
2010/11	398
2011/12	385
Total	1,412

Western HSC Trust:

The Western HSC Trust has referred 928 clients for wig fitting from April 2008 to December 2012. Below is a breakdown of referrals per year.

Year	Number of referrals for wig fitting
April 08 to March 09	142 clients
April 09 to March 10	90 clients
April 10 to March 11	246 clients
April 11 to March 12	242 clients
April 12 to December 12	208 clients
Total	928 clients

Young Adults with Learning Disabilities

Ms McGahan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what percentage of his departmental budget is spent on young adults with (i) learning disabilities; and (ii) severe learning disabilities in the Southern and Western Health and Social Care Trust areas.

(AQW 18638/11-15)

Mr Poots: Unfortunately this information can only be provided at a disproportionate cost as the Trusts' financial systems do not capture this level of analysis.

Foster Care: North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety which Department or agency has overall responsibility for foster care in North Down.

(AQW 18649/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has responsibility for legislation and policy relating to foster care in Northern Ireland. Under Article 17 of the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 and Article 3(1) of the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1994 day to day responsibility and decision making is delegated to the Health and Social Care Board and Health and Social Care Trusts.

The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has responsibility for foster care in North Down.

Dementia Strategy: Health and Social Care Trusts

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether all Health and Social Care Trusts have a dementia strategy in place.

(AQW 18651/11-15)

Mr Poots: In November 2011 I published Dementia Services in Northern Ireland – A Regional Strategy, which contains a number of recommendations designed to improve dementia services across Northern Ireland. The Strategy sets the direction of travel for improving dementia services across Northern Ireland. The HSC Board and Public Health Agency jointly lead a regional group to oversee implementation of the Strategy and its recommendations across NI. Each HSC Trust is represented on the regional implementation group and provides regular updates on the implementation of the strategy in their area.

Dental Hygiene: Kilcooley Estate, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether there is a dental bus that could be used to go into working class communities, such as Kilcooley Estate, Bangor, to help with dental hygiene.

(AQW 18673/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department's Oral Health Strategy (2007) states that preventive interventions, whether within or outside the clinical setting, should have their effectiveness supported by a strong evidence base.

Effectiveness reviews have shown that there is not a strong evidence base for Dental Health Education programmes. Community-based oral health instruction only leads to a short term improvement in knowledge but has a limited effect on behaviour and clinical outcomes. The use of a dental bus to access deprived communities to improve dental hygiene would fall into this category and, therefore, is not currently used.

In terms of community interventions in areas of lower socioeconomic status, my Department's policy is to concentrate on evidence-based schemes delivered by appropriate healthcare professionals for improving oral health, primarily through fluoride toothpaste schemes focussed on children to gain the maximum effect at the earliest opportunity. We have provided funding, since 2005, through Investing for Health to support these schemes. 700 nursery children from the most deprived electoral wards in the North Down and Ards area receive toothbrush and toothpaste packs three times per school year from the South East HSC Trust Community Dental Service.

Health and Social Care Trusts: Consultant Clinics

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what additional secretarial and administrative support the Southern and Western Health and Social Care Trusts have put in place to support their extra consultant clinics.

(AQW 18684/11-15)

Mr Poots: When the Health and Social Care Board agrees to fund additional Consultant clinics, over and above a Consultant's Programmed Activity contract, the required level of nursing, secretarial and administrative support is also agreed and included in the additional funding. Existing staff who work additional hours to support these extra clinics are paid in line with Agenda for Change terms and conditions. Where it is not possible to meet the additional hours from within existing staff additional administrative and clerical support is brought in on a temporary basis to support Trust staff in servicing these extra consultant clinics.

Dentists: National Health Service Patients

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many dentists are currently taking new Health Service patients.

(AQW 18716/11-15)

Mr Poots: As General Dental Practitioners are independent contractors neither my Department nor the Health and Social Care Board maintains a list of dentists that are accepting patients for Health Service treatment and care. However, between

February 2012 and January 2013, 959 of the 1,055 dentists in Northern Ireland registered at least one new patient for Health Service treatment and care.

Changing Places Facilities

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the hospitals that have plans to provide Changing Places facilities, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 18717/11-15)

Mr Poots: The following Health facilities in planning will provide Changing Places Toilets:

- Phase B Ulster Hospital; South Eastern Trust
- Mid Ulster Hospital; Northern Trust
- Ballymena Health and Care Centre; Northern Trust
- Omagh Hospital; Western Trust
- Banbridge Health and Care Centre; Southern Trust

It is my intention that all future new major hospitals and healthcare developments will consider the inclusion of Changing Places Toilets, as appropriate.

My Department is further giving consideration to the incorporation of Changing Places Toilets or suitable alternative amenities into existing Healthcare facilities; including at this time, Antrim Area Hospital and the South West Hospital, Enniskillen.

My officials will continue to support MENCAP (who are leading on this issue), and whilst recognising this is not just an issue for the Health Service to address, we are contributing to the provision of an appropriate network of Changing Places Toilets across the province.

Fire and Rescue Service: Underspend

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how the Fire and Rescue Service's declared underspend will be used.

(AQW 18743/11-15)

Mr Poots: Any underspends arising within the resource budgets of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, or any of my Department's Arms Length Bodies, are considered as part of the management of the Department's overall financial resources to secure the key Ministerial priority of delivering financial breakeven. In terms of capital underspends, these are typically considered as part of the overall proactive management of the capital programme in order to identify other projects to which funding can be allocated.

Cataract Surgery: Ulster Hospital

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the current waiting time for cataract surgery at the Ulster Hospital.

(AQW 18767/11-15)

Mr Poots: Cataract surgery is not provided at the Ulster Hospital.

Fire Station: Cushendall

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the £6m underspend cannot be used for a new fire station in Cushendall.

(AQW 18809/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department declared a capital reduced requirement of £4.8m in January monitoring due to circumstances beyond my control in two major capital projects: Omagh Fire Station, where the collapse of the Patton group caused a delay on this project; and, the RVH Critical care block where a contractual problem caused a delay.

Departmental Capital budgets are set on an annual basis and government budgeting rules mean that any underspend identified within a financial year cannot be carried over into future years. Thus, I was unable to commit these resources to projects which would commence in future years.

No business case has yet been developed for a replacement fire station in Cushendall and it is not currently profiled as one of the highest priority projects in the current budget period.

Muckamore Abbey Hospital

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) whether any wards in Muckamore Abbey are due for closure in 2013; (ii) for an explanation for the closures; and (iii) the number of patients involved.

(AQW 18859/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is anticipated that one ward in Muckamore Abbey Hospital will close during 2013. This will be achieved by the amalgamation of 2 existing wards and is part of the Health and Social Care overall plan for resettlement.

Resettlement is carried out in accordance with the recommendations of the Bamford Action Plan and is carried through into the Transforming Your Care proposals.

The ward closure will affect approximately 16 patients who, following assessment of their needs, will be reintegrated into the community. The principle of betterment for the individual remains the priority of the resettlement process.

Fire and Rescue Service: Budget

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the £6m in the Fire and Rescue Service budget was not spent.

(AQW 18869/11-15)

Mr Poots: A total of £6.4m was surrendered from the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service's DEL Other Resource budget in 2011/12. This comprised £3m retracted by my Department in August 2011 in light of NIFRS' projected expenditure profile and £3.4m surrendered by NIFRS as part of their routine budgetary management processes. The latter amount was primarily due to a reduced number of retained firefighter operational call outs, together with lower than anticipated provision payments and a number of smaller easements across other budget headings.

Muckamore Abbey Hospital

Mr Nesbitt asked Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 18859/11-15, whether suitable alternative accommodation has been found for all the patients concerned.

(AQW 18904/11-15)

Mr Poots: Pursuant to AQW 18859/11-15, those people in Muckamore Abbey Hospital, identified for resettlement in 2013, would not be discharged from the Hospital unless suitable alternative accommodation, along with a care package appropriate to their individual and assessed needs, had been identified and is available.

Bangor Health Centre Site: Proposed Newbuild

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the proposed new build for the administration building on the Bangor health centre site.

(AQW 18912/11-15)

Mr Poots: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust is progressing plans to relocate staff from the administration building on Bangor Health Centre site to other locations within the Bangor area.

I am pleased to confirm that work is underway to facilitate the first phase of decanting staff and this initial work is due to be completed by end March 2013.

It is expected that relocating staff from this building will take approximately 2 years to complete and when all staff have been relocated the Trust plans to demolish the Administration block.

Department of Justice

Prison Service: Estate Managers

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many Northern Ireland Prison Service Estate Managers (i) are brought in from outside Northern Ireland; (ii) the cost of their travel in and out on a weekly basis; (iii) the cost of their accommodation to date; and (iv) the projected final annual cost.

(AQW 17653/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): The Infrastructure Manager for the Northern Ireland Prison Service is seconded to the Prison Service by the Strategic Investment Board on a three year fixed term contract. The Prison Service does not contribute to any travel or accommodation costs.

Legal Aid

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, what is the legal aid composite fee for (i) Senior Counsel; and (ii) Junior Counsel, in relation to High Court proceedings.

(AQW 18356/11-15)

Mr Ford: Fees in respect of the majority of cases in the High Court are assessed (taxed) by the Taxing Master in accordance with Part 2, Schedule 2 of the Legal Aid, Advice and Assistance (Northern Ireland) Order 1981. On taxation of High Court civil cases there is no legal aid composite fee for either senior or junior counsel.

Practitioners can elect to be paid composite fees instead of having the costs taxed in respect of High Court bail applications. The fees payable for one counsel, either senior or junior are:

- Application for bail £180
- Application to vary bail conditions £180

Legal Aid

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the total amount of legal aid that has been paid individually for Brian and Paula Arthurs in relation to fraud charges.

(AQW 18357/11-15)

Mr Ford: A claim for payment has been received from the solicitor who represented both defendants and the total fees paid in respect of proceedings in the Magistrates' Court, in respect of these charges, is £6,265.49 (including VAT of £817.24). As the legal aid certificates predate the introduction of standard fees, the claims were determined on a time based claim submitted by the solicitor in respect of both defendants. It is not possible to detail the fees separately for each defendant.

The Crown Court case has not yet finished and no bills have therefore been submitted for payment.

Maghaberry Prison: Serious Self-Harm Incidents

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) why routine investigations of serious self-harm incidents at Maghaberry Prison are limited, given that, on average, there are twenty-one incidents per month; and (ii) to outline how the Northern Ireland Prison Service intends to manage all such incidents and investigations effectively in the future.

(AQW 18358/11-15)

Mr Ford: Where an incident meets the criteria of a serious self harm; that is death could have occurred without the intervention of staff, required immediate medical intervention to resuscitate and revive, or required the immediate response of an ambulance and the person being taken to an outside hospital for treatment, an investigation will be led by NIPS Headquarters. Maghaberry Prisoner Safety and Support Team (PSST) review all other incidents of self harm.

The PSST will continue to monitor prisoners at risk and complete regular audits of safer custody processes and procedures. In addition, regular safer custody multi-disciplinary meetings are held to identify the appropriate package of care for vulnerable prisoners.

Legal Aid

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 18098/11-15, how much has been paid, to date, from the 2012/13 legal aid budget on civil cases and how many cases does this represent.

(AQW 18359/11-15)

Mr Ford: Legal Services Commission confirms that the amount of £27.3m has been paid up to, and including 17th January 2013, in relation to some 5,530 Civil Legal Aid Certificates.

The Commission's case management system records details of certificates granted to individuals.

It is not possible for the Commission to provide information on the number of cases to which payments relate as some of the 5,530 certificates will have been granted to individuals who are parties in the same case.

Prison Service: Mentoring

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the status of the Northern Ireland Prison Service mentoring scheme and related training programme and; (ii) the number of days in 2011 when the Strategic Committee convened to discuss training priorities required to meet the needs of prison officers.

(AQW 18364/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) launched its mentoring scheme on 1 October 2012 and to date, a total of 39 mentor/mentee relationships have been established. All staff who volunteered to engage as mentors were offered training to support them in undertaking this role.

The Strategic Learning Committee met once in May 2011.

Legal Services Commission: Letter

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 18098/11-15, (i) whether he was made aware of the Northern Ireland Legal Service letter prior to it being sent and; (ii) when he was made aware of the letter.

(AQW 18383/11-15)

Mr Ford: I met members of the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission on 13 December 2012 to discuss the legal aid funding pressure. At that meeting Commissioners advised me of the action they proposed to take in response to the funding position, and that the Commission would be writing to the Law Society and the Bar Council to advise them of that action.

Legal Aid

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether all law firms and junior and senior counsel who are paid through Legal Aid have been in receipt of the composite fee since its introduction,
(AQW 18384/11-15)

Mr Ford: There are no statutory prescribed standard legal aid fees for civil cases, with the exception of bail application fees. In relation to these applications, all payments have been made in accordance with the prescribed fees.

In criminal legal aid cases the Legal Services Commission pays the relevant standard fee in accordance with the prescribed statutory schemes. For Crown Court cases, since 2005, and for magistrates' court cases, since 2009, all new cases are paid the statutory fee set out in the prescribed legislation.

Prisoner Ombudsman

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice on what date and through what media source the Prisoner Ombudsman alleged publicly that on the balance of probabilities a prison officer at Maghaberry planted a note containing information concerning the Governor in a prisoner's cell.
(AQW 18386/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Prisoner Ombudsman is an independent body and the Member may wish to write to her directly about this matter.

Sexual Offender Monitoring

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to the defendant in case number 12/143005, (i) whether he or the Lithuanian authorities, notified Northern Ireland authorities of the conviction and sentence prior to, or on his arrival in Northern Ireland, or to clarify how his conviction was discovered; (ii) why he was permitted to enter Northern Ireland so soon after being released from custody for a serious offence; (iii) whether he will be made subject to sexual offender monitoring, alongside the Notification Order; and (iv) whether he is currently facing any other court charges at this time.
(AQW 18387/11-15)

Mr Ford: The defendant was arrested in June 2011 on suspicion of theft. The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) made an application to the Lithuanian authorities for a copy of his criminal record which showed that he had a conviction for a serious sexual offence. On receipt of this information the PSNI made an application for a Notification Order which was granted at Dungannon Magistrates' Court on 11 January 2013. The defendant is subject to the Public Protection Arrangements and is being managed as if he had committed the sexual offence in Northern Ireland. He is in custody for non-sexual offences he committed after arriving in Northern Ireland and is not facing any other court charges.

Responsibility for granting entry into Northern Ireland is a matter for the UK Border Agency and is not something upon which I can comment.

Maghaberry Prison: Staff Suspension

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to an officer suspended at Maghaberry prison for allegedly planting information about Governor Steve Rodford in a republican's cell, to detail (i) the date the officer was suspended from duty and on whose direction; (ii) the date the suspension was lifted and by whom; (iii) to clarify whether consideration was given to relocating the officer within the prison as an alternative to suspension; (iv) to detail how often the suspension was reviewed and by whom; (v) whether in accordance with Regulation 118 (2) of the Prison & Young Offenders Centre Rules (NI) 1995, the matter was fully reported to the Secretary of State and detail the directions given; and (vi) the cost of the suspension to the Northern Ireland Prison Service.
(AQW 18388/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Prison Service is unable to provide the Member with the details requested, as disclosure would be contrary to the Data Protection Act 1998.

Fraud Awareness

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Justice whether his Department has any responsibility for the delivery of fraud awareness workshops or training to other Departments and their arms-length bodies.
(AQW 18429/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Department of Justice is not responsible for arranging fraud awareness training for other Departments or their arm's length bodies. The Department of Finance and Personnel has advised that generic fraud awareness training is delivered through the Centre for Applied Learning by the appointed training provider.

Course material for such training is quality assured by DFP through the NICS Fraud Forum. However, where Departments provide specific training to staff, this is a matter for the Department concerned.

Fraud Awareness

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Justice to detail how any organisation that was responsible for the delivery of fraud awareness workshops or training to other Departments or their arms-length bodies met the competency requirements.
(AQW 18430/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Department of Justice is not responsible for arranging fraud awareness training for other Departments or their arm's length bodies. The Department of Finance and Personnel has advised that generic fraud awareness training is delivered through the Centre for Applied Learning by the appointed training provider.

Course material for such training is quality assured by DFP through the NICS Fraud Forum. However, where Departments provide specific training to staff, this is a matter for the Department concerned.

Maghaberry Prison: Separated Section

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice to detail the work carried out in the separated section of Maghaberry Prison, and the associated costs, since the ending of the so called dirty protest by republican prisoners.
(AQW 18435/11-15)

Mr Ford: Separated republican prisoners in Roe House ended their protest action on 3 December 2012. The associated costs to date are £50,149. A breakdown of these costs is included in the table below:

Work Carried Out to 17 January 2013	Associated Costs
Upgrading of the access to the external exercise area	£13,360
Reinstatement of Sanitary Ware in cells	£15,789
Cleaning of cells	£21,000
Total Costs incurred to date	£50,149

Prison Officers: Sick Absence

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the number of prison officers who have been absent due to illness as a result of injury by a prisoner and who were subsequently dismissed; and (ii) if any expressed a wish to return to work on reduced duties.
(AQW 18443/11-15)

Mr Ford: Between 12 April 2010 and 31 December 2012 there have been no prison officers dismissed due to illness as a result of an injury by a prisoner.

Legal Services Commission: Legal Aid Budget

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 18098/11-15, to detail the total amount paid to date from the Legal Aid budget on civil cases, in each of the last three full financial years, and how many cases were involved, broken down by year.
(AQW 18447/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission confirms that the amounts paid in relation to Civil Legal Aid Certificates in each of the last three full financial years is as follows:

Financial Year	Amount Paid	Number of Certificates
2009-10	£25,162,043	8,466
2010-11	£25,727,837	7,993
2011-12	£37,229,148	8,760

The Commission's case management system records details of certificates granted to individuals.

It is not possible for the Commission to provide information on the number of cases to which these payments relate as some of the Certificates will have been granted to individuals who are parties in the same case.

Prison Service: Annual Reports and Accounts

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to the Northern Ireland Prison Service Annual Reports and Accounts, to detail the 'Key Performance and Targets' for staff training for the year 2011-12.
(AQW 18448/11-15)

Mr Ford: The 2011/12 annual report and accounts did not have a specific Key Performance Target (KPT) associated with training. The 2011/12 Annual Report does have a development objective for future training, which states, "NIPS will bring forward a tailored training and development strategy to be rolled out to Managers and staff from April 2012 onwards".

This is in line with Year One of the Northern Ireland Prison Service reform programme, Preparing for Structured Change.

Bangor Courthouse

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 16845/11-15, whether expressions of interest from other Departments, for the use of Bangor Courthouse, are being sought (i) ahead of, or (ii) after its closure in 2013.

(AQW 18452/11-15)

Mr Ford: Land and Property Services has commenced a targeted public sector trawl ahead of the closure of Bangor Courthouse to determine if an alternative use can be found for the building.

Prison Facility: Millisle

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 17168/11-15, whether the site at Millisle has been ruled out as a possible contingency/emergency prison facility.

(AQW 18454/11-15)

Mr Ford: There are no plans to use the Millisle site as a contingency/emergency prison facility.

Bangor Courthouse

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice what assessment has or will be carried out on the impact on users of the closure of Bangor Courthouse in order to identify ways of minimising inconvenience.

(AQW 18455/11-15)

Mr Ford: The impact on users of Bangor Courthouse was considered throughout the consultation process and informed my decisions on the Hearing Centre closures.

While there is potential that some users may be inconvenienced, there will be other users who will benefit from the transfer of business to Newtownards Courthouse. All court users, in particular victims and witnesses, will be provided with a higher standard of accommodation and facilities at Newtownards Courthouse.

I do not intend to commission a future assessment of the impact of the closure of Bangor Courthouse on users.

Maghaberry Prison: Prison Regime

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Justice whether (i) the prison regime at HMP Maghaberry has been relaxed; and (ii) concessions are being granted to dissident republicans following the murder of Mr David Black.

(AQW 18484/11-15)

Mr Ford: The prison regime in Maghaberry has not been relaxed and no concessions have been granted to separated republican prisoners following the tragic death of Officer David Black.

Prison Service: Televisions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) how much has the Northern Ireland Prison Service spent on televisions for prisoner use per prison facility in each of the last five years; (ii) how many televisions does this collectively equate to; (iii) whether there are specific criteria for the televisions; (iv) how many suppliers are used to provide televisions; and (v) whether a tendering process or best value study is carried out prior to purchase.

(AQW 18499/11-15)

Mr Ford:

- (i) The Northern Ireland Prison Service has spent £ 356,181 on televisions for prisoner use in the last five years. Of this amount, £101,618 was paid from the Prisoners Amenity Fund, which is funded by tuck shop profits, recycling initiatives, and prisoner television rental fees. Details of expenditure are provided in Table 1.

Table 1 Expenditure on televisions for prisoner use

Year	Hydebank £	Maghaberry £	Magilligan £	Total £
2008/9	8,859	2,015	4,732	15,606
2009/10	1,728	4,232	17,523	23,483
2010/11	72,659	17,248	60,673	150,580

Year	Hydebank £	Maghaberry £	Magilligan £	Total £
2011/12	15,308	29,295	15,120	59,723
2012/13 (to 18 January 2013)	12,156	85,867	8,766	106,789
Total	110,710	138,657	106,814	356,181

- (ii) Information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.
- (iii) The contract for the purchase of televisions was tendered requesting certain popular sizes to ascertain best value for money.
- (iv) One supplier is contracted to provide televisions. Televisions required for new build accommodation are purchased under the construction contract which offers a turnkey solution.
- (v) A full tender process was carried out prior to letting the contract for the purchase of televisions through the Central Procurement Directorate.

Criminal Cases: Release of Information

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 17945/11-15; AQW 17560/11-15; and AQW 14945/11-15, why he was in a position to provide details in respect of Civil Legal Aid for Marion McGlinchey, but was unable to provide the same details for (i) the sex-offender who took High Court action against Facebook; and (ii) a Carrick Hill resident who challenged a Parades Commission ruling on 28 September 2012.

(AQW 18501/11-15)

Mr Ford: Article 24 of the Legal Aid, Advice and Assistance (NI) Order 1981 prohibits the release of information in respect of civil cases in which Legal Aid has been granted, it does not apply to criminal cases. There are exceptions to this, one of which is that the information can be released with the consent of the person on whose behalf the information was furnished or if he did not furnish the information himself, the consent of the person who furnished the information.

Regarding AQW/13367/11-15, the question related to all fees paid in respect of Marion McGlinchey's case. This comprised criminal fees, which can be released without agreement, and civil fees. In providing draft responses to AQW's in respect of criminal legal aid the Commission routinely advises solicitors that it will be providing particular data. On this occasion, in response to notification that the Commission intended to respond to an AQW on the subject, the solicitor indicated he was content for the release of all fees, including civil fees.

The Commission does not routinely request authority under Article 24 for the release of information in respect of civil cases as these can involve a number of different legal representatives and the time available would not allow this process to be routinely followed to answer AQW's. Consent can be withheld by individuals.

At the time of answering AQW/17560/11-15 and AQW/14945/11-15, the Commission had not received any bills for payment. These are both civil cases which are covered by Article 24.

Prison Service: Clarification of Previous Written Answer

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant AQW 17850/11-15, to explain the anomaly in his answer given the content of the responses to AQW 17721/11-15 and AQW 16744/11-15 in which he stated, "that all prison officers undergo extensive induction training, including SPAR, Applied Suicide Intervention Skills and practical training consistent with the recommendations as set out in the European Court Rules etc".

(AQW 18502/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Prison Service wishes to clarify its response to AQW/17721/11-15 and AQW/17850/11-15.

The response to AQW/17721/11-15 did not make it clear that this was in reference to the new current custody officer training programme. All prison officers have undergone extensive induction training including the supervision of prisoners, which is an integral role of a prison officer.

However, not all prison officers have been trained in Supporting Prisoners at Risk procedures or Applied Suicide Intervention Skills.

Hydebank Wood: Christmas Day Incident

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail what occurred in Elm 2 Hydebank Wood Prison on Christmas Day and the estimated costs involved.

(AQW 18503/11-15)

Mr Ford: Nothing of note occurred on Elm 2 landing on Christmas Day. However, an incident did occur on Elm 3 landing late in the afternoon of Christmas Day. The incident involved five inmates who participated in a concerted act of indiscipline by barricading themselves into the dining hall. The incident was brought under control within 40 minutes. Whilst barricaded in the

dining hall, the inmates caused damage to the fixtures and fittings and the cost of repairing this has been estimated at £5000. The matter is currently subject to investigation by the PSNI.

Central Investigation Service: Criminal Justice Inspection

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 18189/11-15, in view of whether the functions discharged by the Central Investigation Service, for his assessment it should be specified as an organisation that is inspected by the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland.

(AQW 18554/11-15)

Mr Ford: I understand that the Central Investigation Service was established in 2002, which would have been after legislative instructions had been prepared for the list of organisations that Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) is able to inspect under the Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2002. I am happy to consult with the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development and with the Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice on whether it should be added to that list. I am meeting with the Chief Inspector within the next few weeks and intend to raise the matter then.

Central Investigation Service: Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2002

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Justice to detail why the Central Investigation Service within the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development was not specified in section 46 of the Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2002.

(AQW 18555/11-15)

Mr Ford: I understand that the Central Investigation Service was established in 2002, which would have been after legislative instructions had been prepared for the list of organisations that Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) is able to inspect under the Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2002. I am happy to consult with the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development and with the Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice on whether it should be added to that list. I am meeting with the Chief Inspector within the next few weeks and intend to raise the matter then.

Central Investigation Service: Criminal Justice Inspection

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Justice, in view of the functions discharged by the Central Investigation Service within the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, for his assessment of whether it should have been included in the list of organisations that the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland could inspect.

(AQW 18556/11-15)

Mr Ford: I understand that the Central Investigation Service was established in 2002, which would have been after legislative instructions had been prepared for the list of organisations that Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) is able to inspect under the Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2002. I am happy to consult with the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development and with the Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice on whether it should be added to that list. I am meeting with the Chief Inspector within the next few weeks and intend to raise the matter then.

Prison Service: Prisoner Ombudsman Recommendations

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, since April 2010, in how many instances has the Prisoner Ombudsman made recommendations on suspension, discipline or dismissal of staff, which were accepted and acted upon by the Northern Ireland Prison Service, but were then overturned on appeal or legal challenge.

(AQW 18562/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Prisoner Ombudsman has not made any recommendations of this nature.

Prison Service: Annual Report and Accounts

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) why the Northern Ireland Prison Service Annual Report and Accounts for 2011-12 does not detail statistics under Key Performance and Targets for staff training, given that such information was published in previous years; (ii) who made the decision not to publish these statistics; (iii) to explain the rationale for the decision; (iv) who approved the decision; and (v) given the criticism in various external reports regarding a lack of staff training, whether such information will be included in future relevant reports.

(AQW 18570/11-15)

Mr Ford: The publication of the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) 2011-15 Corporate Plan set out a four year strategic overview for each year of the NIPS reform programme. The focus of Year One, to which the 2011-12 Annual Report and Accounts pertain, was on preparing for structural change. With this in mind, the 2011-12 Annual Report and Accounts did not have a specific Key Performance Target (KPT) associated with training

In keeping with year two of the reform programme which includes preparing for cultural change, NIPS has demonstrated its commitment to staff training by including development objectives with regard to training programmes and competency frameworks for staff in the 2012-13 NIPS Business Plan. Additionally, in this Business Plan NIPS has included a Key Performance Target which measures the adequacy of training for staff entering into new roles. NIPS will continue to keep

business objectives and Key Performance Targets under review as areas of focus and business needs change: NIPS does intend to include a target for training in the 2013-14 Business Plan.

Responsibility for setting and approving items included in the NIPS 2011-12 Annual Report falls to the Director General of NIPS.

Sexual Offences

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 17771/11-15 and AQW 16244/11-15, will he expand the parameters of serious case reviews to include these types of cases where there has been clear evidence of defaulting or poor monitoring.

(AQW 18571/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Department has issued guidelines under Article 50 of the Criminal Justice (NI) Order 2008 which already require the multi agency strategic forum for the public protection arrangements to consider a serious case review where a significant failure has occurred in the risk management of an individual case.

Prison Service: Suicide and Self-harm

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 17822/11-15, and in light of the extensive procedures set out in the Prison Service Suicide and Self Harm Prevention Policy (2011), the Prison Service Standard Operating Procedures on Suicide and Self Harm Prevention (2010) and the attached Appendices, what assurances he can give that these procedures have been implemented and are being rigorously followed in all establishments managed by the Prison Service.

(AQW 18572/11-15)

Mr Ford: It is the responsibility of prison service managers to ensure that prison service policies and procedures are fully implemented. Line managers' performance will be monitored through the performance management procedures.

Independently, Northern Ireland Prison Service policies and procedures are subject to scrutiny by a number of external bodies, including Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons. In addition, audits are carried out by safer custody managers across all prison establishments.

Prison Service: Staff

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to Prison Service staff who were dismissed but had the dismissal overturned on appeal, but who opted for compensation instead of a return to work, how soon after the decision is issued will compensation be paid; and to detail the timeframe which should be met in all such cases of this nature.

(AQW 18573/11-15)

Mr Ford: NIPS have a 42 day period to make payment from receipt of notification from the Civil Service Appeal Board (CSAB) of the compensation amount to be awarded. Payments are issued within this timeframe.

Newtownards Courthouse

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Justice whether he has any plans for the redevelopment of Newtownards Courthouse in light of the proposed closure of Bangor Courthouse.

(AQW 18594/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service has no immediate plans to redevelop Newtownards Courthouse in light of the closure of Bangor Courthouse. However, an additional consultation room will be made available at Newtownards Courthouse and utilisation monitored.

The Courthouse estate will be examined as part of a wider review of the Department of Justice estate.

Civil Servants: Unrest

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the number of civil servants from his Department who have left work early since 3 December 2012 due to the civil unrest associated with the flag protests; and (ii) the associated financial cost to his departmental budget.

(AQW 18785/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Department of Justice (DOJ) is fully aware of its responsibility to maintain a service to the public and every effort is made to keep its offices open for business.

Whilst the timing of the protests allowed most staff to make their way home unhindered, affected staff were entitled to seek approval from their line manager to leave work early within the rules of the Flexible Working Time - Code of Practice and without additional credits.

Any staff who had specific concerns were advised to discuss the situation with their line manager. Line managers are best placed to consider all the relevant issues including the need to maintain a service to the public and exercise local discretion within the normal rules of the NICS HR Handbook.

Therefore no associated financial cost to the DOJ budget was recorded.

People Trafficking: Prosecutions

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Justice for an estimate of the cost of making people trafficking prosecutions indictable only. (AQW 18872/11-15)

Mr Ford: The current human trafficking offences are triable either summarily or on indictment and therefore human trafficking cases currently may be directed to the Magistrates' Courts, where the maximum term of imprisonment is six months, or to the Crown Court, where the maximum term of imprisonment is, generally, fourteen years.

I have indicated publicly, including to the Justice Committee, my intention to bring forward an amendment to the Criminal Justice Bill that will make offences of human trafficking triable on indictment only in the Crown Court. That approach takes account of the views of the Justice Committee and others on the Bill. In particular, it reflects the fact that such cases have been prosecuted to date in Northern Ireland in the Crown Court (which is the same position as England and Wales), the potential seriousness of the offence in terms of the consequences for victims and the fact that the issue of human trafficking is covered by an EU Directive (Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims).

Given that all cases have been prosecuted in the Crown Court to date, no additional costs are anticipated. The actual costs will depend on the number of cases prosecuted.

Policing Board: Injury on Duty Awards

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice when the Policing Board advised him that it had decided to recommence reviews into injury on duty awards.

(AQW 18996/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Policing Board advised the Department in their letter of 21 November 2011 that the Human Resources Committee had decided to recommence reviews of injury on duty awards.

Gerry McGeough: Release from Prison

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the full terms and conditions of Gerry McGeough's release from prison. (AQW 19012/11-15)

Mr Ford: Like all fixed term prisoners granted early release under Section 4 of the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998 Mr McGeough is being released on the licence conditions specified under Section 9(1) (a) and (b) of the Act which state:

- (a) that he does not support a specified organisation (within the meaning of section 3),
- (b) that he does not become concerned in the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism connected with the affairs of Northern Ireland.

National Crime Agency

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice to detail the consequences for Northern Ireland, in relation to the fight against organised crime, as a result of the failure of the Executive to agree to a Legislative Consent Motion to empower the National Crime Agency in this jurisdiction.

(AQW 19056/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Crime and Courts Bill, if enacted at Westminster, will establish a National Crime Agency (NCA) to replace, and build on, the role of the Serious Organised Crime Agency which currently works in Northern Ireland in support of the PSNI to tackle organised crime.

My request for a Legislative Consent Motion (LCM) was turned down by the Executive. I believe that the paper I presented was balanced. It included changes I had secured from the Home Secretary to reflect our local policing arrangements both before and after engagement with other Ministers. In the absence of an LCM the NCA will only have powers to operate in the non-devolved sphere within this jurisdiction. Its officers, therefore, will still have immigration and customs powers and will not be subject to local scrutiny. Unless steps are taken to address the gap left by the inability of the NCA to operate in the organised crime arena the law enforcement effort here will be significantly diminished in a number of respects.

The Department has started work with the Home Office, law enforcement agencies and others to urgently assess, and then address, the implications.

Department for Regional Development

Beechfield Estate, Bangor: Footpath

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development whether there are plans to complete the removal of paving slabs on footpaths that have yet to be resurfaced in the Beechfield Estate, Bangor.

(AQW 18366/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): My Department's Roads Service considers the footways within the Beechfield Estate, Bangor to be in a satisfactory condition. I understand none of the footways within the Beechfield Development, which was built within the last 20 years, were constructed with paving slabs.

Roads Service will continue to inspect the roads and footways within the Beechfield Estate, Bangor on a cyclical basis and when defects are identified that warrant intervention, appropriate remedial work will be undertaken in accordance with the timescales established in Roads Service's maintenance standards.

Car Parking

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the total revenue generated by car parking fines issued by parking attendants in the last 12 months; and (ii) what consideration has he given to introducing a scheme to enable monthly savings for those making regular use of town centre parking.

(AQW 18439/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Revenue received by my Department from Penalty Charge Notices for the 2011/12 financial year was £4.6million. The figure for 2012/13 is not yet available.

There are a limited number of monthly and quarterly season tickets made available at the majority of Roads Service's charged car parks. Season tickets offer a cost saving in comparison with daily charges. The number of season tickets offered for each car park will depend on the number of spaces and normal uptake of spaces within the car park, however, it should be noted a season ticket does not guarantee the availability of a parking space in a car park.

Towerview Primary School, Bangor: Road Safety

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what measures are planned to improve road safety in the vicinity of Towerview Primary School in Bangor.

(AQW 18453/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: 'School' warning signs are currently located on both approaches to Towerview Primary School. One is positioned on the footway at number 126 Towerview Crescent, and another positioned opposite number 80, which officials are in the process of relocating to an alternative location, slightly closer to the school. The school also has 'School Keep Clear' road markings at its entrance.

My Department's Roads Service has recently carried out an assessment of Towerview Crescent for possible provision of traffic calming measures. This considered various factors including:

- the likely speed and volume of traffic;
- the previous three years' personal injury collision statistics;
- environmental factors such as, the presence of schools, playgrounds, hospitals, clinics, shops, public buildings; and
- whether or not the road in question is used as a through route.

This indicated there are a number of other sites competing for inclusion in Eastern Division's traffic calming programme that are deemed to be of greater priority. Taking account of the funding currently available for such works, Roads Service therefore does not envisage being able to provide further traffic calming measures in this area at this time.

Northern Ireland Water: Union Flag

Mr Anderson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the arrangements for flying the Union Flag on premises occupied by Northern Ireland Water.

(AQW 18477/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Northern Ireland Water premises are not a government building for the purposes of the Flags Regulations (NI) 2000.

Water Bills: Appeals

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development, to detail the number of water bills issued in 2012 that were subject to an appeal, and how many resulted in a reduced bill.

(AQW 18493/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that 166,000 bills were issued to around 80,000 non-domestic customers during 2012. Of these customers, 14% queried their bills and as a consequence 2% of customers received a reduction.

Gortmerron Link Area, Dungannon: Adoption of Roads

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 11031/11-15, what progress has been made on the adoption of these roads since May 2012.

(AQW 18504/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I can advise the Member that the private street developments, referred to in AQW 11031/11-15, have been developed and marketed in seven separate phases and have seven separate Private Streets bonds. It is anticipated phases one, two, five and six will be adopted before the end of the 2013 calendar year.

In addition, the developer has secured Northern Ireland Water (NIW) certification of the storm and sewerage infrastructure on phase three, which can be adopted when the final road surface has been completed. A 50% bond reduction has already been granted in respect of this phase. Should the developer secure NIW certification in respect of phases four and seven and complete all outstanding works, Roads Service will finalise the adoption process in respect of these roads.

In the meantime, Roads Service will continue to liaise with the developer who, it is hoped, will continue to fulfil his legal obligations, in respect of the remaining Private Streets determinations.

Groomsport: Resurfacing Work

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline any resurfacing work that is planned for roads or pavements in Groomsport, over the next 12 months.

(AQW 18518/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would remind the Member that information on completed and proposed roads schemes for the current financial year can be found in Roads Service's Spring and Autumn Reports to Councils. These reports can be accessed from my Department's internet site at the following web address:

http://www.drdni.gov.uk/index/freedom_of_information/customer_information/cinformationtype-results.htm?signpost=Customer+information&informationType=Roads+Service+reports+to+councils

In addition, as the detailed budget for subsequent years has not yet been finalised, I am unable to provide details of future works programmes at this time.

Lennon v DRD

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total cost to the public purse of the case of Lennon v DRD.

(AQW 18532/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am not in a position to provide you with the total cost to the public purse of this case.

As regards the cost to the Department, the final legal bill has not yet been settled and the Department does not hold information on either the costs incurred by the Tribunal in respect of the case or the costs incurred by the Equality Commission in supporting Dr Lennon.

Rural Transport Schemes

Ms McGahan asked the Minister for Regional Development why rural transport schemes are not permitted to take patients to hospital appointments given the pressure on ambulance services.

(AQW 18652/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Services provided by the Rural Community Transport Partnerships are supported from the Rural Transport Fund (RTF). Each partnership provides services based on a specific geographical area in line with the aims of the RTF to facilitate transport for members of the Partnerships in rural areas. It is important to point out that vehicles available to the partnerships have to be available to within that geographic area to facilitate the needs of all members as far as possible.

Under the 'Dial a Lift' scheme the Partnerships have always been able to provide transport to local GP surgeries, dentists and local clinics. My Department agreed with the Partnerships in 2010 that they may provide transport to local hospitals for members who do not qualify for DHSSPS assistance with travel. This position remains unchanged.

This service should not be seen as a substitute for health funded transport, which is the statutory responsibility of the DHSSPS under the auspices of the Patient Care Service. The Patient Care Service (a tier of the NI Ambulance Service) provides non-emergency patient transport services across Northern Ireland.

I recognise the need for my department to interact with the DHSSPS on these important issues. A process has started at official level and it is hoped this will allow these issues to be progressed within statutory and budgetary constraints.

Rural Transport Schemes

Ms McGahan asked the Minister for Regional Development whether rural transport schemes are prohibited from operating across county boundaries.

(AQW 18653/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Services provided by the Rural Community Transport Partnerships are supported from the Rural Transport Fund (RTF). Each partnership provides services based on a specific geographical area in line with the aims of the RTF to facilitate transport for members of the Partnerships in specific rural areas. It is important to point out that vehicles have to be available within that geographic area to facilitate the needs of members. If a bus was used to transport members outside the area, then clearly that bus would not be available for use by other members for locally based activities.

The Partnerships do however work closely together and with Translink and if appropriate they can take members to locations where they can use public transport for their ongoing journey.

“Welcome to Northern Ireland” Signs

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail when a ‘Welcome to Northern Ireland’ sign will be erected at the border on the M1 from Dublin.

(AQW 18690/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The proposed ‘Welcome to Northern Ireland’ Sign will be erected on the A1 dual carriageway (Northbound) at the land frontier with the Republic of Ireland, during late February / early March 2013.

The main purpose of the sign is to advise drivers using this road that the national speed limit is in miles per hour and it will include the message ‘Welcome to Northern Ireland’.

Cycling Casualties

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Regional Development what action his Department is taking to reduce cycling casualties.

(AQW 18701/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department’s Roads Service is committed to providing safer roads for vulnerable road users, including cyclists and pedestrians, by utilising a range of measures, such as road safety engineering, traffic calming and enhancement of the pedestrian and cycling network. The overall objective is to maximise the resources it has available for cycle initiatives.

In the 10-year period, including this financial year, my Department will have invested almost £9 million in the provision of 200km of cycle lanes.

My Department also works closely with the Department of the Environment and the Police Service of Northern Ireland in the promotion of Road Safety to all road users through its Travelwise initiative. This initiative aims to increase the number of commuters who choose to cycle to work, and as part of its promotion of cycling, encourages all road users to consider the needs and safety of others.

In addition, my Department has designed a leaflet entitled ‘Sharing Space on the Road’ to encourage safe behaviour among road users. The leaflet sets out tips for motorists and cyclists on sharing the roads with others. The leaflet was distributed to 120,000 motorists with motor tax renewal forms in March of last year and has been made available at various government and local government locations as well as cycling outlets. A copy of the leaflet can be found online at http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/sharing_space_on_the_road.pdf or from Travelwise NI (telephone 0845 378 0908).

In recent years, cycling has benefited from capital investment, and the cycling infrastructure in Northern Ireland is well established. It remains my intention to continue to improve this network, in so far as available resources permit.

Cycle Counters: Electronic

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Regional Development if his Department will consider installing electronic cycle counters on key arterial routes.

(AQW 18702/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I can advise the Member that my Department’s Roads Service currently has 65 automatic cycle counters installed across the National Cycle Network. These cycle counters are generally installed on dedicated cycle paths, some of which are part of key arterial routes, for example, Hawthornden Way, Belfast. My Department’s Roads Service and Travelwise NI continue to work with third sector organisations such as Sustrans, Sport N.I and the N.I Cycling Forum alongside many other local groups to identify the need for further cycle counter sites.

Cyclists

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Regional Development how often the Roads Service audits the number of cyclists on major routes.

(AQW 18703/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: At present, my Department's Roads Service does not carry out audits of the number of cyclists on major routes. Every two years a Belfast City Centre Cordon Survey is undertaken by officials in Roads Service, to assist in monitoring performance against targets established in the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP) 2015. The purpose of this survey is to determine the modes of travel used by people, crossing a predefined city centre cordon, to travel into Belfast City Centre during the morning peak hour (08:00 to 09:00). The most recent cordon survey was completed in 2011.

The Travel Survey for Northern Ireland (TSNI) 2009-2011 provides information on how, over the region as a whole, people use different forms of transport, including bicycles, to meet their travel needs, as individuals or family groups. The TSNI also provides information to inform government policy, assist with setting objectives and monitor performance in relation to transport and travel in Northern Ireland, for example, in the Regional Transportation Strategy.

Railway Halt, Ballykelly

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has had, or plans to have, any meetings with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development regarding the provision of a Northern Ireland Railways halt at Ballykelly and the funding issues surrounding such a provision.

(AQW 18705/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My officials are in discussion with colleagues in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to consider the transport implications, including the possibility of a railway halt, of the proposal to relocate that department's headquarters at Ballykelly.

There is no provision in my Department's budget for a rail halt. Critical to any business case for funding for such a halt will be commitments to future development in the area and projections of passenger demand arising from that development.

I note that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has not yet secured the necessary budget and other approvals for its relocation project.

Gritting

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail which councils have agreed a memorandum of understanding with his Department in relation to shared gritting arrangements on footways and pedestrian areas.

(AQW 18709/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has confirmed that sixteen Councils have signed up to agreements for the removal of ice and snow from Town Centre Footways during prolonged periods of severe wintry weather. These agreements range from formal agreements to more flexible arrangements contained in an exchange of letters between the two parties. All are based on the same fundamental principles and each contains the basic requirement of an agreed schedule of footways to be treated by the Council, the amount of salt to be provided by Roads Service and salt delivery arrangements.

The sixteen Councils that have signed up to agreements are:

Craigavon, Carrickfergus, North Down, Cookstown, Derry, Larne, Moyle, Newtownabbey, Armagh, Fermanagh, Magherafelt, Dungannon, Ballymena, Belfast City, Lisburn, Limavady.

In addition, Banbridge and Down Councils have exchanged letters setting out local arrangements whilst Strabane, Newry & Mourne and Omagh Councils have indicated they would be willing to assist Roads Service on an ad-hoc basis.

Roads Service officials are continuing to engage with the remaining Councils to ascertain if they would be willing to enter into agreements for the removal of ice and snow from Town Centre footways during prolonged severe wintry conditions.

Civil Servants: Salary Sacrifice Scheme

Mr Ó hOisín asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what arrangements are being put in place for civil servants to participate in a salary sacrifice scheme to pay reduced rates for bus and train journeys, to encourage greater commuter access.

(AQW 18726/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: TaxSmart Translink's annual bus travel card available through an employer salary sacrifice scheme was introduced to the Northern Ireland Civil Service in June 2012 to allow staff the opportunity to participate in the scheme effectively paying reduced rates for bus journeys. This is a HMRC tax scheme and does not include rail travel. This scheme was rolled out to all Northern Ireland Civil Service Department's on a phased basis up to October 2012. Figures provided by Translink show 640 Active Cards for Civil Servants already participating in the scheme at 22 January 2013. Under TaxSmart staff save money on Income Tax and National Insurance contributions by paying for bus travel directly from their salary and receiving tax incentives. Depending on their personal circumstances they can save 31% on annual bus travel.

This discount is on top of savings already available to Translink customers who purchase Translink annual travel cards as opposed to paying weekly or daily fares. This form of discount is available for bus and rail users.

Causeway Hospital: Community Transport

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps are being taken to ensure that patients and visitors arriving at the Causeway Hospital by Community Transport can be facilitated via a stop directly at the hospital.

(AQW 18727/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Patients and visitors arriving at the Causeway Hospital by Community Transport are able to be left off and picked up at the main doors of the hospital. They do not need to make use of the Translink bus stop which is already in place at the hospital.

Translink have also indicated a willingness to consider its existing bus services to facilitate stopping at the Hospital where this does not already happen. Specifically Service 178 Coleraine - Ballymoney – Ballycastle.

Northern Ireland Water: Water Leaks

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development how much NI Water has spent repairing water leaks over the last three years.

(AQW 18833/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that its expenditure over the past three financial years on repairing broken, leaking or burst water pipes which are part of the public water infrastructure is as follows:

2009/10	£6.8 million
2010/11	£6.4 million
2011/12	£6.3 million

Donaghadee Bus Depot

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what plans Translink has for Donaghadee bus depot.

(AQW 18951/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink has not specified to the Department any new plans for the bus facility at Donaghadee. I understand that if any changes were to be made, legislation requires Translink to consult with employees. The Department will also expect to be informed and would expect local consultations to take place.

Balmoral Show

Mrs Hale asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the plans for the provision of access roads to the Maze/Long Kesh site during and after the Balmoral show in May 2013.

(AQW 19103/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Transport Management Plan submitted as part of the planning permission application to create a showground facility at the former Maze/Long Kesh prison site sets out the proposed travel arrangements for the relocated Balmoral Show in May 2013.

Travel by car to the show grounds is proposed by using three access routes:

- From Greater Belfast and the east via M1, Junction 8 (Sprucefield), Hillsborough Road and Blaris Road;
- From the south via A1 and Harry's Road; and
- From the west via M1, Junction 9 (Moira) and A3, Moira Road.

Travel by public transport is proposed via a shuttle bus service to and from Lisburn Train Station.

In addition, the Transport Management Plan requires the Royal Agricultural Society (RUAS) to provide advanced directional signage on all main routes for the duration of the show.

A Development Corporation has been established to scrutinise and ratify future development within the overall site. The Development Corporation is working on longer term proposals for enhanced access provision, as further development progresses.

Department for Social Development

Parking Relaxations

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Social Development whether he has assessed the impact of the Department for Regional Development's parking relaxations on town centre trading over the Christmas period.

(AQW 18257/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): On 5 November 2012, The Minister for Regional Development announced a package of measures aimed at providing assistance to shoppers and traders in the run up to Christmas. The measures were mainly in relation to Park and Ride services in Belfast, Lisburn, Newry and Londonderry and public transport provisions, but did not include any measures in relation to parking restrictions in city and town centres.

The Department for Regional Development, who are responsible for the evaluation of the measures, have advised that initial indications suggest that these were successful with, for example, the Metro £2 Saturday offer leading to significant increases in patronage on Metro services, increased usage of park and ride facilities, especially in Belfast on the Saturdays leading up to Christmas, and increased passenger numbers on the Belfast to Coleraine railway line, where extra trains had been put on.

Homelessness: Under-16s

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development how many children under the age of 16 are in temporary accommodation because of homelessness.

(AQW 18283/11-15)

Mr McCausland: It should be noted that temporary accommodation is not defined in legislation. However, legislation requires the Housing Executive to ensure that temporary accommodation (such as Housing Executive Hostels or Voluntary Hostels or accommodation in the Private Rented sector) is made available to applicants who are deemed to be homeless.

The Housing Executive advised that it does not accept homelessness applications from children under the age of 16 years of age. Accordingly, no-one under 16 years old has been awarded Full Duty Applicant status (FDA). In the event that a young person under 16 years of age approaches the Housing Executive contact is made with the local Social Services.

However, the Housing Executive has advised that, at 14 January 2013, there were 934 households with children who are living in temporary accommodation due to homelessness as follows: -

- 115 - Housing Executive Hostels
- 144 - Voluntary Sector Hostels
- 675 - Private Sector

Suicide Prevention

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development how much money his Department has invested in preventing suicides in each of the past three years.

(AQW 18346/11-15)

Mr McCausland: While my Department does not fund projects which deal solely with suicide prevention, it does support through its Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund a variety of projects and programmes that address a range of mental health and well-being matters. These projects and programmes cut across a range of social and economic determinants and provide services that address the complex issues surrounding suicide. It is therefore difficult to place a monetary value specifically on preventing suicides.

On a practical level, my Department contributes to the security coverage on the Peace Bridge in Londonderry which can help mitigate against the potential incidences of suicide.

Double Glazing Replacement Schemes

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development when the double glazing replacement schemes are scheduled to take place in North Antrim.

(AQW 18360/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not routinely collate information by Parliamentary Constituency. However, the Housing Executive's District Office in Ballymoney, Ballymena and Ballycastle cover the North Antrim area.

In Ballymoney a double glazing scheme for 184 properties has just completed. A second scheme for 104 properties across the Ballymoney District Office area is due to go on site in October 2013.

In Ballymena, two double glazing schemes are programmed: Phase one for 215 properties is scheduled to start in late January 2013; and Phase two for 308 properties is scheduled to start in January 2014.

In Ballycastle, a double glazing scheme for 87 properties is scheduled to start in March 2013.

The Housing Executive advises that the start dates are provisional at this stage.

Civil Servants: Unrest

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of Civil Servants from his Department who have left work early since 3 December 2012 due to the civil unrest associated with the flag protests; and (ii) the associated financial cost to his departmental budget.

(AQW 18463/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In the Department for Social Development the flexible working time arrangements permit staff to leave work at the end of 'core' working time which may be either 3.30pm or 4pm depending on the business area. Generally, these arrangements are sufficient for any member of staff with concerns about any unrest associated with the flag protests, to leave earlier than is their norm. Under these arrangements there is no associated cost to the Departmental budget.

However, there has been a limited number of staff with specific concerns who were allowed by management to leave work early and given credit for the time in question. Details of staff numbers and the associated financial cost are set out in the table below.

Number of staff who left work early since 3 December 2012	Associated financial cost to the Departmental budget
148	*£1801.21

The figures provided are up to and including 18 January 2013.

* This figure is based on average salary costs for the grades of the staff in question. Part of the cost is funded through DSD's contract with the Department for Work & Pensions.

Temporary Accommodation: Foyle Constituency

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development how many people in the Foyle constituency are registered as living in temporary accommodation.

(AQW 18471/11-15)

Mr McCausland: It should be noted that temporary accommodation is not defined in legislation. However, legislation requires the Housing Executive to ensure that temporary accommodation (such as Housing Executive Hostels or Voluntary Hostels or accommodation in the Private Rented sector) is made available to applicants who are deemed to be homeless.

The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not routinely collate information by Parliamentary constituency.

The Housing Executive has advised that at 14 January 2013 they had placed 311 households in temporary accommodation in response to their homelessness duties across their Londonderry District office areas as follows:

Waterloo	136 households
Waterside	57 households
Collon Terrace	118 households

Housing Executive: Occupational Therapists

Mr I McCrea asked Minister for Social Development whether the Housing Executive has a statutory obligation to take into consideration and carry out recommendations from Occupational Therapists when making an offer of housing.

(AQW 18485/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that when making an offer of housing there is currently no statutory obligation to take into consideration and carry out recommendations from Occupational Therapists. In general, the involvement of Occupational Therapists is a matter of good practice to help ensure that suitable and appropriate housing is identified where there are complex needs and where a wide range of housing options such as housing transfer, new build or housing adaptations are being considered.

Housing plays a central role in maintaining the independence of people with a disability enabling them to live safely and independently within their own homes.

The Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 relates specifically to co-operation between statutory agencies and in particular between the Health and Social Care Boards and Trusts and the Housing Executive.

Article 67: Co-operation between Health and Social Services Boards and District Councils "In exercising their respective functions, Health and Social Care Boards, HSC Trusts, Special Agencies, District Councils, Education and Library Boards, and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive shall co-operate with one another in order to secure and advance the health and social welfare of the people of Northern Ireland".

Within the legislation, Health & Social Care Boards and Trusts have statutory responsibility for securing the assessment of the health and social care needs of an individual referred to them. Occupational Therapists are nominated on behalf of the Health & Social Care Trusts to carry out assessments in order to determine the needs of disabled people, including their housing need.

Housing Retrofit Scheme

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development whether he intends to conduct an economic appraisal of the proposals for a housing retrofit scheme in the report entitled Policy Options for Investment in Infrastructure in Northern Ireland published by the Nevin Economic Research Institute.

(AQW 18492/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Nevin Economic Research Institute report has wide ranging proposals for investment in infrastructure with one of the proposals in the area of energy efficiency being an energy retro fitting- fitting scheme similar to that of the Green Deal in the UK.

Although the proposal has some merit there is still concern about how successful the Green Deal will be in the UK and if it will be taken up consumers. I think it would be premature at this time to carry out an economic appraisal on their proposal until more is known about how Green Deal will operate in practice.

Currently my Department through its Warm Homes Schemes offers a range of insulation measures to eligible householders. The Housing Executive also has a retrofitting programme which delivers energy efficiency improvements including heating and insulation. I also launched the boiler replacement scheme which will assist 16,000 householders replace their old inefficient boiler with a new boiler that can be 30% more efficient. The area based pilot also offers heating and insulation using a more targeted approach to those households who are in the most fuel poverty. I think that these energy efficiency measures are consistent with what is suggested in the report.

Landlords: Prosecutions

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development how many landlords were prosecuted for failure to provide rent books to their tenants in the private rented sector, in each of the last three years; and what was the average level of fine imposed during this period for each council area.

(AQW 18547/11-15)

Mr McCausland: There has been one landlord prosecuted and 50 warning letters issued to landlords for failure to provide a rent book to their tenant during the last 3 year period (2010-2012). The landlord who was prosecuted received a £250 fine. Rather than prosecute for not providing a rent book, Environmental Health Officers work with landlords in the private rented sector educating and making them aware of their landlord responsibilities. Normally once landlords are made aware of the need to provide a rent book, or after the issue of a warning letter, they do so preventing the need to take any further action.

The introduction of Landlord Registration (scheduled for summer this year) will allow councils to fulfil their statutory role more effectively by targeting their activity more appropriately and identifying landlords who do not comply with the law. It will be a valuable tool in enforcing standards and improving tenancy management within the sector.

Social and Affordable Homes

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many of the target 1825 new social and affordable homes will be built in North Down.

(AQW 18576/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The 2012/13 Social Housing Development Programme includes three schemes for 45 units, which are due to start on site in the current financial year, in the North Down constituency. The schemes are as follows:

- 4 General needs units at South Circular Road, Bangor
- 37 General needs units at West Green, Holywood
- 4 Supported Housing units at Carmen Lane, Bangor

Affordable homes are currently delivered through the co-ownership scheme with the areas in which properties are purchased being determined by the demands of applicants to the scheme. There have been 59 homes delivered through the co-ownership scheme in the North Down area in this financial year to date.

Strand Area, Holywood: Maintenance Schemes

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what further maintenance schemes are planned for the Strand area of Holywood.

(AQW 18586/11-15)

Mr McCausland: An External Cyclical Maintenance Scheme for all 72 Housing Executive properties in the Strand area of Holywood is planned to start in 2014/15.

Small Pockets of Deprivation: Funding

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development what arrangements have been made for the continuation of Small Pockets of Deprivation funding beyond the end of this financial year.

(AQW 18593/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Funding for the Small Pockets of Deprivation programme has been included in the Department's Urban Regeneration baseline budget for the remaining two years of the current Comprehensive Spending Review period.

Kitchen Schemes: Newtownards

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of properties that will benefit from the new kitchen scheme in the Glen Estate, Newtownards; (ii) the timescale for the project; and (iii) the monetary value of the scheme. (AQW 18595/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The kitchen scheme for the Glen Estate, Newtownards will involve works to 109 properties. The scheme is scheduled to start on the 4 February 2013 and has an estimated duration of approximately five months. The estimated cost of the scheme is £471,000.

Neighbourhood Renewal Area

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the budget remaining in this financial year for each Neighbourhood Renewal Area. (AQW 18599/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The budget available through the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund (NRIF) for the financial year 2012/2013 has been fully allocated. Consequently there is no NRIF remaining available to Neighbourhood Renewal Areas for this financial year.

Social Housing Schemes: Upper Bann

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development how many new build social housing schemes in the Upper Bann constituency have received the necessary statutory approvals and are awaiting funding before proceeding. (AQW 18600/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that they are not aware of any social housing schemes in the Upper Bann constituency which are awaiting Housing Association Grant funding before proceeding.

Housing Stock Levels: Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the current housing stock levels in Carrickfergus. (AQW 18613/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that they currently have 1,904 social housing units in Carrickfergus. Housing Associations have advised that they have 532 units of social housing units in Carrickfergus also.

Home Insulation

Mr I McCreagh asked the Minister for Social Development what schemes are available for people who do not receive a qualifying benefit to insulate their homes. (AQW 18617/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department continues to deliver the Warm Homes Schemes which is targeted at vulnerable householders on low income who have a qualifying benefit. The Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme (NISEP) allocates 80% of its annual funding at energy efficiency schemes for priority (vulnerable) customers. The Programme aims to target priority customers who do not qualify for Government energy efficiency or fuel poverty schemes like the Warm Homes Scheme. Priority customers are defined as those on low incomes and, whilst the exact vulnerability criteria may vary between individual schemes, receipt of benefits is not a qualifying criterion for any NISEP scheme.

NISEP funding has been allocated to four home insulation (cavity wall and loft) only schemes. Details of the individual schemes are as follows:

- Free Insulation – a fully funded scheme providing loft and/or cavity wall insulation for priority customers;
- Cosy Homes Insulation - a part funded scheme providing loft and/or cavity wall insulation for housing association properties (balance of cost paid by Housing Association not the tenant);
- NIHE Loft Top Ups - a part funded scheme providing top-ups (i.e. up to 270mm, the current standard) to loft insulation in Housing Executive properties (balance of cost paid by NIHE not the tenant);
- Energy Saver II - providing cash back of £150 for loft and/or £150 for cavity wall insulation for householders who do not qualify for priority schemes.

Further funding has been provided to domestic schemes which provide whole house solutions to priority (vulnerable) customers i.e. a full package of heating system, cavity wall and loft insulation and hot water cylinder jacket. The individual schemes are as follows:

- Toasty Homes Plus - a fully funded scheme providing whole house solutions for priority customers on the gas network (Firmus energy network);

- Energy saver Homes - a fully funded scheme providing whole house solutions for priority customers;
- Cosy Homes - a part funded scheme providing whole house solutions for housing association properties (balance of cost paid by Housing Association not the tenant);
- Snug Plus - a part funded scheme providing whole house solutions for priority customers on the gas network (Phoenix network);
- Toasty Homes - a part funded scheme providing whole house solutions for priority customers on the gas network (Firmus energy network);
- Discounted Heating and Insulation – a part funded scheme providing whole house solutions for priority customers;
- Snug Plus Oil - a part funded scheme providing whole house solutions for priority customers with old or broken oil boilers on the gas network (Phoenix network).

People with Disabilities: Poverty

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development (i) how many people with disabilities, who are in receipt of benefits, are currently living in poverty; (ii) what impact Welfare Reform will have on this number; and (iii) how he is ensuring that no person with a disability, who cannot work as a result of their disability, is living in poverty.

(AQW 18647/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department does not hold information on how many people with disabilities, who are in receipt of benefits, are currently living in poverty.

Welfare Reform will bring about a number of changes to existing benefits and the way they are administered. Whilst the proposed changes will not have a disproportionate impact on people with disabilities specifically, my Department is currently considering the impact of the changes on all vulnerable groups in order to put in place the appropriate support mechanisms moving forward.

An Executive Sub Committee has been set up to consider all the proposals under Welfare Reform and to develop an Executive response to mitigate any negative impacts and achieve long term benefits for the people of Northern Ireland.

The Social Security Agency continues to actively engage with voluntary sector organisations and customer representative groups on a regular basis to help shape and influence how Welfare Reform is implemented in Northern Ireland to best meet the needs of local people, including those with disabilities.

Housing Associations

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development how the accountability structure will work in the new Housing Associations, specifically how tenants will be able to hold the new associations to account.

(AQW 18729/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The design of the proposed new housing structures and governance arrangements are at an early stage. Currently, there are a number of key measures undertaken by the Department to hold Housing Associations to account. A rolling programme of Inspections are carried out by my Department's Regulation and Inspection Unit to determine individual Housing Associations' compliance of the Housing Associations Guide and ongoing monitoring of Board minutes and relevant financial information.

I have also proposed that there should be a significant enhancement of the Department's Regulation and Inspection unit and function. This will be developed through a detailed programme of projects and key stakeholders will be consulted throughout the process. The proposed new landlord(s) would fall under this enhanced regulation and inspection regime which would regulate social housing providers within the Housing Association movement.

In relation to tenants, there will be formal rights of redress and systems for tenants to raise issues. Indeed this is a feature of both current NIHE processes and a requirement for Housing Associations.

Housing Executive/Social Security Agency: Underspend

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the reasons for the (i) £7 million underspend by the Housing Executive; and (ii) £9.2 million underspend within the Social Security Agency, that were announced in the January Monitoring Round statement.

(AQW 18777/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The £7m identified by the Housing Executive in the monitoring round was made up of £1m in the Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings category (arising from additional receipts achieved); £2.5m from deferral of a Voluntary Early Release scheme; and £3.5m from additional efficiencies achieved from reduced maintenance contract costs. It is worth noting that the Housing Executive has in fact identified savings of £8.5m this year. It has therefore been able to reallocate and spend £5m of this by bringing forward a significant number of additional kitchen and heating system installations.

The £9.2m reduced requirement identified in the monitoring round by the Agency comprised: £4.4m from reduced IT costs payable to the Department of Work & Pensions for the main benefit systems; £2.6m relating to the treatment of historic VAT payments; and £2.2m from easements in other areas. The passage of the Welfare Reform Bill and impact on Welfare Reform

and modernisation-related projects made up the bulk of the £4.4m figure. The Agency was only able to confirm a range of IT costs and a change in the VAT treatment of some supplier costs late in the year. The easements in other areas included lower charges on the ATOS Medical Support Services contract; lower costs arising from staff turnover and vacancies; and lower appeal tribunal costs than previously projected.

The Department monitors its spending throughout the financial year and works closely with the Department of Finance and Personnel to highlight any potential over or under spends. In commenting on the scale of the above surrenders in the monitoring round, the Finance Minister recognised that some of the issues were outside my Department's control.

Negative Equity

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister for Social Development, in light of the decision of the Lands Tribunal on 10 January 2013, what action he intends to take to provide assistance to home-owners who are in negative equity.
(AQW 18852/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I have instructed my officials to re-examine the policy to support owner-occupiers in re-development areas to determine if this can be amended to take account of the issue of negative equity. However, this will require some detailed legal analysis and consultation with my Ministerial colleagues in the NI Executive.

Personal Independence Payment: Applications

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development whether claimants currently receiving the severe disability premium will be subject to medical assessments for Personal Independence Payment applications.
(AQW 19032/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Subject to approval by the Northern Ireland Assembly, all existing Disability Living Allowance working age claimants (16 – 64), including those in receipt of Severe Disability Premium, will be reassessed for Personal Independence Payment.

Green Deal Loan Scheme

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development whether he plans to introduce a Green Deal Loan scheme similar to that which has been announced in England and Wales.
(AQW 19041/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Responsibility for legislation to introduce any Green Deal model in Northern Ireland may become the responsibility of DETI, however I will be closely monitoring the introduction of the scheme to ascertain how successful it will be to help householders improve the energy efficiency of their homes.

Currently my Department through its Warm Homes Schemes offers a range of insulation measures to eligible householders. The Housing Executive also has a retrofitting programme which delivers energy efficiency improvements including heating and insulation. I also launched the boiler replacement scheme which will assist 16,000 householders replace their old inefficient boiler with a new boiler that can be 30% more efficient. The area based pilot also offers heating and insulation using a more targeted approach to those households who are in the most fuel poverty.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Stationery

Mr Wells asked the Assembly Commission what impact the £1,000 per annum limit has had on the level of demand for prepaid envelopes and stationery by Members.
(AQW 18380/11-15)

Mr P Ramsey (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The total expenditure by Members on Prepaid envelopes and Stationery items (IT Consumables included) in 2011/12 (12 months) was £228,481.60*.

The total expenditure by Members on these items in the period April-December 2012 was £40,451*. It is anticipated that expenditure for the full financial year will be in the region of £54,000*.

On this basis the expenditure will have reduced in 2012/13 to 23.6% of the previous financial year.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 8 February 2013

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Irish Presidency European Council

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to explain how, during the Irish Presidency of the European Council, it is anticipated that joint participation by Northern Ireland Executive Ministers at EU Presidency-related events would operate.

(AQW 16456/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The Irish Government will be hosting 'informal council' meetings during the EU Presidency on a range of issues that are impacted by EU policy which will be attended by Ministers and representatives from various EU governments.

The Irish Government has indicated that it is willing to invite Executive Ministers to those that are relevant to their portfolios. Possible attendance and participation at such meetings may provide our Ministers with the opportunity to access key European decision-makers that otherwise would not be the case.

Decisions whether to attend or participate in such events will be a matter for individual Ministers and departments.

China: Human Rights

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will raise the issue of human rights during their trade mission to the People's Republic of China; and whether in the interests of transparency and accountability, an independent observer or activist will accompany them during discussions relating to, or encompassing, Human Rights.

(AQW 16531/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We did not bring an independent observer or activist with us. We continue to take advice regarding raising human rights issues and will do so if or when appropriate.

USA and China Trips

Mr Copeland asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the investment resulting from the recent trips to the U.S.A. and China.

(AQW 16739/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Economic growth is at the heart of the Executive's Programme for Government and inward investment plays a key role in this. The Programme for Government sets an ambitious growth target of a 60% increase in exports to emerging economies, including China.

Securing new inward investment projects can take a considerable length of lead-in time and many meetings are of such a commercially sensitive nature that we are unable to publicly declare them. However, we have already seen some positive impacts of our two most recent trips to the USA and Canada in September 2011 and March 2012. Our attendance, as keynote speakers, at a major creative industries promotional event at Sony studios in Los Angeles further consolidated relationships with Universal Studios and HBO, two of the most significant investors in the Paint Hall and the newly opened Titanic Studios in Belfast.

We met with Jeff Smisek, CEO of United Continental Airlines and his senior Board, and directly helped to address their concerns over UK Air Passenger Duty in Belfast. We secured the devolution of APD to the Assembly which will maintain the long-term commitment of UCA to its hugely important transatlantic flight, the only direct route from Belfast to the US.

Our meetings with the top management team of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange and Senior Executives of Cowan International Ltd culminated in both companies committing significant investment packages in Northern Ireland.

In Canada we continued to develop the longstanding relationship with Bombardier when we met with senior Bombardier Corporate Office management. We were given an insightful demonstration on how the C Series wings, produced in Belfast,

are being used in the overall construction of the aircraft. Bombardier remains our largest manufacturer and a major driver in the local economy, employing in excess of some 6,000 people.

We have just participated in our first trade mission to China, where we saw at first hand Invest NI's efforts to help local companies grow and develop their export sales in this massive market. Our involvement reinforced the message that we are pro-business and committed to growing the economy. We are optimistic that the initial contacts made at the Food Exhibition in Shanghai's New Expo Centre and at the Invest NI receptions in Shanghai and Hong Kong will result in real and tangible business for local companies.

As we go forward, developing our international relations can only help drive forward our export sales and the Executive is fully committed to proactively supporting our businesses to succeed on the international stage.

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy

Mr Byrne asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy. (AQO 2968/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We remain committed to building a united and shared community by continuing to improve good relations across our society. Bringing forward a robust good relations strategy with a clear framework for action will be a critical part of achieving our vision of a better future for everyone.

We recognise the importance of translating the Executive's commitment into clear, meaningful action. Work is ongoing and a Strategy will be published on completion of discussions between parties.

China: Visit

Mr Hazzard asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their recent visit to China. (AQO 2973/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Following the visit of Madam Liu to Northern Ireland in April, we were invited to visit China to further strengthen relationships in trade, investment, tourism and university links.

Focusing on high growth markets is an integral part of the Executive's strategy to reinvigorate the Northern Ireland economy. China, as the second largest economy in the world, offers huge potential for local businesses. The 37 organisations that made up the trade mission on the visit were very positive about the contacts they made and the potential for future collaboration with Chinese partners.

During the visit we announced orders worth £1 million for Carrickfergus company Yelo who design and manufacture automated test equipment for the electronics market. We also had the opportunity to meet with Texthelp from Antrim and the Chinese Education Alliance to witness the signing of a major commercial contract between the two organisations. We are confident that this will lead to further orders for Texthelp in China. We also met with local businesses at the Food Hotel China Exhibition which is an established platform for international buyers and sellers to do business in the China market.

Another important area for economic potential is in education and our visit included a visit to Shanghai Jiaotong University, one of China's top five universities which has a strategic alliance with Queen's University Belfast. We were shown joint laboratories, established by the two universities and heard about the £2.3 million Science Bridge Project. This collaboration helps strengthen research links and technology transfer in the field of sustainable energy and the built environment and will lead to the development of many more commercial opportunities in the future.

In Hong Kong we met with John Tsang, the Financial Secretary of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, and discussed a number of initiatives for opening up economic opportunities with the Hong Kong Government. We also attended an event hosted by Northern Irish Connections and met with over 100 of our diaspora who are supportive of helping us in our efforts in growing our economy in international markets. You will be aware of the positive news story from Wrightbus and we had the opportunity to meet with the Directors of one of its key customers, the Kowloon Bus Company. This provided us with the opportunity to support the company's business growth in Hong Kong.

On Saturday we accepted an invitation to the Hong Kong Open to meet with a number of tour organisations and to promote our golf and tourism products. Our visit was very positively received and we will be maintaining contact with those organisations. We were also able to use the event to arrange meetings with some of the Chief Executives of Asia's leading financial and investment organisations. These were very useful contacts and our officials will be meeting with colleagues in DETI to discuss how we build on this relationship.

To fully evaluate the success of our visit will take time but initial feedback would indicate that it was warmly received by local businesses and by the Chinese business community.

China: Trade Mission

Mr Givan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of investment opportunities, following the trade mission to China. (AQO 2974/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We visited Shanghai and Hong Kong last November following invitations from senior Chinese Government Ministers. The invitation was to help strengthen government relations with China, particularly in economic development, education research and technology.

During our visit we met with diplomatic representatives, business people and Diaspora who all stressed the tremendous economic benefits that exist for local businesses in China.

We led a trade mission of over thirty businesses, and the immediate feedback has been very positive. This was a unique opportunity for local businesses to build relationships, create partnerships and showcase what we have to offer. During the visit we announced orders worth £1 million for Carrickfergus company Yelo who design and manufacture automated test equipment for the electronics market. We facilitated the signing of an agreement between Texthelp from Co Antrim and the China Education Alliance. Texthelp designs and supplies literacy software for those with literacy difficulties, dyslexia, mild visual impairments or where English is a second language.

The Executive is committed to developing strong trade links with China and is ready to work alongside local companies to help them harness the very real business opportunities that are developing in one of the world's most dynamic markets.

China: Visit

Mr Nesbitt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) who else attended their recent visit to China alongside the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development, including staff and officials; (ii) what accommodation they used; (iii) what travel class was used; and (iv) to detail the cost of the trip broken down by (a) travel; (b) accommodation; and (c) other expenses.

(AQW 17445/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The trade mission to China was the first government led visit following invitations from Madame Liu Yandong and the now President Xi Jinping. The mission focused on establishing and maintaining economic contacts and partnerships and also included elements of education, research and agriculture. Ministers were supported by officials necessary to facilitate a successful visit, which included staff from Invest NI.

Also participating in the trade mission were representatives from some 40 businesses and organisations such as the CBI and Queen's University, Belfast.

The full costs of the visit are not yet available.

China: Visit

Mr Nesbitt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when they became aware of the clash between their visit to China and the 18th national congress of the Communist Party of China, which meant that the country's top political representatives were in Beijing whilst the delegation from Northern Ireland was in Shanghai and Hong Kong.

(AQW 17446/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Our original schedule included a series of political meetings in Beijing at the invitation of the Chinese Government. Once the date of the National Congress was confirmed, the Government had to postpone these meetings at a relatively late stage.

The businesses travelling on the parallel trade mission to China, along with Invest NI and DETI, presented compelling justification for us to travel and support the trade mission's objectives, despite the schedule of the Congress causing the postponement of the political element of the visit.

Subsequently, many of the businesses attending have indicated that our attendance was both necessary and useful in achieving their objectives.

China: Visit

Mr Nesbitt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) whether and when they will be making any return visit to China; (ii) what is the intention of a further visit; and (iii) who they would hope to meet during any further visit that they did not have an opportunity meet on the recent visit.

(AQW 17448/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Our initial visit to China had a focus on trade, business and investment. We were aware of the scheduling of the people's congress; however the business community, along with Invest NI and DETI, remained keen for us to travel and support the trade mission.

Many of the businesses on the trip have indicated subsequently that our attendance was both necessary and useful. Having visited Shanghai and Hong Kong with a trade and investment focus, our intention is to return later this year for a series of political and investment engagements in Beijing.

We have been strongly advised that continuous engagement of this nature is required when building relationships and links with China.

China: Visit

Mr Nesbitt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for the itinerary of their recent visit to China.
(AQW 17449/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Information on the various meetings and events we attended during our recent visit to China is a matter of public record.

In Shanghai we visited the joint Queen's University and Shanghai Jiao Tong University Science Labs where we were briefed on developing projects there that could lead to commercialisation and provision of social care. We met with the University management regarding the potential for further collaboration and joint ventures.

We held discussions with a range of business and trade development organisations which, for commercial reasons, we are unable to elaborate on.

We visited the Food Hotel China Exhibition where we met with all the local exhibitors and hosted a "Meet the Buyer" evening reception during which we had the opportunity to meet local businesses and their potential Chinese partners.

We also met with the United Kingdom and Irish Consul Generals in Shanghai and Hong Kong and with United Kingdom Trade and Investment and Enterprise Ireland.

In Hong Kong we met with the Government's Secretary for Finance, and a number of potential initiatives were identified that we will be discussing with the Minister of Enterprise Trade and Investment, Arlene Foster, over the coming weeks. We attended the NI Connections event in Hong Kong which attracted over 100 people with a local connection. We look forward to this network of people and businesses working for the benefit of our local economy over the coming months and years.

As part of our objective to promote the local economy, we followed up on the success of the Irish Open by meeting with the European Golf Tour decision-makers and the organisers, as well as the organisers of the Hong Kong Open.

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy

Mr Givan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the engagement of political parties on the development of the Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy.
(AQO 3000/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Working Group has substantively completed its work and we have received the draft document. We are seeking to engage with Party Leaders with a view to publishing the Strategy as soon as possible.

The Strategy will provide a clear framework in support of our vision to improve good relations and build a better future for all.

Community Relations Projects

Mr Sheehan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what was the total funding allocated to community relations projects in 2012.
(AQO 3112/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: OFMDFM currently supports community relations activity through a number of programmes including Contested Spaces, Summer Interventions, District Council Good Relations, Central Good Relations, North Belfast Strategic Good Relations and the Community Relations Council.

In this financial year to date, over £10m has been allocated to community relations projects.

Irish Presidency European Union

Mr Rogers asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their proposed involvement during the Irish Presidency of the European Union.
(AQO 3116/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We last updated Members on our involvement with the Irish Government during its Presidency of the Council of the European Union in November of last year. Since then, the Irish Government has finalised its detailed programme and priorities for its Presidency with a particular emphasis on stability, jobs and growth.

The focus of this Presidency will be to drive recovery in Europe and on securing agreement, including with the European Parliament on a comprehensive programme of policy and legislation. This will include advancing and concluding negotiations on the 67 or so regulations, including those covering Common Agricultural Policy Reform and Cohesion Policy which would follow an agreement on the Multi-Annual Financial Framework for the period 2014 to 2020.

Junior Ministers used the opportunity during their visit to Brussels in December to raise our interests in many of these issues with the Head of the Irish Permanent Representation in Brussels. We also had the opportunity to receive an update on the progress of the Presidency from the Ambassador when we met him in Brussels on 31 January.

Final decisions, of course, do not rest with the Irish Government whose job it is to broker agreement between the Council and the European Parliament. For that reason, we also met with the President of the Parliament, Martin Schultz, with a view to promoting our interests during the Presidency.

Junior Ministers attended a Presidency Council Informal in Dublin on 20 and 21 January. We understand that invitations to attend Presidency events have been and will be extended to other Executive Ministers as the Presidency progresses. Again, this will give Executive colleagues a similar opportunity to share perspectives and promote our interests internationally.

Civil Servants: Unrest

Mr Dickson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the number of Civil Servants from their Department who have left work early since 3 December 2012 due to the civil unrest associated with the flag protests; and (ii) the associated financial cost to their departmental budget.

(AQW 18462/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Civil servants working in OFMDFM have flexible working arrangements that provide for flexitime to be utilised from 4pm. We do not hold central records of how many civil servants utilised this flexible arrangement due to civil unrest. There is no associated financial cost to the Departmental budget.

Childcare Strategy

Mr Weir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the implementation of a childcare strategy; and how the strategy will be rolled out.

(AQW 18678/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: A public consultation on the proposed Childcare Strategy was launched on 5 December 2012. The consultation process will run until 5 March 2013. All comments received during the consultation process, and the findings of research being carried out in parallel, will then be reviewed to inform the detail of the Strategy, including the way in which it will be delivered.

Childcare Funding

Mr Weir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much funding for childcare is ringfenced within their current departmental budget.

(AQW 18679/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Executive Childcare Fund has ringfenced £12 million for actions to develop the Childcare Strategy. The Fund will operate until 2014/15.

Maritime Museum, Derry

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AWQ17800/11-15, for an update on the establishment of a Maritime Museum in Derry, including (i) funding requirements for the project; (ii) funding secured for the project; and (iii) an opening date for the Museum.

(AQW 18719/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The establishment of a Maritime Museum in Derry/Londonderry is a programme activity under the One Plan catalyst programme "Accelerating the Growth of the Tourism and Cultural Economy". Derry City Council has assumed lead responsibility for the project. The project has been selected to proceed to Stage II of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's (NITB) Tourism Development Scheme 2011-13 application process and still under assessment.

Funding requirements for the project are still being finalised and it is too early to predict an opening date for the museum given that a full funding package is not yet in place for the project.

Ebrington 2020

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the Ebrington 2020 process.

(AQW 18978/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: OFMDFM is working closely with Ilex on the development of Ebrington. The process of initiating a Development Framework to secure outline planning permission for the legacy usage of the site is underway which will open up the site to full market potential.

In advance of the Development Framework, officials are working closely with Ilex to facilitate meanwhile uses on the site to maintain interest and momentum in the development of Ebrington. To that end, Ilex is currently working on "Ebrington 2020" an approach, in line with the Development Framework, to identify potential projects for the site which will make the most significant contribution to improving quality of place, attraction and experience for the regeneration of Ebrington and develop an integrated process for economic appraisal for potential projects.

Corporation Tax

Mr Gardiner asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what recent discussions they have had with the Prime Minister on the devolution of Corporation Tax.

(AQO 3230/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Earlier this year the Government reiterated its commitment to consider the case for devolving Corporation Tax here. The work of the Joint Ministerial Working Group is complete. The Group met four times last year, with the final meeting held on 18 October. The report of the main findings was sent to the Prime Minister for his consideration in November.

The Government must now decide whether the Executive should be offered the opportunity of taking responsibility for Corporation Tax.

At our meeting with the Prime Minister during his visit in November, we discussed the general implications of devolving Corporation Tax and we agreed then we would have a further meeting in London. As we are anxious to progress this issue, we wrote to the Prime Minister on 29 November to request this meeting.

He responded to us on 9 January, indicating that he would be pleased to meet with us again to hear our views on Corporation Tax devolution in detail and his office would work with ours to identify a suitable date. We continue to press for this meeting to take place as soon as possible.

Minority Ethnic Development Fund

Ms Brown asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the provision of the Minority Ethnic Development Fund after 31 March 2013.
(AQO 3237/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Our officials have consulted representatives of the minority ethnic sector in order to produce a revised funding scheme that takes full account of the NISRA evaluation of the Minority Ethnic Development Fund and that reflects our objectives for the Fund, the needs within the sector and the need for good governance.

Once finalised, the Fund will run from the beginning of the new financial year for two years. Calls for applications to the Fund are expected to be made in the near future.

National Crime Agency

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister why the Executive has not agreed to a Legislative Consent Motion to empower the National Crime Agency to operate in Northern Ireland; and how this position can be reconciled with the affirmations which accompanied the agreement to devolve police and justice powers.

(AQW 19052/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: All aspects of Executive business, including the processes by which the Executive reached a decision on any matter, are confidential.

Civil Contingencies Legislation

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when they will introduce legislation on Civil Contingencies.
(AQW 19112/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Consideration is currently being given to recommendations made by the Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit (PEDU) to the Executive following the flooding events of 27 and 28 June 2012. One of the PEDU recommendations relates to "formalising the role of Local Government in Northern Ireland in civil contingencies matters". It would not be appropriate to pre-empt the outcome of this ongoing work, and the subsequent consideration of it by the Executive.

Civil Contingencies Legislation

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether he has any plans to introduce civil contingencies legislation to bring Northern Ireland in line with the rest of the UK and to bring consistency to the structures and delivery of the emergency response.

(AQW 19131/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: There are no plans at present to bring civil contingencies legislation here into line with the rest of the UK.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Tuberculosis in Cattle

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 8787/11-15, to detail why high numbers of cattle were unnecessarily slaughtered due to a misdiagnosis of tuberculosis.

(AQW 18644/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): The answer to AQW 8787/11-15 referred to a number of animals removed as reactors to the skin test but which did not have TB confirmed at slaughter or subsequent laboratory tests.

The TB skin test is the specified test in EU Directive 64/432, the Trade Directive, that must be complied with to meet intra-community trading and EU Commission co-funding requirements. Under this Directive it is a legal requirement to slaughter all cattle that are reactors to the skin test. This test has a very high specificity (99.96%) and therefore a positive skin test result is very highly indicative of exposure to TB.

To put this in perspective, of the 1.5 million animals which are TB tested here each year, a relatively small number, estimated at some 600, may not have been exposed to infection, yet react to the test. These so called "false positives" are indistinguishable from infected reactors that also may show no disease signs post mortem, and so they must be removed.

I hope that this reassures you that the considerable majority of TB reactors are correctly diagnosed as being infected.

Rural Development Fund

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she sought legal advice prior to taking the decision to claw back underspend from Axis 3 of the Rural Development Fund.

(AQW 18654/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I can confirm that my officials took legal advice prior to taking the decision to claw back underspend from Axis3.

Joint Council Committee and Local Action Groups

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the total legal costs incurred in setting up Joint Council Committee and Local Action Groups.

(AQW 18655/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department incurred no direct legal costs in setting up the Joint Council Committees or Local Action Groups.

Rural Development Programme

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how delivery of the Rural Development Programme will change as a result of the Review of Public Administration?

(AQW 18658/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: It is still too early in the process of developing the next Rural Development Programme to know how the delivery will change as a result of the current Review of Public Administration. The delivery model for the next Programme is still to be decided. However the draft proposals do require that 5% of the EU contribution should be delivered through the Leader approach. In preparation for the next programme a review of Leader was commissioned to help inform the delivery structures for the new funding period. However, I will continue to look at the potential role local government can play in delivery of all elements of the 2014-2020 Rural Development Programme.

Single Farm Payment

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 14156/11-15, for an update on the review of the 600 inspection cases.

(AQW 18666/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department has reviewed 623 inspection cases that were paid their 2011 Single Farm Payments after 30 June 2012. Of these, 34 were eligible for and paid interest totalling £3,486.74.

Rural Development Programme

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the total amount of funding allocated to (i) Gaelic Athletic Association clubs; and (ii) soccer clubs through the current Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme.

(AQW 18672/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Rural Development Programme does not provide funding to sports clubs for direct sporting activities. However, where such an organisation wishes to promote a project that benefits the wider rural community and which is separate from their primary activity, this may be considered for funding.

To date:-

- (i) GAA/GAC community projects have been allocated funding worth £1.4m;
- (ii) Soccer clubs community projects have been allocated funding worth £400k .

The Local Action Groups depend on applications being received for each of the 6 Measures under Axis 3 which are then assessed competitively, and do not seek applications from any organisations. Axis 3 is a demand led Programme.

Dogs Destroyed

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many dogs have been destroyed in each of the last three years, broken down by council area.

(AQW 18770/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Dog control is legislated for here by the Dogs Order 1983, as amended by the Dogs (Amendment) Act 2011. The Councils enforce this legislation and provide statistics to my Department regarding its operation on a quarterly basis. We are currently awaiting Council returns for the final quarter of 2012 and so do not as yet have complete statistics for that year.

The figures set out in the table below include the total number of stray and unwanted dogs destroyed by Councils and destruction orders issued by Courts following dog attacks on people or animals for the three complete calendar years 2009 – 2011 and for the period running from 1 January – 30 September 2012.

	2009	2010	2011	1 January – 30 September 2012
Antrim Borough Council	23	24	17	10
Ards Borough Council	41	26	47	24
Armagh City And District Council	56	46	97	25
Ballymena Borough Council	71	86	82	21
Ballymoney Borough Council	9	10	7	6
Banbridge District Council	30	21	31	12
Belfast City Council	307	102	27	30
Carrickfergus Borough Council	24	31	36	19
Castlereagh Borough Council	40	26	19	7
Coleraine Borough Council	72	47	31	14
Cookstown District Council	23	17	15	14
Craigavon Borough Council	143	181	14	3
Derry City Council	170	178	150	79
Down District Council	178	158	153	91
Dungannon And South Tyrone Borough Council	97	121	113	56
Fermanagh District Council	195	155	124	71
Larne Borough Council	13	16	12	5
Limavady Borough Council	57	53	43	35
Lisburn City Council	134	188	171	76
Magherafelt District Council	36	11	19	12
Moyle District Council	26	17	20	18
Newry and Mourne District Council	291	259	196	135
Newtownabbey Borough Council	63	45	31	32
North Down Borough Council	18	12	34	9
Omagh District Council	115	72	35	14
Strabane District Council	91	69	96	27
Total	2323	1971	1620	845

Changes implemented by the Dogs (Amendment) Act 2011 necessitated a review of the statistical information my Department required from the Councils. From April 2012 Councils have been collating statistics on the number of dogs of a banned type (e.g. pit-bull terriers) that have been humanely destroyed. So, in addition to the figures set out in the tables above I can advise that two dogs of a banned type have been humanely destroyed by Coleraine Borough Council and one by Lisburn City Council between 1 April 2012 and 30 September 2012.

Regeneration Scheme: Millisle

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans there are for a regeneration scheme in Millisle.

(AQW 18820/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department does not have a specific budget for regeneration schemes; these are the responsibility of the Department for Social Development.

The current work on village renewal, which is being taken forward by my Department through Axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme (RDP), is within the broader context of assessing the need for funding within rural villages, which will impact on communities, not just environmentally but also socially and economically.

Axis 3 of the RDP, as you will be aware, is being delivered on behalf of my Department by Council clusters that have formed into Joint Council Committees and Local Action Groups.

The Joint Council Committee that covers the Millisle area is the Down Rural Area Partnership (DRAP). An application for a Youth and Community Facility in Millisle has been awarded funding through Axis 3, Village Renewal. In addition, a Letter of Offer for funding through the tourism measure has been issued to Ards Borough Council for a Coastal Route Car Parks Branding project to upgrade 6 sites within the Ards Borough Council area, one of which is the Lagoon, Millisle.

DRAP intend to open a further call for applications to Village Renewal later this year, providing a further opportunity to support villages like Millisle.

Farm Inspections

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 18219/11-15, whether her officials operate on a target-basis when they aim to action and complete queries within 15 working days.

(AQW 18853/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department aims to action and complete queries within 15 working days whilst operating according to the targets in the DARD's Customer Service Standards outlined in AQW 18219/11-15.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development which departmental functions will be transferred to local government under the Review of Public Administration.

(AQW 18867/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The transfer of 'rural development' has historically featured as the main area of DARD work considered for potential transfer to local government under the Review of Public Administration.

The EU has published its rural development proposals for the 2014-2020 funding period as part of the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy.

Negotiations continue on the EU proposals and I am continuing to consider all policy needs for the agricultural sector and the wider rural community in the preparation and implementation of a future rural development programme.

It is still too early in this process to make any firm commitment in relation to the rural development aspect of the Review of Public Administration. However, it remains the case that I will continue to look at the potential role local government can play in delivery of elements of the 2014-2020 Rural Development Programme.

Crossmaglen Memorial and Heritage Committee

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why a member of the Crossmaglen Heritage Committee, which is promoting the Rural Development Programme funding application for the refurbishment of the republican monument in Crossmaglen, sits on the Southern Organisation for Action in Rural areas joint committee, and participates in its decision making processes in respect of this application.

(AQW 18884/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department has provided clusters with very specific rules on conflict of interest. Members of the Joint Council Committee who have an interest in any project being considered for funding must declare their interests. In such cases they must absent themselves from the assessment procedure and discussion of the project. DARD has provided a Conflict of Interest Declaration and a Register of Interests Declaration. These must be completed for all those involved in the delivery of the programme and retained for inspection. The chairperson of the JCC has the right to rule on issues of conflict of interest and where guidance is required should consult DARD. No representation has been received from SOAR.

Salmon

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many farm salmon have escaped from commercial sites in each of the last eight years, broken down by site.

(AQW 18920/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The north of Ireland only has 1 commercial salmon farm, covering 2 sites at Glenarm and Red Bay and there has been no report of salmon escapes within the last 8 years. It should be noted that salmon farms authorised by Scottish or Southern authorities are not required to report to DARD.

There is, however, an escape monitoring programme in operation at the River Bush Salmon Station which will highlight any significant escape that might impact wild populations here. This can be reported to the relevant authorities for consideration of remedial actions.

Salmon

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what responsibility commercial farms have in relation to escaped salmon and the impact on fish stocks.

(AQW 18921/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: A commercial operator must hold an Aquatic Animal Health Authorisation and a Fish Culture Licence, granted by DARD. The Licence and Authorisation are granted subject to conditions including specific conditions relating to bio-security, risk based surveillance and escape reporting. These conditions are checked as part of an annual inspection programme.

The commercial operator must notify DARD of all salmon smolt imports and DARD Fish Health Inspectorate attend smolt import sites to verify there are no fish spillages or escapes. DARD also monitor harvest operations monthly to verify that fish escapes or spillages do not occur.

Current site operators also have a policy of no cage towing between sites, specifically to minimise risks of fish escapes.

In addition the operators employ commercial divers regularly to inspect and report on the structural integrity of fish holding units.

Forest Service: Woodland Scheme

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to explain the reason for the delay in payments to participants in the Forest Service's Woodland Scheme.

(AQW 18922/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: A new annual claim process required by EC regulation was implemented in 2011 and as a consequence, payments in 2011 and 2012 were generally made in December each year whereas in previous years these payments were made in October and November.

Forest Service paid 96% of 2012 Farm Woodland Premium Scheme (FWPS) claims by the end of December 2012. The remaining claims were received after the requested return date and could not be validated in time for the December payments. All remaining claims will be validated and payments made by the end of February 2013, including payments for the archived Farm Woodland Scheme.

Waterlogged Agricultural Land

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the acreage of agricultural land that has become waterlogged in the last twelve months broken down by (i) constituency; and (ii) council area.

(AQW 19005/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department does not hold this information. All soils become waterlogged at points throughout the year, every year. The timing and duration of water logging will vary from year to year, from season to season and from locality to locality. This is dictated by the interaction of soil characteristics, rainfall and evapo-transpiration (i.e. the sum of evaporation and transpiration, meaning the movement of water from sources such as soil into the atmosphere).

Solar Energy Infrastructure

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) how many applications for the installation of solar energy infrastructure have been received in each of the Rural Development Programme Local Action Group areas; and (ii) the monetary value of each application.

(AQW 19010/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme grant assistance may be provided for standalone renewable initiatives including the installation of Photovoltaic panels 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 farm business or farm home domestic running costs.

Private promoters which include farmers and 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 75% of eligible costs up 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.

The Axis 3 clusters have received applications for funding for solar installations as follows:

Cluster	No of applications	Grant requested £
ARC	2	150,000
DRAP	1	47,360
LRP	4	139,455
NER	1	30,000
SOAR	1	50,000
SWARD	12	326,050
GROW	0	

Ash Dieback Disease

Mr Ó hOisín asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether any chemical or herbicidal method has been developed to counter the effects of Ash Dieback disease.

(AQW 19048/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: There are no effective chemical treatments available for trees which already have ash dieback; trees infected by *Chalara fraxinea* are likely to die and may act as a source of further infection, but it may be possible to reduce spread of the disease by the use of chemicals. DARD are currently commissioning AFBI to conduct a desk study which will assess the possible role of disinfectants, biocides, antifungal agents and physical methods to prevent transfer of the fungus in plant debris and to stop it sporulating on leaf litter.

Deer: Ballypatrick Forest

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the species of deer in Ballypatrick Forest (ii) their numbers; and (iii) who controls the numbers.

(AQW 19070/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Ballypatrick forest contains sika deer. Numbers are estimated at 70 to 100 deer. The sporting rights of this forest are privately owned and deer culling is primarily carried out by private individuals exercising these rights.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Amateur Rugby Clubs: Funding

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the level of funding that amateur rugby clubs have received over the past five years compared with football and the Gaelic Athletic Association.

(AQW 17883/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): The table below outlines the exchequer and Lottery funding provided by Sport NI to amateur rugby clubs, football clubs and GAA clubs in each of the last five financial years.

Year	Rugby		Football		GAA	
	Exchequer	Lottery	Exchequer	Lottery	Exchequer	Lottery
2007/08	0	0	807,163	0	590,000	981,342
2008/09	410,403	0	976,217	1,642,000	3,754,228	1,299,358
2009/10	204,680	0	2,968,015	245,000	6,569,878	10,000
2010/11	89,104	0	2,303,384	0	610,092	0
2011/12	9,880	0	1,204,126	0	537,108	0
Totals	714,067	0	8,258,905	1,887,000	12,061,306	2,290,700
Grand Total	£714,067		£10,145,905		£14,352,006	

Lough Erne: Netting of Pike

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the terms of commercial licences that are issued to allow the netting of pike from Lough Erne including (i) the initial cost to the licensee; (ii) any additional revenue her

Department is entitled to from fish that are sold as a result of commercial operations; (iii) the number of current valid licences; (iv) the maximum number of licences that can be issued; and (v) the names of the current commercial licence holders.

(AQW 18486/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The terms of commercial licences that are issued to allow the netting of pike from Lough Erne are outlined in the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966 and in Byelaws made under that Act and these are outlined on the licence.

- (i) A licence for a single wall set net or trammel net for the taking of freshwater fish other than trout or rainbow trout, per 91 metres (100 yards) is £17.00.
A licence for a bait net for the taking of freshwater fish other than trout or rainbow trout for use as bait – per net is £5.00
- (ii) DCAL receives no additional revenue generated from fish sold as a result of commercial operations.
- (iii) A commercial licence allows the fishermen to fish on any water in the DCAL jurisdiction with the fishery owner's permission. Currently there are 7 commercial licences issued for the 2013 season on Lough Erne.
- (iv) There is no maximum limit to the number of commercial licences issued. As fishery owner, DCAL controls the number of commercial fishermen on Lough Erne through the issue of permits.
- (v) Under data protection legislation, Section 40 (2), the Department cannot disclose the identity of commercial licence holders.

Lough Erne: Netting of Pike

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the limits of the commercial licences currently issued to allow the netting of pike from Lough Erne including (i) maximum catch limits; (ii) size of fish allowed to be removed; (iii) species of fish allowed to be removed; (iv) type of nets that can be used for the process; (v) when nets are allowed to be used; (vi) where exactly can nets be used; and (vii) how often nets are checked by the operators.

(AQW 18487/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Regulations regarding all aspects of commercial fishing on Lough Erne are outlined in the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966 as amended. There are currently no limits to the number of commercial licences issued, which are not restricted to Lough Erne. However, the Department restricts the number of commercial fishermen through the issue of permits for Lough Erne.

- (i) There are no maximum catch limits.
- (ii) The minimum size of pike and perch allowed to be taken are defined under Regulation 83 of the Fisheries Byelaws 2003. ie pike less than 60 cm and perch less than 16.5 cm.
- (iii) Pike are currently the only species that DCAL issue a commercial permit for Lough Erne. (a)
- (iv) The type of permitted nets are defined under Regulation 49 and 50 of the Fisheries Byelaws 2003
- (v) Commercial fishing for coarse fish (except pollen) on Lough Erne is restricted from 1st December until the last day in February.
- (vi) Details of where nets can be used on Lough Erne are defined under Regulation 48 of the Fisheries Byelaws 2003.
- (vii) There are no defined regulations regarding how often commercial nets are checked by operators.
- (a) All other species caught must be returned to water unharmed

World Championships for Predator Boat Fishing with Lures

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she has spoken to the organisers of the 2013 World Championships for Predator Boat Fishing with Lures in Lough Erne regarding the competition being in jeopardy as a result of the operation of commercial nets on the lough.

(AQW 18488/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DCAL Fisheries Officers for the Southern and Western area are in contact with the organisers to offer their support in the management of the competition.

Commercial fishermen operating on Lough Erne are regulated by DCAL and do not pose any threat to this competition which attracts anglers from across Europe.

Lough Erne: Pike and Other Species

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number and mass of (i) pike; and (ii) all other species taken out of Lough Erne by commercial net operators, in each of the last 26 months.

(AQW 18489/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Regulations regarding all aspects of commercial fishing on Lough Erne are outlined in the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966 as amended. There are currently no limits to the number of commercial licences issued, which are not restricted to Lough Erne. However, the Department restricts the number of commercial fishermen through the issue of permits for Lough Erne.

- (viii) There are no maximum catch limits.
- (ix) The minimum size of pike and perch allowed to be taken are defined under Regulation 83 of the Fisheries Byelaws 2003. ie pike less than 60 cm and perch less than 16.5 cm.
- (x) Pike are currently the only species that DCAL issue a commercial permit for Lough Erne. (a)
- (xi) The type of permitted nets are defined under Regulation 49 and 50 of the Fisheries Byelaws 2003
- (xii) Commercial fishing for coarse fish (except pollen) on Lough Erne is restricted from 1st December until the last day in February.
- (xiii) Details of where nets can be used on Lough Erne are defined under Regulation 48 of the Fisheries Byelaws 2003.
- (xiv) There are no defined regulations regarding how often commercial nets are checked by operators.
- (b) All other species caught must be returned to water unharmed

Lough Erne: Pike Net Fishing

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the scientific evidence that has been sought to assist in awarding commercial licences for pike net fishing on Lough Erne.

(AQW 18490/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DCAL has commissioned the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) to undertake net surveys of fish, which provide information on existing fish stocks on Lough Erne. The last survey dates from 2010 and the next survey is scheduled for 2013.

The scientific evidence from these surveys informs DCAL policy on the management of the stock on Lough Erne, including pike.

Lough Erne: Commercial Nets

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the dates in the last 3 years when (i) announced; and (ii) unannounced checks have been made by her departmental officials on the operation of commercial nets on Lough Erne.

(AQW 18494/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

(i) Inland Fisheries enforcement staff do not announce when they are undertaking visits.

(ii) In 2010, Twenty four unannounced checks were undertaken

In 2011, Thirteen unannounced checks were undertaken

In 2012 , Eleven unannounced checks were undertaken up until 18 January 2013

2010	2011	2012 *
19/01/2010	26/01/2011	12/01/2012
20/01/2010	08/02/2011	07/02/2012
22/01/2010	22/02/2011	14/02/2012
28/01/2010	24/02/2011	16/02/2012
08/02/2010	01/03/2011	01/03/2012
04/02/2010	09/03/2011	08/03/2012
08/02/2010	16/03/2011	13/03/2012
16/02/2010	24/03/2011	23/03/2012
23/02/2010	26/03/2011	27/03/2012
25/02/2010	28/03/2011	29/03/2012
01/03/2010	30/03/2011	06/12/2012
06/03/2010	20/12/2011	
09/03/2010	22/12/2011	
09/03/2010		

2010	2011	2012 *
11/03/2010		
18/03/2010		
18/03/2010		
18/03/2010		
22/03/2010		
25/03/2010		
30/03/2010		
11/11/2010		
22/11/2010		
25/11/2010		

* up until 18 January 2013

Lough Erne: Female Pike

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the impact that removing a significant quantity of large female pike from Lough Erne through commercial netting would have on the predicted balance of fish stocks in the lough.

(AQW 18496/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DCAL monitors pike stocks based on scientific evidence from AFBI. There is no scientific evidence to demonstrate that pike numbers are adversely impacted by commercial operations.

Scientific evidence confirms that pike take disproportionate numbers of trout in relation to the balance of other species available to them. Removing a proportion of the pike above 60 cm (likely to be females) through the commercial fishery, will lead to a pike population with lower overall numbers but as the spawning stock includes young females and males less than 60 cm the existence of the pike is not threatened.

Lough Erne: Commercial Licence Holders

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail any funds or equipment that have been provided to commercial licence holders on Lough Erne in the last five years.

(AQW 18497/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DCAL has provided no financial funding or equipment to commercial fishermen on Lough Erne in the last five years.

Lough Erne: Angling Tourists

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the impact of her Department's efforts to increase the number of angling tourists while at the same time allowing the removal of a significant number of fish from Lough Erne through commercial licences.

(AQW 18498/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DCAL's overall policy for Lough Erne is primarily focused on developing the Lough as a recreational facility to support the angling tourist industry and in contributing to the economy of County Fermanagh, while respecting the traditional commercial fishery.

DCAL owns the fishing rights to Lough Erne and the management of fish stocks is informed by scientific analysis of fish stock surveys undertaken by the Agri Food and Biosciences Institute. DCAL implements changes to its management of the Lough to reflect this advice.

DCAL also controls the issue of commercial permits to ensure that commercial fishing on the Lough Erne is managed. DCAL enforcement officers also undertake regular patrols both on land and water to ensure only those fishermen with the appropriate commercial licence and permit are operating.

Pike Catching

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether nets which were previously used to catch or conserve eels are permitted to be used to catch pike commercially.

(AQW 18564/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Nets which are used to catch or conserve eels are not suitable for catching pike commercially.

Senior Fisheries Officer

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether a Senior Fisheries Officer for the southern and western areas has been recently appointed.

(AQW 18565/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DCAL is currently undertaking a recruitment competition to appoint a new Senior Fisheries Officer (SFO) promotion competition.

Lough Erne: Commercial Nets

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (i) for how long have commercial nets been in operation on Lough Erne; and (ii) the rationale behind permitting commercial nets in the Lough.

(AQW 18566/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

- (i) Families have been commercially fishing Lough Erne for generations. Regulations regarding fishing engines which relate to commercial fishing were introduced in the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966.
- (ii) DCAL's overall policy for Lough Erne recognises and respects the rights of the traditional commercial fisheries but is primarily interested in developing the Lough as a recreational fishery to support the local economy.
- (iii) Fish stock surveys on Lough Erne undertaken by the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) have indicated there is a sustainable population to permit commercial fishing. The term sustainable population is applied to a fishery where the populations have safe biological limits and/or reproductive capacity and can be exploited to provide a yield. DCAL controls the number of commercial fishermen on Lough Erne through the issue of permits.

Physical Activity at School

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of whether creating a joint approach between her Department, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education to increase physical activity at schools, would help to improve the health of the population.

(AQW 18642/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I fully agree that increased physical activity at schools can help to improve the health of the population. For that reason, my Department is already working jointly with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education (DE), along with a number of other Departments and stakeholders, to increase participation levels in sport and physical activity across the north of Ireland including within schools. This is one of the key aims of my Department's 10-year strategy for sport, Sport Matters, which contains a number of targets to increase participation across the population including among school aged children. As part of this process, a Sport Matters Action Plan has been developed and published which sets out detailed actions that are now being taken forward to ensure these targets are achieved within the life of the strategy.

Coarse Angling Venues

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the locations of all public coarse angling venues.

(AQW 18674/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Details of the locations of all DCAL Public Angling Estate waters, including coarse angling venues, can be found on the NI Direct angling website at www.nidirect.gov.uk/angling

Coarse Angling Venues: North Down and Ards

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she has any plans to increase coarse angling venues in North Down and Ards.

(AQW 18675/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: There are few coarse fisheries in the North Down and Ards areas and as such there are limited opportunities for the Department to increase coarse angling venues in the Public Angling Estate.

The fishing rights to many waters in these areas are already secured by angling clubs, but the Department would give consideration to any new waters that may become available.

Angling Stands: County Down

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if her Department has any plans to increase the number of angling stands on waters in County Down.

(AQW 18722/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DCAL Inland Fisheries Staff in the South East Area, which includes Co Down, are at present delivering on a five year plan for the development of Public Angling Estate. Subject to funding constraints, this plan will include the provision of improved access for anglers, new angling stands and the repair and maintenance of existing angling stands.

In 2012 DCAL added four additional fishing stands at the Quoile and three additional fishing stands at Lough Money.

Boxing Clubs: East Londonderry

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail which boxing clubs, as currently constituted, in the East Londonderry constituency will be eligible for funding in the next financial year.

(AQW 18728/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The eligibility of any sports organisation, including boxing clubs, for funding in the next financial year will depend on the eligibility criteria that is applied to individual funding programmes.

In relation to the Boxing Investment Programme, however, I understand that five boxing clubs based in the east of Co. Derry constituency have submitted expressions of interest forms to Sport NI. These are The Skerries Amateur Boxing Club (ABC) in Coleraine, Coleraine ABC, Errigal ABC in Garvagh, Churchurchlands ABC in Coleraine and St Canices ABC in Dungiven.

Sport NI has confirmed that all five of these clubs currently meet the eligibility criteria for assistance under the programme, which is presently out to consultation until 8 February 2013. Final decisions on funding will be taken once this process has been completed.

CS Lewis: 50th Anniversary

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans are in place to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the death of C.S. Lewis.

(AQW 18738/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: To commemorate the 50th anniversary of C.S Lewis's death on 22nd November 2013, Libraries NI is organising a programme of events including exhibitions, talks, readings and workshops. These will be centred around Hollywood Arches library and Belfast Central library both of which are close to the areas in which CS Lewis lived and worked. The Linen Hall library will also mark the anniversary with a series of events.

The Arts Council NI, which administers funding for cultural events, is likely to receive applications for funding for a range of events in the next financial year.

Arts Group: Grants

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail what grants are available to arts groups.

(AQW 18773/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: When open to applications, arts groups can apply to the Arts Council for financial support from the following funding programmes:

- Annual Funding Programme;
- Lottery Project Funding;
- Artists' International Development Fund;
- Professional Arts Abroad;
- Musical Instruments for Bands;
- Building Peace Through The Arts – Re-imagining Communities;
- Equipment;
- Public Art;
- Creative Industries Innovation Fund (CIIF);
- Arts & Older People's Programme; and
- Small Grants Programme (rolling programme).

Sports Stadium Projects

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what are the completion dates for each of the sports stadium projects.

(AQW 18895/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Construction work for the UBIRFU Stadium Project is on target to be completed by September 2014.

- Construction work for the IFA Stadium Project is on target to be completed by June 2015.
- Construction work for the UCGAA Stadium Project is on target to be completed by September 2015.

Lough Erne: Nets

Mr Ó hOisín asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what is the total length of the nets being used by the seven licensees on Lough Erne.

(AQW 18916/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The total length of nets licensed for the 2012/13 season on Lough Erne is 2,800 yards.

Lough Erne: Net Sizes

Mr Ó hOisín asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what is the mesh size of the nets being used by the licensees on Lough Erne.

(AQW 18917/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A single wall set net or trammel net for the taking of coarse fish, except pollen, on Upper or Lower Lough Erne must have a mesh of 63 millimetres or more from knot to knot or 252 millimetres to be measured all round each mesh.

Lough Erne: Netsmen

Mr Ó hOisín asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether there is any evidence of by-catch, other than pike, being caught by the licensed netsmen on Lough Erne.

(AQW 18918/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department has no evidence of by-catch other than pike being caught by licensed netsmen on Lough Erne. It is a condition of the DCAL permit that all fish other than pike over 60cm should be returned to the water without avoidable injury.

Lough Erne: Netsmen

Mr Ó hOisín asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what grants have been awarded to Lough Erne netsmen in each of the last three years.

(AQW 18919/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DCAL has not awarded any grant funding to Lough Erne commercial fishermen in the last three years.

Salmon Fishing: North Antrim Coast

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether salmon were taken from nets off the North Antrim coast in the 2012 season, when licences were withheld by her Department.

(AQW 19296/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department is not aware of any salmon being taken by any nets off the North Antrim coast in the 2012 season.

Department of Education**Schools Estate: East Antrim**

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to outline the issues facing the schools estate in East Antrim; and the steps that his Department, in conjunction with the North Eastern Education and Library Board, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, are taking to address the concerns of school principals and Boards of Governors.

(AQW 18821/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): I understand that you have provided clarification in relation to your question and that you are seeking information in relation to the maintenance of schools. The maintenance of schools in the maintained and controlled sectors in the East Antrim area is the responsibility of the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB). The NI Council for Integrated Education and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools have no responsibility for maintenance of the schools estate. Maintenance of Voluntary Grammar, and Grant Maintained Integrated schools is the direct responsibility of the schools, with the cost being met from within the schools' recurrent budget.

I am advised by the NEELB that expenditure in relation to maintenance in each of the last three years up to 31 January 2013 is as follows:

2010/11 (£000s)	1,267,241
2011/12 (£000s)	1,207,015
1 April 2012 to 31 January 2013 (£000s)	1,174,430

Total (£000s)	3,648,686
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It is anticipated that a further £727,000 approx will be spent on maintenance from 1 February 2013 – 31 March 2013.

The need for maintenance works across the schools estate is well documented. I have made certain that monies for maintenance have been ring fenced to ensure that the significant backlog is tackled effectively. According to the Education and Library Boards' estate management system, the current maintenance backlog in schools in the East Antrim area is as shown in the table below:

School Name	School	Management type	Backlog at 30 Jan 2013 £
Ballycarry Primary School	Primary	Controlled	125,785
Cairncastle Primary School	Primary	Controlled	76,075
Carnalbanagh Primary School	Primary	Controlled	60,925
Carrickfergus Central Primary School	Primary	Controlled	58,372
Carrickfergus Model Primary School	Primary	Controlled	88,751
Eden Primary School	Primary	Controlled	51,348
Glynn Primary School	Primary	Controlled	46,800
Greenisland Primary School	Primary	Controlled	401,634
Hollybank Primary School	Primary	Controlled	348,551
King's Park Primary School	Primary	Controlled	210,713
Larne And Inver Primary School	Primary	Controlled	45,619
Linn Primary School	Primary	Controlled	319,807
Moyle Primary School	Primary	Controlled	113,468
Mullaghdubh Primary School	Primary	Controlled	64,244
Oakfield Primary School	Primary	Controlled	239,055
Olderfleet Primary School	Primary	Controlled	37,047
Silverstream Primary School	Primary	Controlled	155,967
Sunnylands Primary School	Primary	Controlled	174,819
Toreagh Primary School	Primary	Controlled	12,225
Upper Ballyboley Primary School	Primary	Controlled	34,462
Victoria Primary School	Primary	Controlled	163,436
Whiteabbey Primary School	Primary	Controlled	286,019
Whitehead Primary School	Primary	Controlled	143,700
Woodburn Primary School	Primary	Controlled	27,050
Woodlawn Primary School	Primary	Controlled	227,945
Carnlough Controlled Integrated Primary School	Primary	Controlled Integrated	13,888
Glenann Primary School	Primary	Maintained	25,567
Seaview Primary School	Primary	Maintained	175,408
St Anthony's Primary School	Primary	Maintained	200,931
St James' Primary School	Primary	Maintained	428,782
St John's Primary School	Primary	Maintained	34,093
St Macnissi's Primary School	Primary	Maintained	3,632
St Marys Primary School	Primary	Maintained	153,979
St Nicholas' Primary School	Primary	Maintained	14,783

School Name	School	Management type	Backlog at 30 Jan 2013 £
St Patrick's Primary School	Primary	Maintained	62,275
St Ciaran's Primary School	Primary	Maintained	112,744
Kilcoan Primary School	Primary	Other Maintained	47,284
Acorn Integrated Primary School	Primary	GMI	11,975
Corran Integrated Primary School	Primary	GMI	20,943
Carrickfergus College	Post-Primary	Controlled	527,501
Carrickfergus Grammar School	Post-Primary	Controlled	1,138,331
Downshire School	Post-Primary	Controlled	1,139,872
Larne High School	Post-Primary	Controlled	324,565
Monkstown Community School	Post-Primary	Controlled	1,080,068
Monkstown Nursery School	Nursery	Controlled	1,670
Roddens Vale Special School	Special	Controlled	4,200
Rosstulla Special School	Special	Controlled	78,393
Sunnylands Nursery School	Nursery	Controlled	850
Thornfield Special School	Special	Controlled	40,348
St Anthony's Nursery School	Nursery	Maintained	61,633
St Killians College	Post-Primary	Maintained	1,509,388
Jordanstown Special School	Special	Other Maintained	450
Belfast High School	Post-Primary	VGS	1,113,577
Larne Grammar School	Post-Primary	VGS	168,010
Ulidia Integrated College	Post-Primary	GMI	43,391
		Total	12,052,348

The backlog for the whole schools estate is currently £307m (excluding schools that have been closed). There is a programme of planned maintenance across the schools' estate that influences the overall maintenance backlog. In addition reactive maintenance is required to address unexpected emergency issues such as a heating system failure. The cost of emergency work is not reflected in the maintenance backlog.

School Enhancement Programme

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education whether his Department received any submissions for the School Enhancement Programme.

(AQW 18822/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I do not expect to receive proposals for the Schools Enhancement Programme until April, as reflected below in the timetable for the scheme:

- 22 January 2013 –Capital Investment Statement to Assembly –announcing the Schools Enhancement Programme call for projects to school authorities;
- 28 January 2013 - Department issued letters to school authorities setting out process, copying the approved protocol, programme application form and confirming the programme timetable;
- 12 April 2013 – deadline for submission of proposals by School Managing Authorities;
- Mid May 2013 - conclusion of assessment process and submission of proposals to Minister;
- Mid June 2013 – Minister's announcement of successful projects; selected proposals advised to proceed in planning, including securing professional team as required.

School Enhancement Programme

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to outline the timescale for the bidding and funding processes of the Schools Enhancement Programme.

(AQW 18865/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The timescale for the new Schools Enhancement Programme is shown below:

- 22 January 2013 –Capital Investment Statement to Assembly –announcing the Schools Enhancement Programme call for projects to school authorities;
- 28 January 2013 - Department issued letters to school authorities setting out process, copying the approved protocol, programme application form and confirming the programme timetable;
- 12 April 2013 – deadline for submission of proposals by School Managing Authorities;
- Mid May 2013 - conclusion of assessment process and submission of proposals to Minister;
- Mid June 2013 – Minister's announcement of successful projects; selected proposals advised to proceed in planning, including securing professional team as required.

Irish Language Posters

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 18500/11-15, to detail the source of the poster placed on a phone booth, in Ann Street in Ballycastle, that only contains the Irish phrase *Mar eiríonn leis an oideachas*, and bears the Department of Education logo.

(AQW 18910/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The poster currently on display on the phone kiosk in Ann Street, Ballycastle is part of my ongoing "Education Works" advertising campaign. The campaign is of vital importance and aims to raise the value we, as a society, place on education. It aims to inform and engage all parents, in particular those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, to become more involved in their child's education. It is also intended to impact upon home/family and attitudinal factors by providing parents with consistent, authoritative information on the importance of education and the steps they can take to support their child in achieving good educational outcomes.

This is a multi-media campaign comprising television, radio, outdoor posters, local press and various online sites. It is also being taken forward in English and in Irish in line with my Department's language policy and is consistent with my duty to encourage and facilitate Irish-medium education.

The Irish poster to which you refer is a replica of the English poster which was displayed during the first two weeks in October on the phone kiosk in Ann Street, Ballycastle.

The wording on the poster *Bí páirteach ann, Labhair le do pháiste faoi cad é a d'fhoghlaim siad inniu ar scoil, Mar éiríonn leis an oideachas* translates as *Get involved, Talk to your child about what they learnt at school today, Because Education Works*.

Education and Library Boards: Tribunals

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 18192/11-15, (i) how many cases went to tribunal; and (ii) how many cases went to court; and to detail the differences in a tribunal case and a court case and the rationale for choosing one over the other.

(AQW 18955/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Number of Cases in last five years by ELB Area

	(i) Tribunal Cases	(ii) Court Cases
BELB	17	1
NEELB	27	0
SEELB	39	2
SELB	11	0
WELB	35	1
Total	129	4

The nature of the cause of action will determine which court has jurisdiction to hear the case. Claims which fall within the jurisdiction of the Fair Employment Tribunal or an Industrial Tribunal must be lodged with the Office of Industrial Tribunal and the Fair Employment Tribunal.

The Industrial Tribunal is the principal forum for adjudicating disputes between employees, prospective and former employees and employers covering a wide range of matters, by way of example only

- Unfair Dismissal
- Redundancy Payment
- Sex Discrimination
- Age Discrimination
- Deduction from wages
- Equal Pay
- Less favourable treatment as an agency worker, than a directly recruited employee

The Fair Employment Tribunal deals with employment discrimination claims arising from alleged complaints arising on the grounds of religious belief or political opinion.

There are a very small number of employment associated matters where there is an overlap between the jurisdiction of the main civil courts here (the county court and the High Court) and the Industrial Tribunal and Employment Tribunal.

A claim for breach of contract up to a value of £25,000 can be brought in either the Fair Employment Tribunal or an Industrial Tribunal. Alternatively, if the value is £15,000 or less it can be brought in the county court. The figure of £15,000 is currently subject to review.

Normally, there is not a rationale for choosing one court over the other, since in the vast majority of employment cases the cause of action will determine whether it is the Industrial Tribunal and Fair Employment Tribunal that has jurisdiction to hear the complaint or the civil court. This is determined by legislation and is normally not in the gift of the complainant.

In the very limited cases where there is a choice, e.g. breach of contract case the different court costs are likely to be an influencing factor.

Disadvantaged Children

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education what action he is taking to ensure that disadvantaged children who live outside urban areas are given similar help to those who have access to Sure Start.

(AQW 18963/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Sure Start is not restricted to urban areas. The Sure Start programme provides services to approximately 34,000 children aged 0-4 and their families who live in at least the top 20% most disadvantaged wards and Super Output Areas in the north of Ireland.

Sure start currently operates 35 projects across 207 wards, of which 33% of the wards are classified as either rural or mixed.

I plan to expand Sure Start provision to an additional 21 wards, of which 10% of the wards are classified as either rural or mixed. The expansion of Sure Start will be on a phased approach commencing in this budget period, subject to available resources.

Childcare Strategy

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education what level of engagement he has had with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister regarding the Childcare Strategy.

(AQW 19036/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My officials have engaged with OFMDFM officials on the development of a childcare strategy and latterly on early drafts of 'Towards a Childcare Strategy'. DE officials regularly attended meetings to discuss the Childcare Strategy and provided information to inform the development of the published document. My Department has written to OFMDFM on a number of occasions in relation to the development of a childcare strategy setting out the context of the Department of Education contribution.

The Department will continue to participate in the Childcare Strategy Project Board and I will continue to work with OFMDFM through the Executive to support the development of the Childcare Strategy.

Consultancy Firms

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education to (i) list the consultancy firms his Department has engaged with in each of the last three years; (ii) the purpose of each engagement; and (iii) the total amount paid to each firm.

(AQW 19038/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: A list of firms engaged by my Department in relation to external consultancy assignments, as classified in accordance with guidelines set out by the Department of Finance of Personnel (DFP), is set out below. The tables below set out, in alphabetical order, the firms, the purpose of each engagement and the amount of spend incurred on external consultancy in the last three financial years. Clearly, such firms may also be engaged on other areas of work, which are not classified as external consultancy in accordance with DFP guidelines. Spend in relation to such activities is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

2009-2010

Consultant	Purpose of external consultancy assignment	£
Addleshaw Goddard	Schools Modernisation Programme	8,698
Barnardos	Consultation with Children and Young People on draft Education (Pupil Records and Reporting) Regulations	6,000
Class Consultancy	Security validation of new system	4,163
Deloitte	ESA delivery models and location options	44,926

Consultant	Purpose of external consultancy assignment	£
Donal Rogan	Speaker's Fee Autism Conference	100
EMQC	Chartermark Re-assessment	801
Frank	Education Skills Authority (ESA) Corporate Identity and Education Brand	3,750
FSG McClure Watters	Diversity training needs in early years sector, schools and youth	3,678
Goteborg University	Speaker's Fee Autism Conference	1,931
Hamill Bosket	ESA Corporate Identity and Education Brand	2,750
Hays Group	Determination of terms and conditions of ESA directors	12,315
Kings College	Speaker's Fee Autism Conference	974
Marcella Leonard	Child Protection Training	672
McCadden	ESA Corporate Identity and Education Brand	3,960
Millward Brown	Readiness Change	2,015
Papermouse Design	Promoting Emotional Health and Wellbeing (PEHAW) Homework diary inserts	2,275
Parents' Advice Centre	Parenting Forum	1,250
Parents' Advice Centre	Consultation on Transfer	2,300
Parity Solutions	Programme Manager ESA	65,745
Patricia Daly	Speaker's Fee Autism Conference	221
Price Waterhouse Coopers	Provision of an assessment centre ESA	60,855
Prof Fiona McNicholas	Speaker's Fee Autism Conference	225
QBM	Implementation of Review of Public Administration Programme	7,400
Richard Black	Discretionary cases relating to working with children	5,646
Robert Savage	Speaker's Fee Autism Conference	193
Tandem Design	ESA Corporate Identity and Education Brand	3,755
The Connectives	Design preparation and delivery of workshops at Governors' conference	3,413
Vivienne Walker	Strategic Human Resources/Workforce Issues	10,113
Total 2009-10		260,124

2010-11

Consultant	Purpose of external consultancy assignment	£
Arthur Cox	Lisanelly Project	7,027
Brian Whalley	Governance & Accountability Training Seminars	11,742
Chambre of Public Affairs	Controlled Schools Sectoral Body Working Group	2,807
EMQC Ltd	Customer Service Excellence Model	2,014
FGS McClure Watters	Needs assessment and Feasibility Study	16,500
Goldblatt McGuigan	CESG Listed Advisor Scheme (CLAS) – system security validation	2,813
Jacqui Simpson	Turbaries Barrister Costs	3,500
KPMG	Lisanelly Project	24,287
Martin Sykes	Appointment of Independent Procurement Expert to SEELB	4,450
Papermouse Design & Advertising	Homework diary inserts	1,860

Consultant	Purpose of external consultancy assignment	£
Parity Solutions	Programme Manager ESA	275
Participation Network	Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED) Public Consultation	6,705
Total 2010-11		83,980

2011-12

Consultant	Purpose of external consultancy assignment	£
Arthur Cox	Lisanelly Project	2,377
Early Years	Early Years Consultation with Children	4,390
EMQC Ltd	Customer Service Excellence Model	3,335
Encription IT Security & Forensic Services	Independent IT Health Check	4,840
KPMG	Lisanelly Project	20,271
Martin Sykes	Independent Procurement Expert for SEELB	9,102
Moore Stephens	St. MacNissi's Pension Provision advice	1,819
Papermouse Design	Revision to Homework Diary inserts	720
Pierce Communications	Branding of PEHAW	1,360
Sean Madden	Restoration of Legal Documents	11,500
Smalltown America Limited	Speaker's fee	361
Total 2011-12		60,075

Rating Scales

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the (i) Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale; and (ii) Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale inspection tool; and whether he intends to introduce these tools.
(AQW 19039/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) recognises the diverse needs of children and the wide variety of ways in which settings address identified needs. Early Years practitioners use a wide range of observations which help to identify needs, interests and ability and they use the outcomes of such observations to inform their planning for the next stage of that child's pre-school education. The ETI does not advocate the use of only one method. The ETI evaluates the outcomes for the children and the method of observation/assessment which is employed, in the context of the individual setting.

The ETI has no plans to implement the use of the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale inspection tool.

'Have Your Say on Education' Report

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the 'Have Your Say on Education' report produced by Youth Action NI, Rural Community Network, Spirit of Enniskillen and Integrated Education Fund; and what he is doing to increase access to integrated education within the remit of Area Based Planning. [R]
(AQW 19042/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I welcome all contributions, including the 'Have Your Say on Education' report, to the wider debate on how we might ensure that our education system meets the needs of all our children and young people.

The need for places across the various sectors, including the integrated sector, will be identified through the area planning process being taken forward by the statutory planning authorities, namely the Education & Library Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools. The Terms of Reference for area planning state explicitly that it should take account of commitments outlined in the Good Friday Agreement and subsequent legislation in relation to integrated provision.

The Boards have adopted a model to project future need for places across broad sectors, including integrated, to be used in area planning. However, this does not mean that growth in any management type is capped by the projections. Rather, the breakdown of the projected need for places across broad sectors reflects the current pattern and as such is the starting point for planning. Particular sectors in an area may grow beyond the projections provided there is a consequent reduction in numbers elsewhere.

You may also be aware that I gave approval for NICIE to engage external professionals to form a Panel of associates to act on behalf of and represent the views of NICIE during the Area Planning process. I understand that this work is continuing.

Education and Skills Authority: Board

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education to outline the rationale for having a maximum of eight political representatives on the Board of the Education and Skills Authority.[R]

(AQW 19044/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Schedule 1, 2(1)b of the Education Bill, provides that 8 members of the ESA Board shall be political members. It does this to reflect the Heads of Agreement published by OFMDFM on 16 November, 2011. This was the approach agreed by the Executive in order to bring balanced local democratic accountability to the delivery of a key public service.

Teachers: Redundancy Packages

Mrs McKeivitt asked the Minister of Education how many teachers have accepted a redundancy package in each year since 2010; and how many of these teachers took up part-time teaching posts in schools.

(AQW 19066/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The table below details the number of teachers who received discretionary compensation for redundancy in each year since 2010 and the number of these who have subsequently taken up part-time i.e. temporary teaching days in schools.

Financial Year	Number of teachers who received discretionary compensation for redundancy	Number of these teachers subsequently re-employed on a temporary/substitute day basis
2010-2011	163	41
2011-2012	252	39
2012- Jan 2013	527	42
Totals	942	122

*Figures do not include Voluntary Grammar Schools

School Development Plans

Ms Boyle asked the Minister of Education to list the school development plans submitted since 1 January 2012; and which of these plans remain outstanding.

(AQW 19069/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: A list of the thirty-seven development proposals published since 1 January 2012 is provided below. Sixteen of the proposals are currently under consideration.

DP no.	School / ref. no.	Description of proposal	Date published	Decision/ date of decision
220	Gaelscoil Neachtain 201-6700	Establish a new grant-aided, Controlled Irish medium Primary School in Dungiven, from 1 September 2012 or as soon as possible thereafter	11/01/12	Approved 25/05/12
272	Bronte PS 501-6612	Establish a Nursery Unit to provide 26 full time places with effect from 1 September 2012 or as soon as possible thereafter.	16/02/12	Approved 15/05/12
273	Iveagh PS 501-1611	Establish a Nursery Unit to provide 26 full time places with effect from 1 September 2012 or as soon as possible thereafter.	16/02/12	Not Approved 15/05/12
274	Brackenagh West PS 501-6098	To extend the capacity from 6 to 7 class base primary school from 1 September 2012 or as soon as possible thereafter.	16/02/12	Not approved 22/05/12
212	Colaiste Feirste 124-0291	To establish, a post primary satellite of Colaiste Feirste in Maghera	28/02/12	Decision Pending

DP no.	School / ref. no.	Description of proposal	Date published	Decision/ date of decision
222	Altnagelvin Hospital School 231-0029	Proposed closure of Altnagelvin Hospital School and Tuition Service	06/03/12	Approved 03/07/12
221	St Canice's PS 203-6045	Proposed closure of the Irish Medium Stream from 31 August 2012 or as soon as possible thereafter	07/03/12	Approved 25/05/12
223	Knockavoe School 231-6528 Sion Mills PS 201-6442	Proposed relocation of the Speech & Language Support Classes from Knockavoe School Resource Centre to Sion Mills PS	08/03/12	Approved 03/07/12
225	Ardstraw PS 201-6376 Drumlegagh PS 201-2392	Proposal that Ardstraw and Drumlegagh amalgamate on the site of the existing Ardstraw Primary School with effect from 1 September 2012, or as soon as possible thereafter.	09/04/12	Approved 26/06/12
261	Dalriada School Prep Dept 362-0012	Phased closure commencing with effect from 31/08/12 followed by full closure with effect from 31/08/14 or as soon as possible thereafter	15/05/12	Approved 16/08/12
262	Carlane PS 303-0713	Proposed closure of Carlane PS with effect from 31 August 2012 or as soon as possible thereafter.	15/05/12	Approved 27/07/12
226	Drumragh College 226-0283	Proposal to increase the Enrolment of Drumragh College from 580 to 750 pupils over a period of 5 years.	15/05/12	Not Approved 12/10/12
227	Gaelscoil na Daroige 204-6687	Establish a new Irish Medium Nursery Unit on the site of Gaelscoil na Daróige from 1 September 2012 or as soon as possible thereafter.	15/05/12	Not Approved 15/08/12
228	St Eugene's HS 223-0111	Phased closure with effect from 31/08/12. Full closure of the school with effect from 31/08/13 or as soon as possible thereafter.	15/05/12	Approved 16/08/12
229	St Peter's HS 223-0181	Phased closure with effect from 31/08/12. Full closure of the school with effect from 31/08/13, or as soon as possible thereafter.	15/05/12	Approved 08/08/12
230	St Davog's PS 203-2664	Proposed closure from 31 August 2012 or as soon as possible thereafter	04/06/12	Approved 21/08/12
275	Dungannon NS 511-6236	Establish a third full-time unit be with effect from 1 September 2012, or as soon as possible thereafter.	14/06/12	Not Approved 06/12/12
263	Garvagh HS 321-0013	Proposed closure with effect from 31 August 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter.	27/06/12	Approved 27/09/12
230	St Malachy's PS 403-6454	Proposal that the 3 Moderate Learning Difficulty Units should be changed to Learning Support Units. The modified Units will accommodate 30 P1 to P7 pupils and will be operational from 31 August 2013. (Units from Knockmore PS)	03/09/12	Approved 14/12/12

DP no.	School / ref. no.	Description of proposal	Date published	Decision/ date of decision
231	Carryduff PS 401-3044	Proposal that a Learning Support Unit is created. Unit will accommodate 6 to 8 P1 to P7 pupils and will be operational from 31 August 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter. (Unit From Knockmore PS)	03/09/12	Approved 13/12/12
213	St Gemma's HS 123-0173	Proposal closure with effect from 31 August 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter.	13/09/12	Approved 07/01/13
276	Orchard County PS 501-6658	To extend the capacity from a 5 to a 6 class base from 1 September 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter.	14/09/12	Decision Pending
277	Fair Hill PS 501-6599	To extend the capacity of Fair Hill Primary School from a 10 to an 11 class base from 1 September 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter.	14/09/12	Decision Pending
231	Ballycolman NS 211-6333	Proposed closure from 31 December 2012 or as soon as possible thereafter. Predicated upon prior Ministerial approval being given to DP232	11/10/12	Decision Pending
232	St Mary's PS 203-6696	Proposal that St Mary's PS establish an additional double nursery unit (52 full time places) using the existing site of Ballycolman NS from 1 Jan 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter	11/10/12	Decision Pending
278	New-Bridge Integrated College 526-0285	To increase the admission number from 80 to 100 and sixth form from 100 to 120 pupils from 1 September 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter.	15/10/12	Decision Pending
279	Donacloney PS 501-6178	To extend the capacity from an 8 to a 9 class base from 1 September 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter.	15/10/12	Decision Pending
232	Ballymagee PS 401-6430	Establish a 26 place part time nursery unit with effect from 31 August 2012 or as soon as possible thereafter.	13/11/12	Approved 17/01/13
214	Ballygolan PS 101-0296	To cease education provision with effect from 31 August 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter.	15/11/12	Decision Pending
264	Gaelscoil Éanna 304-6685	To increase approved total enrolment numbers of 140 to 176 - 205 from September 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter.	13/12/12	Decision Pending
233	Belmont House School 231-0015	Relocation of speech and language provision in the North West area, the Woodlands Unit, located at Belmont House School to close with effect from 31 August 2013, or as soon as possible thereafter. This proposal is predicated upon prior Ministerial approval being given DPs 234, 235 and 236.	21/01/13	Decision Pending
234	Ebrington PS 201-0382	The relocation of two speech and language classes from Woodlands Unit to Ebrington Primary School with effect from 1 September 2013, or as soon as possible thereafter.	21/01/13	Decision Pending

DP no.	School / ref. no.	Description of proposal	Date published	Decision/ date of decision
235	St Anne's PS, Derry 203-6069	The relocation of two speech and language classes from Woodlands Unit to St Anne's Primary School, Derry with effect from 1 September 2013, or as soon as possible thereafter	21/01/13	Decision Pending
236	Ballykelly PS 201-2298	Speech and Language Provision in the North West Area be expanded by two additional classes being established in Ballykelly PS from 1 September 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter.	21/01/13	Decision Pending
237	St Eugene's PS 203-1888	To close with effect from 31 August 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter	21/01/13	Decision Pending
280	Fivemiletown PS 501-6088	To extend the approved enrolment for Fivemiletown Primary School from a 6 class base primary school to a 7 class base primary school with effect from 1 September 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter	22/01/13	Decision Pending
238	St Dympna's PS 203-6186	Increase capacity from 145 to 210, with increase in admissions number from 21 to 30 pupils with effect from 1 September 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter.	04/02/13	Decision Pending

Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education what discussions he has held with the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and other stakeholders in the integrated sector; and what were the outcomes of these meetings.

(AQW 19127/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Since taking office in May 2011 I have had several meetings with the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) and the Integrated Education Fund (IEF).

Matters discussed included integrated education in the context of the Programme for Government; Cross Border Planning; governance and accountability issues; and Shared Education.

The outcomes of all of these meetings were constructive and beneficial.

Integrated Education

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education, since 2011, what his Department has done to fulfil the obligation given in the Education Reform Order (NI) 1989 to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education.

(AQW 19129/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I take the Department of Education's statutory duty, to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education, very seriously.

The integrated sector continues to grow. In 2011, the schools' census statistics indicated that there were 21,170 pupils attending 42 primary, and 20 post-primary integrated schools here. This has increased to 21,301 pupils according to the 2012/13 census figures.

To comply with the statutory duty, my Department provides funding to the Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) to assist the development of integrated schools for public benefit. Funding of £613k was allocated in 2011/13 and this increased to £628k in 2012/13.

In addition, DE also provides funding to help schools with the process of transformation to integrated status. This assists schools in the initial stages of the transformation process, and with the employment of a teacher from the minority community in the school to assist with religious education. The budget available for 2011/12 was £255k, which increased to £261k in 2012/13.

I recognise the vital and valuable contribution that the integrated sector, together with all sectors of education, makes to building a peaceful and stable future for our children.

However, as is the case for all of the other education sectors, my Department responds to parental demand for integrated education. It funds integrated schools that are robust, do not involve unreasonable public expenditure and meet the specified criteria. It does not favour one education sector over another.

Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what are the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) implications for the staff involved in procurement sections of Education and Library Boards, in light of the recent policy change in this area.
(AQW 19134/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department has carried out a major project to consider and develop options for the future delivery of procurement services in the education sector, which included significant engagement with other government departments and agencies.

The Procurement Board has mandated the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) to aggregate government demand for goods and services, to develop common procurement arrangements across the public sector and seek out collaborative opportunities. My decision to engage CPD will ensure that the education sector is at the heart of pan government collaboration. Consequently, the decision has been warmly welcomed by the Minister of Finance and Personnel. In addition, CPD has indicated that it will deliver for the education sector, a minimum 3% savings on procurement spend per annum.

Procurement staff within ESA will continue to be responsible for a range of functions including, annual procurement planning, contract management, liaising with the Centre of Procurement Expertise (CoPE), ongoing review of its performance and the dissemination and promotion of procurement awareness to education sector staff. The proposals are, therefore, unlikely to lead to any reduction in professional procurement staff within the sector.

Central Procurement Directorate

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what consultation took place prior to his decision to transfer responsibility for the procurement of goods and services to the Central Procurement Directorate.
(AQW 19135/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department has carried out a major project to consider and develop options for the future delivery of procurement services in the education sector, which included significant engagement with other government departments and agencies.

The Procurement Board has mandated the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) to aggregate government demand for goods and services, to develop common procurement arrangements across the public sector and seek out collaborative opportunities. My decision to engage CPD will ensure that the education sector is at the heart of pan government collaboration. Consequently, the decision has been warmly welcomed by the Minister of Finance and Personnel. In addition, CPD has indicated that it will deliver for the education sector, a minimum 3% savings on procurement spend per annum.

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Central Procurement Directorate

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what are the anticipated savings that will be achieved by the decision to transfer the procurement of goods and services to the Central Procurement Directorate.
(AQW 19136/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department has carried out a major project to consider and develop options for the future delivery of procurement services in the education sector, which included significant engagement with other government departments and agencies.

The Procurement Board has mandated the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) to aggregate government demand for goods and services, to develop common procurement arrangements across the public sector and seek out collaborative opportunities. My decision to engage CPD will ensure that the education sector is at the heart of pan government collaboration. Consequently, the decision has been warmly welcomed by the Minister of Finance and Personnel. In addition, CPD has indicated that it will deliver for the education sector, a minimum 3% savings on procurement spend per annum.

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Pupils: English as First Language

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what additional funding or pupil premium is available to schools for pupils whose first language is not English.

(AQW 19157/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Children who need additional support to learn the language of instruction or who do not have the satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum, may be designated as "Newcomer" pupils, in accordance with the Newcomer Guidelines for schools policy.

As set out in paragraphs 3.60 to 3.63 of the Common Funding Scheme, Newcomer pupils receive an additional 0.5 of the basic Age Weighted Pupil Unit (AWPU) cash value for each full-time pupil. This equates to £1,012 in the current 2012/13 financial year. Part-time pupils are weighted at 0.25 of the AWPU cash value.

GCSEs: North Down

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Education what steps he will take to increase the rate of school leavers in North Down currently achieving at least 5 GCSEs at grades A* to C.

(AQW 19165/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have in place a coherent set of policies designed to improve educational outcomes for all our young people and to address the root causes when pupils are not achieving to their full potential. These policies include the school improvement policy, "Every School a Good School" and the strategy for improving literacy and numeracy, "Count, read: succeed". I remain committed to tackling educational underachievement wherever it exists.

The most recent statistics available show that these policies are working, with continued improvements in pupil attainment at GCSE level for all school leavers in the north of Ireland as well as for pupils resident in the North Down constituency.

	School leavers resident in the North Down Constituency* ¹		School leavers in the north of Ireland	
	2006/07	2010/11	2006/07	2010/11
Percentage of school leavers achieving at least 5 GCSEs A*-C (inc. equivalents)	69.0	74.8	64.7	73.2
Percentage of school leavers achieving at least 5 GCSEs A*-C (inc. equivalents) inc. GCSE English and maths.	61.3	67.0	54.2	59.5

*¹ Please note the data are based on the residential postcode of each pupil and not on the location of the school.

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.

Indeed, the Programme for Government 2011-2015 has a stretching target to raise the percentage of school leavers, entitled to free school meals, achieving five or more GCSEs (or equivalent) including GCSE English and maths by 2015.

In addition to these policies I launched an advertising campaign in September last year which aims to inform and engage all parents, but in particular those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, to become more engaged in their child's education. The campaign provides parents with consistent, authoritative information on schooling and the steps they can take to support their child in achieving good educational outcomes.

£12million will also be invested to improve literacy and numeracy levels in schools over the next two years. This will result in 230 unemployed teachers being appointed as part of a programme to ensure extra support for children in primary schools who are struggling with reading and maths. It will also direct support to pupils in post-primary schools who are not predicted to get at least a 'C' grade in English and/or maths.

Both the advertising campaign and intervention to support the teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy in schools complement the policies I have in place to support raising standards and to achieve improved outcomes for all our young people.

Southern Education and Library Board: Area Plans

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education when he will publish the Area Plans for the Southern Education and Library Board.

(AQW 19171/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education and Library Boards have submitted a report on their post-primary area plan consultation and a revised draft area plan. It is my intention that the Education and Library Boards will make these reports and revised plans publicly available, in the near future, to ensure all interested parties are fully informed on the issues and actions.

The draft primary area plans have been finalised, taking into account lessons learned from the post-primary consultation and forwarded to the Department.

I will address the House regarding the post primary area plans in the coming weeks and will also outline how the primary area planning process will progress.

Reception Classes: Conversion to Nursery Units

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) how many reception classes have applied to become nursery units in each of the last 3 years; and (ii) what was the decision in each case.

(AQW 19184/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There have been (i) 4 Development Proposals (DP) published for conversion of a reception class to a nursery unit of which (ii) 3 were approved and 1 turned down.

In addition to this, 2 proposals to establish a nursery unit were also published and were approved subject to the condition that the schools ceased the reception class. There were also 2 proposals to establish a nursery unit, with the intention to cease reception provision if the DP was approved.

Details as follows:

Year DP Published	DP No.	School	Proposal	Decision
2010	252 (SELB)	St Anthony's PS, Craigavon	To establish an additional nursery unit to replace existing reception provision	Approved
2011	257 (NEELB)	Randalstown Central PS, Randalstown	To convert existing reception class to a nursery unit	Not Approved
2011	256 (SELB)	Drumadonnell PS, Ballyroney	To establish a nursery unit	Approved - subject to the condition that the school ceases the reception class
2011	257 (SELB)	Orchard County PS, Portadown	To establish a nursery unit	Approved – subject to the condition that the school ceases the reception class
2011	261 (SELB)	St Patrick's PS, Mayobridge	To convert existing reception class to a nursery unit	Approved
2011	222 (SEELB)	Tonagh PS, Lisburn	To convert existing reception class to a nursery unit	Approved
2011	264 (SELB)	St Francis of Assisi, Keady	To establish a nursery unit [It was intended to cease reception if the DP was approved]	Not Approved
2012	273 (SELB)	Iveagh PS, Rathfriland	To establish a nursery unit [It was intended to cease reception if the DP was approved]	Not Approved

Reception Classes

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the reception classes which are currently operating, broken down by (i) school type and (ii) Education and Library board.

(AQW 19185/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The following table provides details of the number of reception classes comprising only reception pupils, broken down by management type and Education and Library Board:

Management type	ELB	Nos of schools/ classes	Reception pupils
Controlled	NEELB	3	35
Catholic maintained	NEELB	2	32
	SEELB	2	37
	WELB	1	14
Total		8	118

The following table provides details of the number of reception pupils in classes with pupils of compulsory school age, broken down by management type and Education and Library Board:

Management type	ELB	Nos of schools/ classes	Reception pupils
Controlled	NEELB	7	36
	SEELB	4	22
	SELB	10	34
	WELB	8	23
Controlled Integrated	NEELB	1	4
	SEELB	3	6
Other Maintained	SELB	1	1
Catholic maintained	NEELB	5	25
	SEELB	9	44
	SELB	22	57
	WELB	15	52
Total		85	304

Data is from the 2012/13 school census. These figures may be subject to minor revision once the Education and Library Boards' auditing process is completed. Finalised figures will be available at the end of February 2013.

Expenditure: Projects

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 16943/11-15, how much finance had been expended by 31 December 2012 on each of the projects listed.

(AQW 19188/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Finances expended against the 18 capital build projects announced in June 2012 up to 31 December 2012 are shown in the table below.

School Scheme	Type of School	All Expenditure up to 31/03/2012 £000's	2012/13 Expenditure up to 31/12/2012 £000's	Total Spend to Date £000's
Coláiste Feirste, Belfast	Post-Primary	2,645	0	2,645
St Clare's Convent Primary School	Primary	739	58	797
St Colman's Abbey Primary School, Newry				
St Joseph's Convent PS, Newry	Primary	93	45	138
Dromore Central Primary School	Primary	244	7	251
Eglinton Primary School	Primary	154	1	155
Tannaghmore Primary School, Lurgan	Primary	209	0	209
Ebrington Controlled PS, Derry	Primary	113	0	113
Foyle & Londonderry College	Post-Primary	15,071	2	15073

School Scheme	Type of School	All Expenditure up to 31/03/2012 £000's	2012/13 Expenditure up to 31/12/2012 £000's	Total Spend to Date £000's
St Teresa's Primary School, Lurgan	Primary	144	8	152
Victoria Park Primary School, Belfast	Primary	408	210	618
Enniskillen Model Primary School	Primary	138	4	142
St Mary's Primary School, Banbridge	Primary	69	0	69
Bheann Mhadagain, Belfast	Primary	52	0	52
Belmont House Special School, Derry	Special	10	0	10
Rossmar Special School, Limavady	Special	10	0	10
Castletower Ballymena	Special	0	2	2
Arvalee School & Resource Centre, Omagh	Special	0	0	0
St Gerards Education Resource Centre	Special	0	0	0
		20,099	337	20,436

It should be noted that the figure for Coláiste Feirste, Belfast and Foyle & Londonderry College include site purchases of £2,325k and £14,500k respectively.

Expenditure for the current financial year reflects payments against invoices presented as at 31 December 2012.

Children with Special Needs: Annual Reviews

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the delays caused by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in relation to the return of paperwork required by schools completing annual reviews for children with special needs.

(AQW 19194/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Neither the Department of Education nor the Education and Library Boards have been made aware of significant issues regarding the return of paperwork by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) in relation to requests by schools for paperwork required for annual reviews of statements of special educational needs.

Preschool Pupils: Attendance

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Education what research his Department has conducted into the effect that the mode of attendance (either part time or full time) of pre-school pupils has on society and parental career choices.

(AQW 19197/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department provided funding, along with the Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety and the Social Steering Group for a longitudinal study which looked at the educational and developmental impact on children of a pre-school education and one of the aspects considered by the study was length of session. The 'Effective Pre-school Provision (EPPNI) Summary Report 2006' found, inter alia, that full time attendance had no benefits for cognitive development at the start of primary school compared to part-time provision.

In December 2012 I launched Learning to Learn – A Framework for Early Education and Learning which sets out the Department of Education's proposed overall policy for early years education and learning. A key action proposed in the Framework is that the Department will over time standardise patterns of attendance as part of the pre-school programme. In finalising the actions I will consider the responses to the consultation in order to ensure the best possible learning outcomes for the child.

Education and Skills Authority: Operating Budget

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education to detail the estimated operating budget for the Education and Skills Authority, broken down by the area and amount of the projected spend.

(AQW 19209/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The budgets for 2013/14 have not yet been finalised. Until the commencement date for the Education and Skills Authority has been determined, its operating budget for 2013/14 cannot be established. Work is currently ongoing to establish both structures and budgets.

Area Learning Communities

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education for an update on each of the Area Learning Communities, detailing their work and cost to date.

(AQW 19210/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Schools individually, and on an area basis, undertake a review of their curricular offer at 14+ and 16+ and set SMART targets to ensure the offer is of high quality, broad and balanced, coherent and sustainable and relevant to the needs of all young people and the economy. Based around 4 strategic priorities set by the department, each ALC submits an annual implementation plan. All Area Learning Community implementation plans will be available to view on www.efaudit.org by the end of February 2013.

The monies allocated to the schools as a contribution to the costs of expanding the curricular offer in each of the 30 Area Learning Communities in the last year are set out below:

Area Learning Community	No. of schools	Total Allocation 2013/14
Antrim ALC	4	£220,120
Armagh ALC	9	£338,120
Ballyclare ALC	2	£53,552
Ballymena ALC	10	£401,439
Ballymoney ALC	3	£90,811
Ballynahinch ALC	5	£207,924
Banbridge ALC	7	£617,456
Carrickfergus ALC	4	£108,984
Castlereagh ALC	6	£216,854
Coleraine ALC	12	£526,890
Craigavon ALC	13	£413,049
Derg Mourne ALC	5	£280,800
Dungannon & Cookstown ALC	13	£540,779
East Belfast ALC	9	£319,190
Fermanagh ALC	16	£582,649
Foyle ALC	15	£685,266
Larne ALC	4	£134,830
Lecale ALC	8	£335,312
Lisburn ALC	9	£289,310
Magherafelt ALC	6	£223,060
NEELB Rural ALC	4	£228,367
Newry & Mourne ALC	15	£1,081,181
Newtownabbey ALC	9	£419,917
North Belfast ALC	11	£390,191
North Down & Ards ALC	15	£706,376
Omagh ALC	9	£228,670
Roe Valley ALC	5	£331,288
South Belfast ALC	11	£192,179
South West Belfast ALC	2	£90,535
West Belfast ALC	9	£517,429

Bilateral Selection System

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Education how many post-primary schools work a bi-lateral selection system for pupils; and what percentage of (i) pupils of all ability; and (ii) pupils academically selected attend each of these schools.

(AQW 19212/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There are five post-primary schools that operate a bi-lateral selection process for entry to Year 8 – that is they use a mixture of academic and non-academic criteria to select pupils for admission. The table below sets out, for each of these schools, the percentage of pupils that will be selected for admission to Year 8 using academic criteria and the percentage that will be admitted using non-academic criteria in the Transfer 2013 process.

School	% pupils admitted using academic criteria	% pupils admitted using non-academic criteria
Lagan College	35	65
Slemish Integrated College	35	65
Strabane Academy	50	50
Coleraine High School	90	10
Coleraine Academical Institution	92	8

The admissions criteria used by any school are a matter for the Board of Governors: there are currently no Regulations that either prescribe or prohibit criteria, or set down the order in which criteria should be applied. However, all post-primary schools are obliged by law to have regard to the guidance published by the Department which recommends a number of criteria that schools should use, and also recommends that schools should not use criteria referenced to academic ability.

The Board of Governors of a school, as the legal admissions authority, has responsibility for setting the admissions criteria for that school in line with DE legislation and policies. For schools currently operating a bi-lateral process this includes determining the percentage of applicants to be selected with reference to academic ability.

Bilateral Selection System

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Education, where a Board of Governors is against a bi-lateral selection system and wants to retain academic selection, what measures are in place in Education and Library Boards or his Department, to require a school to work a bi-lateral system of selecting pupils.

(AQW 19213/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There are five post-primary schools that operate a bi-lateral selection process for entry to Year 8 – that is they use a mixture of academic and non-academic criteria to select pupils for admission. The table below sets out, for each of these schools, the percentage of pupils that will be selected for admission to Year 8 using academic criteria and the percentage that will be admitted using non-academic criteria in the Transfer 2013 process.

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The Board of Governors of a school, as the legal admissions authority, has responsibility for setting the admissions criteria for that school in line with DE legislation and policies. For schools currently operating a bi-lateral process this includes determining the percentage of applicants to be selected with reference to academic ability.

Bilateral Selection System

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Education what mechanisms are in place in Education and Library Boards or his Department, to determine the percentage of pupils that are selected by academic selection in a post-primary school that has a bi-lateral selection process.

(AQW 19214/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There are five post-primary schools that operate a bi-lateral selection process for entry to Year 8 – that is they use a mixture of academic and non-academic criteria to select pupils for admission. The table below sets out, for each of these schools, the percentage of pupils that will be selected for admission to Year 8 using academic criteria and the percentage that will be admitted using non-academic criteria in the Transfer 2013 process.

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The Board of Governors of a school, as the legal admissions authority, has responsibility for setting the admissions criteria for that school in line with DE legislation and policies. For schools currently operating a bi-lateral process this includes determining the percentage of applicants to be selected with reference to academic ability.

School Newbuilds: Renewable Energy

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education what provisions are in place to provide each of the new school builds announced in January 2013 with renewable energy resources and water recycling facilities.

(AQW 19223/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: All major works projects must include measures to achieve a Building Research Establishment Environment Assessment Method (BREEAM) rating of 'excellent' for new schemes or 'very good' for refurbishment schemes. The BREEAM assessment uses recognised measures of performance set against established benchmarks to evaluate a building's specification, design, construction and use. These measures include aspects related to energy and water use, the internal environment (health and well-being), pollution, transport, materials, waste, ecology and management processes.

In addition, design proposals for a new school must include consideration of renewable energy as part of the business case submitted to the Department for approval.

My Department is committed to the promotion of sustainability and the new school builds that I announced last month will have to comply with the requirements outlined above.

Extended Schools Concept

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education whether he will re-affirm his commitment to the extended schools concept; and to detail the physical capacity in the new school builds, announced in January 2013, to cope with an extended provision of services.

(AQW 19224/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I remain committed to the Extended Schools concept. In recognition of this I provided £11.8m for the Extended Schools programme in 2012/13. Over 450 schools across the north of Ireland currently benefit from additional funding provided through the programme.

The focus of my capital investment announcement of 22 January has been on providing a first class educational experience for pupils to help our young people fulfil their potential.

The schools to be advanced in planning are core to emerging area plans, which will ensure a strategic approach covering all children's needs is adopted. They will be brought forward in discussion with Managing Authorities and schools to ensure they fully address the needs of pupils. The need for extended services will form part of these discussions.

Continuing Professional Development

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail the budget available for Continuing Professional Development across the school sectors in this financial year; and whether he will affirm his commitment to the importance of improving the teaching body through access to training and development in the workplace.

(AQW 19225/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have made some £11.5 million available for Continuing Professional Development across the school sectors in this financial year.

Well trained and motivated teachers are essential in the drive to raise standards in our schools. The proposed Education and Skills Authority will therefore have a professional support service of the highest quality. It will be responsive to the needs of teachers, modern in its outlook and dedicated in its commitment to helping teachers support pupils. In the interim, I have tasked my officials with taking action to ensure that the current structures continue to deliver effectively for teachers.

I will also ensure support for the continuing professional development of teachers through a new strategy for teacher education that will focus on developing and supporting teachers throughout their career.

Composite Classes: Attainment Levels

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Education whether any research has been carried out on the attainment levels of children who have been taught in composite classes.

(AQW 19233/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department has not carried out any specific research on the attainment levels of children who have been taught in composite classes.

The Department is aware that research has been carried out in other countries and this evidence suggests there is little correlation between pupil achievement and composite classes.

Furthermore, there is no evidence from inspections to suggest that the teaching of children in composite classes is any less competent than that received by children in classes with only 1 year group.

School Boards of Governors have a degree of flexibility afforded to them under the Local Management of Schools arrangements. It is the Board of Governors that has responsibility for determining their school's staffing complement and for managing the school's education budget.

Therefore, any decision on the use of a composite class approach is a matter for the Board of Governors.

Nursery Schools, Staff:Pupil Ratio

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Education whether his Department has conducted any pilot projects to research the optimum staff to pupil ratio needed for nursery schools; and whether these findings were published.

(AQW 19234/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In December 2012 I launched Learning to Learn – A Framework for Early Education and Learning. A proposed action in the Framework is piloting the deployment of additional assistants in nursery schools and nursery units to increase the staff to child ratios across statutory pre-school settings. In taking this action forward I proposed that the Department would work directly with nursery school and primary school principals to develop the pilot.

In developing 'Learning to Learn' my officials worked with a Stakeholder Advisory Group, which brought together a wide cross-section of interests in the early years field, including the statutory nursery and primary education sectors.

The focused consultation concluded on the 31 January 2013 and I will consider the comments received during consultation and their impact on the current proposals before finalising the way forward. Before implementing any changes, officials will engage with nursery teachers and principals to discuss the optimum staff to pupil ratio needed for nursery schools and units.

Nursery School Education

Mrs Hale asked Minister of Education, given that Early Years progress will be maintained by inspections, how he will ensure that external providers of nursery school education will be adequately inspected.

(AQW 19235/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: All pre-school providers which are in receipt of funding from the Department of Education are expected to deliver the same pre-school curriculum which follows the Curricular Guidance for Pre-school Education (which was produced by CCEA). All DE funded pre-school providers, whether they are a nursery school, nursery unit, voluntary or private playgroup, are inspected in the exactly the same way, to the same standard, by early years specialist inspectors from the Education and Training Inspectorate. A comparative summary of the latest findings relating to inspections across the range of pre-school providers during the period of 2010-12 can be found in the latest Chief Inspector's Report.

Nursery Schools, Staff:Pupil Ratio

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Education whether there has been any engagement with nursery teachers and principals to discuss the optimum staff to pupil ratio needed for nursery schools and units.

(AQW 19236/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In December 2012 I launched Learning to Learn – A Framework for Early Education and Learning. A proposed action in the Framework is piloting the deployment of additional assistants in nursery schools and nursery units to increase the staff to child ratios across statutory pre-school settings. In taking this action forward I proposed that the Department would work directly with nursery school and primary school principals to develop the pilot.

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The focused consultation concluded on the 31 January 2013 and I will consider the comments received during consultation and their impact on the current proposals before finalising the way forward. Before implementing any changes, officials will engage with nursery teachers and principals to discuss the optimum staff to pupil ratio needed for nursery schools and units.

Shadow Year Evaluation Report

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Education whether there has been any engagement with schools to address the concerns set out in the Shadow Year Evaluation Report.

(AQW 19237/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: CCEA held an evaluation event on 3 December 2012 for all Shadow Year schools to report the findings of the Shadow Year Evaluation report, to outline actions taken in response to the recommendations of the report and to provide an opportunity for participants to discuss the findings, recommendations and subsequent developments. Findings from the report were also shared and discussed with the Post Primary Principals' Forum on 23 October and the Primary Principals' Forum on 14 November 2012.

I am assured that CCEA continues to engage with schools on an ongoing basis in relation to assessment and moderation arrangements. Engagement to date has included telephone contact with all Shadow Year schools, to ascertain their intention regarding moderation this year and engagement with two Primary principals' cluster groups regarding the new arrangements. In addition, CCEA has delivered 11 Post Primary Agreement Trial Events since 19th November and has provided support visits to both primary and post primary schools. CCEA also continues to provide ongoing email and telephone support for schools on all aspects of the new assessment arrangements.

School Transport: Education and Library Board Buses

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Education how Education and Library Boards promote the use of Board buses instead of private hire buses for school transport needs outside of normal school hours.

(AQW 19284/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education and Library Boards have provided the following information:

The Belfast Education and Library Board caters almost exclusively for the transport requirements of statemented pupils who attend special schools. Many of the vehicles are adapted for wheelchair provision and special schools are supported for after school clubs and summer schemes.

The North Eastern and South Eastern Education and Library Boards actively seek to promote the use of their buses outside of the normal home to school transport hours. Both Boards encourage schools to apply to use their vehicles throughout the year. During the school day and once pupils are transported into school each morning, buses move to operate an extensive transport programme bringing pupils to swimming pools, library visits and on other school trips as requested. Using Board buses for these trips is more cost effective than using private hire as the Boards only charge for expenses incurred. Additionally, both Boards' special needs buses are based at special needs schools where they are used to provide transport throughout the school day as required. Also, both Boards' buses provide transport for their Youth Departments in the evenings and weekends, and there is provision on Saturday mornings for the Boards' Music Departments to transport pupils to and from orchestra practice and concerts.

The Southern Education and Library Board writes to schools on a yearly basis, detailing the availability of Board buses for hire. In addition, area transport management staff network with local schools/principals on a regular basis.

The Western Education and Library Board has for many years provided transport on a regular basis to schools and registered youth groups. However, it is a matter for the school management or youth club to decide as to the form of transport acquired; whether Board bus or private hire.

It should be noted that Boards work under domestic driving regulations and are unable to operate for 'hire and reward', as to do so would be to compete against the interests of the private sector. The regulations cover all scheduled / timetabled (ie. regular) bus services within a 30 mile radius from a vehicle's base. Therefore, Boards are restricted by the availability of time on drivers' schedules, the distance/times schools need to travel.

Preschool Places

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Education how his Department defines part-time and full-time preschool places; and what is the legal basis for these definitions.

(AQW 19288/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education (NI) Order 1998, Article 22, Paragraph 4, Sub-paragraph (b) provides the following definitions.

"Any reference to full-time pre-school education is a reference to pre-school education normally provided for at least 4 hour and 30 minutes on each school day, and any reference to part-time pre-school education is a reference to pre-school education normally provided for less than that amount of time but for at least 2 hours and 30 minutes on each school day."

Minister of Education: North Down Visits

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many visits he has made to North Down since coming into office. (AQW 19309/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have visited 7 schools in North Down since coming into office. The schools visited are listed below.

- St Columbanus' College, Bangor;
- Regent House School, Newtownards;
- Ballyholme Primary School, Bangor;
- Bangor Central Integrated Primary School, Bangor;
- Hollywood Primary School, Hollywood;
- Hollywood Nursery School, Hollywood; and
- Priory College, Hollywood.

Pupil Absence Rates: North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail the pupil absentee level for each school in North Down, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 19348/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: School level absence statistics for 2011/12 will be available from 28th February 2013.

The tables below provide the overall absence rates for primary, post-primary and special schools in the North Down Parliamentary Constituency between 2008/09 and 2010/11.

Overall absence rates (% of total half days) in North Down primary schools, 2008/09 – 2010/11

School Name	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Ballyholme PS	3.6	3.4	4.3
Ballymagee PS	4.0	4.1	4.3
Ballyvester PS	5.2	5.2	4.4
Bangor Central PS	5.5	5.5	5.4
Bangor Grammar School Prep. Dept.	3.5	3.7	N/A
Bloomfield PS	7.8	7.6	7.5
Clandeboye PS	7.7	6.8	7.8
Crawfordsburn PS	4.9	5.0	4.4
Donaghadee Ps	5.1	5.3	4.6
Glencraig Integrated PS	3.6	4.0	3.5
Glenlola Collegiate Prep. Dept.	5.4	4.2	3.6
Grange Park PS	3.7	4.3	3.5
Hollywood PS	4.7	4.6	4.4
Kilcooley PS	9.3	7.2	8.4
Kilmaine PS	3.8	3.6	3.5
Millisle PS	4.9	4.8	5.4
Rathmore PS	3.7	4.0	3.6
Redburn PS	10.0	8.8	7.6
St Anne's PS Donaghadee	6.2	8.6	6.2
St Comgall's PS Bangor	4.2	4.3	4.2
St Malachy's PS Bangor	6.0	4.8	5.0
St Patrick's PS Hollywood	3.5	4.5	3.8
Sullivan Upper School Prep. Dept.	2.7	3.0	3.6
Towerview Ps	4.8	4.6	3.7

Overall absence rates (% of total half days) in North Down post-primary schools, 2008/09 – 2010/11

School name	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Bangor Academy And 6Th Form College	12.2	12.0	11.4
Bangor Gs	4.1	4.4	3.9
Glenlola Collegiate	4.9	5.3	5.6
Priory College	11.8	11.5	11.5
St Columbanus' College	8.5	9.4	9.0
Sullivan Upper School	4.0	3.7	3.3

Overall absence rates (% of total half days) in North Down special schools, 2008/09 – 2010/11

School name	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Clifton Special School	10.2	10.7	8.7
Lakewood Special School	22.7	29.9	13.4

Notes to tables:

- 1 Figures for primary schools include pupils in Years 1-7, post-primary schools include Years 8-12 and special schools include all pupils.

Teachers: Sickness Absence

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail the overall teacher sickness absenteeism level, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 19349/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Average teacher sickness absence* in each of the last three financial years is as follows:

2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
7.6 days	6.3 days	7.2 days

* Excludes Voluntary Grammar Schools

Teacher Qualifications

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education what qualifications are required by teachers who wish to work in each year group, including nursery and reception classes, in the (i) Controlled; (ii) Maintained; (iii) Integrated; (iv) Voluntary; and (v) Irish Medium Sectors.

(AQW 19362/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The qualifications required to enable teachers to work in grant aided schools are set out in the Department's Circular 2007/22. Individuals who have completed one of the following courses of study at an approved university or school of education will be eligible to teach here. The courses are:

- A Bachelor of Education Degree;
- Other degree courses with an approved teacher education element;
- An approved degree course together with an approved Post Graduate Certificate in Education qualification;
- An approved degree course together with a Post Graduate Diploma in Further and Higher education obtained while serving as a teacher in a further education setting.

Teachers who have gained recognised qualifications and teaching status in Britain will also be eligible. In addition teachers from within the EC or beyond can apply to the General Teaching Council (GTC) to have their qualification recognised.

Responsibility for the approval of qualifications lies with the GTC, and, in general, teachers registered with the Council are eligible to teach in grant-aided schools here regardless of the sector or phase of education.

However, responsibility for making teaching appointments rests with employers. Although a teacher may be registered as eligible to teach in any school, an employer should ensure that, where required, a teacher's qualifications, training and skills are appropriate to the needs of the school. This could include, but would not be exclusive to, the Irish Medium sector where an Irish language qualification may be desirable.

The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools requires individuals appointed to a permanent teaching position in a Catholic Maintained nursery or primary school to hold a recognised Certificate of Religious Education. The onus is therefore on teachers to acquire the Certificate if they wish to seek employment in those schools.

It is not a requirement to possess the Certificate to work in post-primary schools. However, I understand that individual schools may seek the Certificate as a job- related criterion.

Department for Employment and Learning

Universities: Student Enrolment

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of students, domiciled in Northern Ireland, who enrolled in university courses in (i) Northern Ireland; (ii) Great Britain; (iii) the Republic of Ireland; and (iv) other EU countries, in each of the last five years, broken down by religion.

(AQW 18752/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning):

- (i) The table below details the number Northern Ireland domiciled students enrolled at Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions broken down by religion for each of the last five years.

Academic year	Protestant	Catholic	Other	Not known/ available	Total
2007/08	14,200	19,820	1,345	6,720	42,085
2008/09	13,570	19,380	1,395	7,355	41,700
2009/10	14,415	20,995	2,270	5,990	43,670
2010/11	14,740	21,380	2,765	5,070	43,960
2011/12	14,505	21,275	3,510	3,970	43,260

- (ii) and (iii) The table below details the number of (ii) Northern Ireland domiciled students enrolled at Higher Education Institutions in Great Britain and (iii) Northern Ireland domiciled students enrolled on Higher Education courses in the Republic of Ireland for each of the last five years. Information on religion is not collected for these students however total enrolments have been included for information.

Academic year	Great Britain	Republic of Ireland
2007/08	20,210	1,060
2008/09	20,560	1,040
2009/10	20,965	1,165
2010/11	21,595	1,035
2011/12	22,330	965

- (iv) There is no known source of information which collects data for other EU countries which the Department can access to answer this aspect of the question on Northern Ireland domiciled students enrolled in university courses in other EU Countries.

Sources: Higher Education Statistics Agency and Higher Education Authority (ROI)

Notes:

- 1) Latest available data are for the 2011/12 academic year.
- 2) Religious affiliation is only collected for Northern Ireland domiciled students at Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions, however it is not a mandatory question.
- 3) Figures are rounded to the nearest 5 and therefore may not sum to totals.
- 4) Figures for enrolments in Higher Education Institutions in Great Britain include enrolments at the Open University.

Universities: Student Enrolment

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of students, domiciled in Northern Ireland, who enrolled in university courses in (i) Northern Ireland; (ii) Great Britain; (iii) the Republic of Ireland; and (iv) other EU countries in each of the last five years, broken down by the post-primary sector they attended.

(AQW 18753/11-15)

Dr Farry: Information on university students broken down by the post-primary sector they attended is not available from my Department.

Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) provides information on NI domiciled students at UK Higher Education Institutions and although some limited information is available on the previous institution which students have attended, HESA has advised that the information is not complete or robust, and therefore cannot be provided.

In addition, although data from the Higher Education Authority in the ROI provides information on NI domiciled students at ROI institutions, this does not include details of the post-primary sector they attended. There is no known source of information which collects data for other EU countries which the Department can access.

Civil Servants: Unrest

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the number of civil servants from his Department who have left work early since 3 December 2012 due to the civil unrest associated with the flag protests; and (ii) the associated financial cost to his departmental budget.

(AQW 18786/11-15)

Dr Farry: The NICS is fully aware of its responsibility to maintain a service to the public and every effort is made to keep its offices open for business.

Business continuity and staff safety are the key issues to be assessed when considering office closure. My Department has a process in place outlining the appropriate steps to take when considering office closure. Managers monitor the situation locally and if they foresee any security, safety or transport related difficulties for staff, decide on the appropriate action to take in light of the information available within the rules of the Flexible Working Time - Code of Practice.

Since 3rd December all DEL Headquarter buildings have been closed at 5pm on a small number of occasions. Under the NICS Flexible Working Time scheme, staff are able to vary times of arrival and departure from work, the length and timing of lunch breaks and to take time off if extra hours are worked. As staff were able to avail of flexible working to leave at 4 p.m. on the days where DEL Headquarter buildings were closed at 5 p.m., there is no associated financial cost to my departmental budget.

Recruitment Agencies: Disclosure of Convictions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) what checks are made by recruitment agencies to ensure that applicants are providing the correct information, particularly in relation to the disclosure of convictions; (ii) whether this is a legal requirement; and (iii) how this requirement is enforced.

(AQW 18879/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Conduct of Employment Agencies and Employment Businesses Regulations (NI) 2005 ("the Regulations") set out the information which must be obtained by an employment agency or employment business from hirers and workseekers, before a post can be filled.

There is no specific requirement in the regulations to compel a workseeker to disclose a criminal conviction. However, a requirement to do so may arise if the hirer makes it a specification of the post they are seeking to fill, or if such a disclosure is required by law in connection with a particular post.

The information to be obtained from the hirer about the position to be filled should include details of any experience, training, qualifications and authorisations required by the hirer, by law or by any professional body. If the hirer wishes a worker to have a criminal record check, or if one must be obtained because of the nature of the post, it would be at this stage that it would be identified.

There are some circumstances in which criminal records checks or Enhanced Access NI checks, must be carried out prior to placing workers. Article 13 of the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Order (NI) 2007 requires employment businesses and agencies to ensure that workers who are to engage in "regulated activity" (i.e. with vulnerable adults and children) are not on a barred list. This is done by obtaining an Enhanced Access NI Disclosure certificate. These are required in the case of workers who take up positions in which they will be in contact with vulnerable adults or children.

Where the position to be filled involves working with vulnerable people, or if a specific qualification is required by law or a professional body, the Regulations oblige employment agencies and businesses to obtain copies of any relevant qualifications or authorisations (including Access NI disclosures), and to offer to provide copies of these to the hirer.

In short, if a role to be filled does not involve working with vulnerable adults or children, and if a hirer does not make it a stipulation that a clear criminal record was a condition for the role, then a Northern Ireland based recruitment agency/business has no reason and no legal obligation to seek to obtain a criminal record history for the worker.

My Department enforces the Regulations through its Employment Agency Inspectorate (EAI) and its programmes of inspections. During an inspection, evidence will be sought of any experience, training, qualifications and authorisations required by the hirer, by law or by any professional body, including Enhanced Access NI disclosures, where these must be obtained. Provision is included in the Regulations as to measures that may be taken if there are infringements of the Regulations.

The EAI programme is based on an ongoing identification and assessment of risks in the recruitment sector, and workers who are to work with vulnerable adults or children are prioritised in this programme of work.

The EAI will be happy to investigate any complaint against a recruitment agency and to take whatever steps are necessary on foot of its findings.

Skill Shortages: North and North-west

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans his Department has to address skill shortages in the North and North West of Northern Ireland.

(AQW 18923/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland, known as 'Success through Skills – Transforming Futures', articulates the Department's overarching vision for the development of skills in Northern Ireland. The Strategy, which is informed by forecasting work and labour market information, highlights a number of challenges that need to be addressed if we are to overcome current and forecast skills shortages and have a workforce equipped with the skills employers need to drive their businesses.

A key component of my Department's work is how we effectively engage with employers to help them up-skill their existing staff and recruit new staff with the skills they require.

My Department's Skills Solutions Service, targeted specifically at small and medium sized enterprises, helps employers across Northern Ireland and in all sectors to understand and access the Department's skills development provision. It is delivered on an area based basis, which includes a dedicated team in the North West. We are mindful of the One Plan, aimed at the regeneration of Londonderry, and my Department is represented on the Skills Directorate which was established in the city to take forward the relevant parts of the plan.

My Department also undertakes work on a sectoral basis. Last year, I identified the 'hotels and catering sector', which supports tourism, as a priority sector. Consequently, the Skills Solutions Service has worked in partnership with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and People 1st, the relevant Sector Skills Council, to introduce and fund the World Host Customer Service Programme as the primary customer service training programme for the hospitality and tourism sector. To date, some 4,500 sector employees across Northern Ireland have successfully completed it, with approximately 50% of this total based in the North and North West of Northern Ireland. The Department has brought forward further World Host programmes to build on this success.

To complement the WorldHost training, the Department's Skills Solutions Service, in conjunction with the Further Education Colleges, has also developed short, accredited training packages in key specific areas. There are numerous other types of training provisions across Northern Ireland which support the flow of qualified people into the hospitality sector, with high quality courses offered throughout the network of Further Education Colleges and Universities. This work builds on the successful Hospitality and Tourism Skills Action Plan, led by my Department.

As the aim of the Skills Strategy is focussed on improving the match between the demand and supply of skills to bring about increased productivity, the Strategy has deliberately focused on the private sector and the skills shortages and gaps within it. That said, a number of pilots based on the Apprenticeship scheme have been taken forward within the public sector including the recently initiated Public/Private Sector ICT Apprenticeship.

Skill Shortages: Hospitality and Public Administration Sectors

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans his Department has to address skill shortages in the (i) hospitality; and (ii) public administration sectors.

(AQW 18924/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland, known as 'Success through Skills – Transforming Futures', articulates the Department's overarching vision for the development of skills in Northern Ireland. The Strategy, which is informed by forecasting work and labour market information, highlights a number of challenges that need to be addressed if we are to overcome current and forecast skills shortages and have a workforce equipped with the skills employers need to drive their businesses.

A key component of my Department's work is how we effectively engage with employers to help them up-skill their existing staff and recruit new staff with the skills they require.

My Department's Skills Solutions Service, targeted specifically at small and medium sized enterprises, helps employers across Northern Ireland and in all sectors to understand and access the Department's skills development provision. It is delivered on an area based basis, which includes a dedicated team in the North West. We are mindful of the One Plan, aimed at the regeneration of Londonderry, and my Department is represented on the Skills Directorate which was established in the city to take forward the relevant parts of the plan.

My Department also undertakes work on a sectoral basis. Last year, I identified the 'hotels and catering sector', which supports tourism, as a priority sector. Consequently, the Skills Solutions Service has worked in partnership with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and People 1st, the relevant Sector Skills Council, to introduce and fund the World Host Customer Service Programme as the primary customer service training programme for the hospitality and tourism sector. To date, some 4,500 sector employees across Northern Ireland have successfully completed it, with approximately 50% of this total based in the North and North West of Northern Ireland. The Department has brought forward further World Host programmes to build on this success.

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Skill Shortages: Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans his Department has to address skill shortages in small and medium sized enterprises.

(AQW 18925/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland, known as 'Success through Skills – Transforming Futures', articulates the Department's overarching vision for the development of skills in Northern Ireland. The Strategy, which is informed by forecasting work and labour market information, highlights a number of challenges that need to be addressed if we are to overcome current and forecast skills shortages and have a workforce equipped with the skills employers need to drive their businesses.

A key component of my Department's work is how we effectively engage with employers to help them up-skill their existing staff and recruit new staff with the skills they require.

My Department's Skills Solutions Service, targeted specifically at small and medium sized enterprises, helps employers across Northern Ireland and in all sectors to understand and access the Department's skills development provision. It is delivered on an area based basis, which includes a dedicated team in the North West. We are mindful of the One Plan, aimed at the regeneration of Londonderry, and my Department is represented on the Skills Directorate which was established in the city to take forward the relevant parts of the plan.

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University Students: Religious Breakdown

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the religious breakdown of students attending (i) the University of Ulster; and (ii) Queen's University Belfast, broken down by (a) campus; and (ii) attendance type.

(AQW 18960/11-15)

Dr Farry: The tables below detail by religion the number of Northern Ireland domiciled students enrolled at the University of Ulster and Queen's University, Belfast by campus and mode of study in 2011/12.

Full-time students

	Protestant	Catholic	Other	Not known/ available	Total
University of Ulster, Belfast	470	570	200	85	1,325
University of Ulster, Coleraine	1,760	1,415	455	230	3,860
University of Ulster, Jordanstown	2,340	4,445	530	295	7,615
University of Ulster, Magee	545	1,855	230	125	2,755
The Queen's University of Belfast	5,405	7,255	1,105	500	14,265
Total	10,525	15,535	2,520	1,235	29,815

Part-time students

	Protestant	Catholic	Other	Not known/ available	Total
University of Ulster, Belfast	35	135	35	20	225
University of Ulster, Coleraine	170	195	70	55	490
University of Ulster, Jordanstown	1,410	1,825	375	520	4,130
University of Ulster, Magee	100	390	60	40	590
The Queen's University of Belfast	1,435	1,815	425	2,060	5,730
Total	3,155	4,360	960	2,695	11,170

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

Notes:

- 1) Latest available data are for the 2011/12 academic year.
- 2) Religious affiliation is only collected for Northern Ireland domiciled students at Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions, however it is not a mandatory question.
- 3) Figures are rounded to the nearest 5 and therefore may not sum to totals.

Skills and Vocational Training and Further Education

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what coordination exists between his Department and the Department of Education in relation to funding for skills and vocational training and further education.

(AQW 18961/11-15)

Dr Farry: Both the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and the Department of Education (DE) are committed to ensuring that every young person has the opportunity, through the education and training system, to fulfil their potential. Concurrent with this is a need to develop a highly skilled, flexible and innovative workforce which will contribute to the twin goals of economic success and social inclusion.

DEL and DE have been working closely on these issues since 2004. Initially through the Vocational Enhancement Programme (VEP), and since 2008 through the Entitlement Framework (EF). The VEP was developed to progress the recommendations contained in the Further Education Strategy Review and the Post-primary Review (the Costello Report) to enhance the profile of 'vocational education' and promote the need for collaboration among schools, colleges and training providers in the interest of pupils. The VEP, which was funded by DEL, ended in June 2008, and from then funding was channelled through DE to schools through the EF funding formula. Collaborative arrangements between schools, colleges and training providers are continuing.

Senior officials from DEL and DE meet regularly to discuss how they will implement their respective policies and programmes for 14 to 19 year olds in a coherent manner, both to maximise the benefit to young people, and to make the best use of the resources that are available to both departments.

DEL seeks to guarantee that the education, training and skills provision it funds is of excellent quality, and that those who provide these services on its behalf commit to suitably high performance standards. We know that young people stand the best chance of succeeding and achieving if they can follow courses that interest and inspire them, and that can enable them to progress to training or to further and higher education, and on to fulfilling careers.

Learners who see their time at school or college as relevant to their interests and career choices are more likely to stay engaged with education, and are more likely to succeed and do well. This, in turn, contributes to improving standards, increasing retention and achievement rates, improving the life chances of individuals, and impacting positively on the performance of the economy.

Improving the levels of literacy, numeracy and, more recently, ICT in the population is a key priority for DEL and for the Executive, and in 2002 DEL launched its Essential Skills strategy. Currently, sixty-six post primary schools now deliver Essential Skills provision. However, my department is discussing with DE, and with Education and Training Inspectorate, how the use of Essential Skills in schools could be increased, as it has the potential to help those young people who are at risk of not attaining a grade C or better in GCSE English or mathematics.

Northern Regional College, Antrim

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the progress on the sale of the Northern Regional College, Antrim; and (ii) plans for the future of (a) the site at Antrim; and (b) the college.

(AQW 18964/11-15)

Dr Farry: Following a Public Sector Trawl, interest in acquiring a portion of the Antrim Campus site has been expressed by Fold Housing Association, for social housing. There is no public sector interest in the purchase of the remainder of the site which will be advertised on the open market when Fold Housing Association's exact requirements are finalised.

The Northern Regional College continues to work with Land and Property Services to achieve value for money for the entire site.

The College offers a range of part time and evening classes at various locations within the Antrim area. In the past two years, 200 courses have been offered, with 2446 participants. The College will continue to offer this type of provision in Antrim, subject to demand.

Northern Regional College, Antrim

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning why fewer students from Antrim have taken up places at the Northern Regional College over the past two years,
(AQW 18965/11-15)

Dr Farry: Northern Regional College has informed me that there has been no decline in enrolment numbers from the BT41 Antrim postcode area over the past two full years for which complete figures are available.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning which departmental functions will be transferred to local government under the Review of Public Administration.
(AQW 19097/11-15)

Dr Farry: No functions will be transferred from my Department to local government under the Review of Public Administration.

Pathways to Success: Collaboration and Innovation Fund

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether the Pathways to Success Collaboration and Innovation Fund programme will ensure that an innovative approach will be taken to developing, delivering and managing the approved programmes, in collaboration with partner organisations.
(AQW 19125/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Collaboration and Innovation Fund (CIF) is providing funding of over £9 million to address the issue of NEETs across Northern Ireland during the period December 2012 to March 2015.

A total of 18 organisations, drawn from the community, voluntary and educational sectors, have been chosen to engage with the most disadvantaged young people and help them into or move them towards education, training and employment.

Engaging NEETs will be achieved through a range of innovative approaches including assessment of individual need, bespoke training plans, identification of work placements, education and training courses, mentoring and in some cases the offer of full-time employment. A key point will be to encourage progress in the development of key skills in order to bring the young people closer to the labour market. The fund will also allow for greater collaboration with and between organisations working in this sector, particularly community and voluntary groups who are best placed to reach many young people who are in the NEET category.

A NEET Advisory Group has been established, with membership drawn from across the Executive Departments, business, the voluntary and community sectors, local Government, and from the NEET Strategy Forum. This group will monitor the effectiveness of the programme on a regular basis throughout the funding period and had its inaugural meeting on 22 January 2013.

The provision of a NEET Advisory Group will ensure innovative and collaborative best practice approaches are identified and shared with all project providers to ensure the most vulnerable and hard to reach young people's lives and prospects can be significantly enhanced. The Collaboration and Innovation Fund project managers will work closely to monitor the effectiveness of the CIF providers and provide ongoing help and support in the spirit of partnership.

As is the case with all public funding, projects that receive funding under the Collaboration and Innovation Fund will be subject to the financial guidance issued by DFP and endorsed by the Minister of Finance. This is set out in 'Managing Public Money' and is available for download at

http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/index/finance/afmd/afmd-key-guidance/afmd-mpmni/managing_public_money - chapter_02.pdf

North West Regional College, Londonderry

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the impact that the delay in issuing the report into the North West Regional College may have on the college and its lecturers.
(AQW 19211/11-15)

Dr Farry: The publication of the report on industrial relations in North West Regional College has been delayed until 21st February 2013 to allow time for the Department to consider the responses of those individuals who were invited to comment on the report's references to them. The delay is not expected to have a significant impact on the college or its lecturers.

North West Regional College, Londonderry

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) why the report into the North West Regional College Londonderry, which was due to be published in October 2012, was postponed until 31 January 2013 and has been further delayed for publication until 21 February 2013; and (ii) whether he guarantee that it will be published on this date.
(AQW 19287/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Department had intended to publish the report on 31st January 2013, following its original completion date of October 2012. Publication has been delayed until 21st February 2013 to allow an opportunity for individuals mentioned in the report to comment on its references to them and for the Department, in turn, to reflect on any comments made. The revised publication date remains 21st February 2013.

Stranmillis University College: Chairperson of the Board of Governors

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many applications were for the post of Chairperson of the Board of Governors of Stranmillis University College and how this compares with the last time the post was advertised.
(AQW 19318/11-15)

Dr Farry: By the initial closing date, there were two applications for the post of Chairperson of the Board of Governors of Stranmillis University College. When the post was last advertised in 2004, there was one application.

Due to the low number of applications returned, and before considering these applications, the panel decided to re-advertise the post in order to maximise the likelihood of at least one candidate successfully demonstrating the essential criteria at interview. I hope to be in a position to appoint the successful candidate by early May 2013.

Stranmillis University College: Chairperson of the Board of Governors

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what is the current position on filling the post of Chairperson of the Board of Governors of Stranmillis University College; and when an appointment will be made.
(AQW 19322/11-15)

Dr Farry: By the initial closing date, there were two applications for the post of Chairperson of the Board of Governors of Stranmillis University College. When the post was last advertised in 2004, there was one application.

Due to the low number of applications returned, and before considering these applications, the panel decided to re-advertise the post in order to maximise the likelihood of at least one candidate successfully demonstrating the essential criteria at interview. I hope to be in a position to appoint the successful candidate by early May 2013.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Invest NI: Venture Capital Schemes

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the requirement that is placed on fund managers working on venture capital schemes with InvestNI to make or return a profit to taxpayers.
(AQW 18636/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): The primary reason for Invest NI's intervention in the venture capital market is to achieve economic development impacts from the companies invested in. The achievement of a return of profits to taxpayers is therefore a secondary objective.

The best way of achieving sustainable economic impacts is by requiring the venture capital funds to operate on a wholly commercial basis.

All venture capital funds promoted by Invest NI require private capital to be raised alongside the public capital and that private capital can only be raised if there is a firm belief in making a commercial return on the capital. Whilst it is in the interest of government to make a commercial return from Funds in which it has an investment, government intervention must firstly demonstrate an economic development impact. For this reason, Invest NI is sometimes prepared to rank behind the suppliers of private capital in order to raise a Fund at all, thereby gaining a positive economic impact.

Rathlin Island: Broadband

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what measures are being put in place to improve broadband provision on Rathlin Island.
(AQW 18746/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Officials in my Department continue to engage with the industry and the Rathlin Community, to explore feasible and economic options to improve current broadband provision on the Island provided through wire line and satellite technologies. I can also advise that the Island has been identified as one of the areas that should be part of my plans to

improve basic and superfast broadband services under the Northern Ireland Broadband Improvement Project. Until the procurement phase of this project is completed I am unable to comment on the precise improvements that may occur.

Potential Investors: Coleraine and Limavady

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of potential investors visiting (i) Coleraine; and (ii) Limavady, in the last twelve months.

(AQW 18750/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI reports on visits on a full financial year basis following a validation process with results published at year end. As a result, visits from April 2012 are not yet available.

In the last full financial year 2011/12 (1st April 2011 to 31st March 2012), Invest Northern Ireland facilitated 4 visits to the Coleraine District Council Area by potential inward investors. In the same period zero visits were facilitated to Limavady District Council Area.

It is important to note that Invest NI does not determine the location of an inward investment project. This decision is taken by the investor. Invest NI does work closely with the company when preparing a visit programme to ensure that the locations to be visited meet their requirements and also provide the best opportunity for Invest NI to sell the Northern Ireland proposition.

Titanic Project

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what are the consequences to her Department of the refusal of its bid for £18m in the January monitoring round in respect of EU refusal of support aid for the Titanic project.

(AQW 18784/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The bid remains under consideration by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister on behalf of the Executive.

EU Regional Aid: Titanic Project

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether applications for EU regional aid are project specific or generic; and how the EU funding sought for the Titanic project could be made available to other Departments.

(AQW 18835/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Titanic project was not a Regional aid project. Regional aid is a specific type of State aid for areas that are disadvantaged relative to the European or National average. The rules for Regional aid applications are set out in the Guidelines on National Regional Aid 2007 – 2013 at:

[http://eurlex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52006XC0304\(02\):EN:NOT](http://eurlex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52006XC0304(02):EN:NOT)

In 2007, Northern Ireland was granted €306m from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) to be matched euro for euro by national resources resulting in a Programme worth €613m (£510 at a 1.2 exchange rate) This Programme is known as the EU Sustainable Competitiveness Programme for Northern Ireland (2007-2013) and the funding allocated must be spent by 31 December 2015.

DETI proposed to draw down £18.2m of the ERDF available via expenditure on the Titanic Signature Project. However, if the funding is not used for this project, it can be proactively reallocated to an alternative Northern Ireland project within the programme period. This would bring about a corresponding easement on the Northern Ireland block budget position. The project will need to meet the Programme objectives but could be brought forward and managed by any Northern Ireland Government Department.

Titanic Project: EU Funding

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether the £18m EU funding anticipated for the Titanic project was received; and what happened to this money.

(AQW 18836/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The EU funding anticipated for the Titanic project has not yet been received. It remains available within the Northern Ireland Competitiveness Programme allocation.

Tourism Ireland: World Cup Qualifier

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what activities Tourism Ireland has planned to attract tourists from the Benelux countries to coincide with the World Cup Qualifier fixture between Luxembourg and Northern Ireland on 10 September 2013.

(AQW 18863/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Tourism Ireland maximises marketing opportunities around Northern Ireland matches which take place in, or involve teams from, key markets for inbound tourism.

The Benelux countries are not currently a priority market for tourism to Northern Ireland therefore no marketing activity is planned. I am however happy to discuss the issue with the member.

Titanic Signature Building: EU Tendering Requirements

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps were taken to ensure that the tendering process surrounding the Titanic Signature Building was compliant with EU tendering requirements.

(AQW 18886/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Department satisfied itself by reference to Central Procurement Directorate and legal advice that the processes for the award of both the contract to construct the Titanic Signature Building and the contract to operate and maintain the Titanic Signature Building were compliant with EU tendering requirements.

Rugby World Cup

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on any discussions that her Department has been involved in regarding Ireland hosting the 2023 Rugby World Cup.

(AQW 18897/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I was due to meet with The Minister of Culture, Arts & Leisure on Tuesday 8 January 2013 to discuss this issue; however this was postponed by DCAL until the GAA make their position clear.

The Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) has requested a contribution of £25,000 (+VAT) from NITB to undertake a feasibility study. I granted approval for this expenditure in December 2012.

Ryder Cup

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether any consideration has been given to submitting a bid to host the 2022 Ryder Cup.

(AQW 18898/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My department, through the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB), is committed to identifying opportunities for Northern Ireland to host major events. However plans and discussions on major events always need to be kept confidential due to the risk of jeopardising negotiations.

Natural Gas Network: South Down

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions she has had with the Utility Regulator on the possible extension of the natural gas network to South Down.

(AQW 18933/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Natural gas is already available in some areas of South Down, in towns such as Banbridge, Newry and Warrenpoint. With input from the Utility Regulator, my Department has recently completed a detailed economic appraisal on gas network extension to additional towns in the West and North-West and to towns in East Down such as Ballynahinch, Downpatrick, Saintfield and Crossgar. My Department will be considering the next steps in respect of East Down through further discussions with the Utility Regulator, including which towns should form part of any new or extended gas licensed areas.

Natural Gas Network: Downpatrick and Rostrevor

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail proposed timelines for the extension of natural gas networks to (i) Downpatrick and surrounding areas; and (ii) Rostrevor and surrounding areas.

(AQW 18934/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department recently completed an Outline Business Case on gas network extension to further towns in the West and North-West, and to towns in East Down including Hillsborough, Ballynahinch, Downpatrick, Crossgar and Saintfield. Gas network extension in East Down will be subject to further consideration by the Utility Regulator over coming months in relation to which towns may form part of any new or extended licence area. Gas extension to new areas is dependent on sufficient gas loads being available and the willingness of a gas company to construct and operate the new network.

No assessment has been made by the Department with regard to gas loads in Rostrevor. firmus energy has already extended the natural gas network to Warrenpoint and natural gas has been available in Newry for much longer.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment which departmental functions will be transferred to local government under the Review of Public Administration.

(AQW 18946/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Executive is expected to make a decision soon on the functions which will transfer to Local Government under Local Government Reform.

Invest NI: Technology Industry

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the bids that InvestNI has won for foreign direct investment in the technology industry, from April 2009 to March 2012.

(AQW 18966/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The following table highlights the sectors, in accordance with Invest NI's internal sector structure, directly linked to the technology industry and illustrates the associated project and jobs promoted against each.

Table 1: Invest NI Inward Investment by Technology Sectors (2009-10 to 2011/12)

Sector	No of Offers	Total Assistance £m	Total Planned Investment £m	New Jobs	Safe Jobs
Computer Software & Services	95	24.85	122.57	1,299	0
Employment Related	31	19.84	103.22	1,299	0
Business Development	64	5.01	19.35	0	0
Electrical & Electronics	71	18.59	93.79	441	56
Employment Related	13	16.61	87.80	441	56
Business Development	58	1.98	5.99	0	0
Telecoms	25	4.96	26.71	239	708
Employment Related	4	3.51	21.75	239	708
Business Development	21	1.45	4.95	0	0
Grand Total	191	48.40	243.07	1,979	764
Employment Related	48	39.96	212.77	1,979	764
Business Development	143	8.44	30.30	0	0

Notes:

- 1 Planned Investment includes Assistance Offered.
- 2 New Jobs represents the number of jobs expected to be created by the project.
- 3 Safe Jobs represents the number jobs that would have been lost if the project was not supported.
- 4 Figures include both first-time inward investments and reinvestments by existing externally-owned clients.
- 5 Business development activities will underpin business competitiveness leading eventually to growth and employment opportunities.
- 6 Invest NI revises performance data on a regular basis to ensure that it reflects implemented projects; therefore, the data above may differ to previously published information.

In the last three full financial years 2011/12 (1st April 2009 to 31st March 2012), Invest Northern Ireland has assisted 191 technology related projects by externally owned companies, promoting 1,979 jobs and safeguarding 764 existing jobs and leveraging investment commitments of £243 million.

However the table does not include potential investment projects which included some technology requirement but ultimately centred on skills required for other sectors, e.g. financial services, business services, creative services, renewable sectors, etc.

Tax Avoidance and Corporation Tax

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of tax avoidance schemes and what difference the rate of Corporation Tax made to Google's decision to choose Dublin as a foreign direct investment base instead of Northern Ireland.

(AQW 18967/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Policy on tax avoidance is, and will remain, the responsibility of the UK Government and in particular HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC). If corporation tax setting powers were to be devolved to Northern Ireland, HMRC would remain as the tax collection body and we would expect it to pursue the collection of taxation in Northern Ireland with the same vigour as any other part of the UK.

Invest NI will attempt to establish the reasons for companies locating outside Northern Ireland. However, such decisions are often commercially sensitive and, as a result, companies are not always willing to share their commercial reasoning for choosing one location over another. For some companies a low rate of Corporation Tax is indeed an important factor in

the decision making process and a low Corporation Tax rate is often cited as one of the significant factors attracting large companies to locate in the Republic of Ireland.

Invest NI: Job Creation Measures

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail how InvestNI measures job creation compared to the Industrial Development Board measurement used during the last year of its operation.

(AQW 18968/11-15)

Mrs Foster: In its last published annual report, IDB presented figures for the number of jobs promoted and created by new inward-investment projects. In this, IDB reported that c.76% of jobs relating to new inward-investment projects assisted between 1995/96 and 1998/99 were created.

An updated analysis carried out by Invest NI covering the period 2002/03 to 2007-08, and scrutinised by the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), shows that 75% of those jobs promoted through new inward-investment projects were actually created. This figure was accepted by the NIAO as being 'the most reliable estimate available'. It was produced on the same basis as the IDB approach, and is almost identical to its 76% conversion rate.

Trade Development Centre, Düsseldorf

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the performance and impact of the website of the Northern Ireland Trade Development Centre in Dusseldorf.

(AQW 18970/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI does not maintain an active or separate website for the Northern Ireland Trade Development Centre in Dusseldorf, therefore no web performance data is available for this office location. All web based trade enquiries are routed through the main investni.com website; in the past 12 months it has logged 1630 German visits.

Oil and Gas Wells

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many times organisations or public bodies under her Department's remit have inspected oil and gas wells since 1990, broken down by year and organisation or public body.

(AQW 18982/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department's Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland (HSENI) has carried out 9 inspections comprising 15 visits of oil and gas wells since 1990 as follows:

- 1990 – HSENI - one visit
- 1993 – HSENI - one visit.
- 1995 – HSENI - one visit
- 1999 – HSENI – one visit
- 2000 – HSENI – four visits
- 2001 – HSENI – four visits
- 2008 – HSENI – one visit.
- 2009 – HSENI – one visit.
- 2012 – HSENI – one visit.

Gas Transmission Pipeline

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what consideration she has given to charging a levy on any gas extraction company that will make use of the proposed gas transmission pipeline to the west of Northern Ireland, to recoup any public expenditure.

(AQW 18983/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The economic appraisal undertaken by my Department on extending the natural gas network to further towns in the West and North-West based its assessment of new transmission infrastructure on connecting existing and future gas loads in the respective towns. Estimated pipeline sizes and costs were based only on projected gas demand in towns under consideration. The gas extension project is being taken forward independently from any consideration of potential usage of new pipelines by a company engaged in gas extraction.

EU Electricity and Gas Directives

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail all the outstanding actions required to fully comply with the EU Electricity and Gas Directives.

(AQW 19020/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The vast majority of the work to transpose the Directives was completed by the original deadline of March 2011. My Department is at an advanced stage in developing legislative measures to introduce the following new activities to Northern Ireland:

- Electricity distribution licensing exemptions and obligations on exempt distributors and suppliers;
- Provision in respect of Liquefied Natural Gas(LNG); and
- Provision for Gas exemption conditions.

In addition, the existing licence modification power under the 2011 Regulations will be extended, and certain provisions of the Energy and SEM Orders will be amended to reflect requirements of the Electricity Directive.

The Department is on track to complete the work by April 2013, in line with the timeframe already notified to the Commission.

Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the most up-to-date figures on visitors to the Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre, broken down by visitors from Northern Ireland and outside Northern Ireland; and (ii) how this compares with projected figures.

(AQW 19045/11-15)

Mrs Foster:

- (i) From 3 July 2012 until 6 January 2013 The Giant's Causeway Visitor Experience welcomed 328,000 visitors. Of this, 29% of visitors were from Northern Ireland, 7% of visitors were from the Republic of Ireland and 64% of visitors were from Great Britain and overseas registered from 130 countries around the world.
- (ii) The figures projected for the Giants Causeway Visitor Experience for Year 1 are 645,000.

Tamboran: Petroleum Exploration Licence

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether her Department has agreed to a change in any of the licensing terms and conditions, including work items, in Tamboran's Petroleum Exploration licence and to provide details of any changes that were made and the date they were agreed.

(AQW 19123/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The only change agreed by the Department has been to the work programme. The details are contained in my answer to AQW No. 18021/11-15.

G8 Summit: Costs

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assurances they have received from the British Government on covering the costs of the G8 summit which will take place in Fermanagh in June.

(AQW 19142/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The UK Government will meet the material costs of hosting the G8 Summit at the Lough Erne Resort in June. The Northern Ireland Executive and other Northern Ireland bodies will be engaging in promotional activities in and around the Summit that will capitalise on having an international audience focused on Northern Ireland during this exciting time and using the opportunity to tell the world that this is a great place to do business and to visit. We are working closely with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and No.10 on ways that we can maximise this great opportunity.

Gas Network

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether she will provide a map showing all areas that receive natural gas through the gas network.

(AQW 19148/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Department has commissioned a map which shows the Phoenix Natural Gas and firmus energy gas licence areas, and the gas transmission and major distribution pipeline network in Northern Ireland. The map also highlights the key towns connected to natural gas, however it does not reflect every town/village connected or more recent developments, such as the Utility Regulator's November 2012 announcement of plans to extend the natural gas network to Bushmills. I will arrange for a copy of the map to be placed in the Assembly Library.

Gas Network

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the timetable for the extension of the gas network.

(AQO 3305/11-15)

Mrs Foster: On 10 January 2013, the Executive approved financial support of up to £32.5 million for the extension of the natural gas network to the main towns in the West and North-West of Northern Ireland. The Utility Regulator is planning to

launch a public consultation exercise in early 2013 on the proposed method for conducting a competition for new gas licences in the West and North West area, with the award of new licences anticipated around the end of 2013.

I hope to see construction of the new gas transmission infrastructure commenced by the end of 2015 with the first customer connections shortly thereafter.

However I recognise that this timetable will be very challenging, as the new licensee will have to complete detailed scheme design, and obtain other approvals including planning consent, in advance of any construction works commencing.

Tourism: Unrest

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the damage caused to Northern Ireland's tourist brand by the recent unrest.
(AQO 3306/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The press coverage of Northern Ireland in recent weeks has portrayed a negative image of Northern Ireland which is unhelpful especially as this region has been so successful in attracting visitors in recent years.

The ni2012 campaign was hugely successful in enhancing the image of Northern Ireland and I want to ensure that a positive message continues to be delivered.

My Department, through NITB and TIL, remains fully committed to promoting Northern Ireland as a visitor destination; providing reassurance to potential visitors and emphasising that it is 'business as usual' in Northern Ireland.

Flag Protests: Impact on Investor Confidence

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment has been made of the impact of flag protests, disruptions, blockages and violence on investor confidence.
(AQO 3307/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI's International Business team works with existing and potential investors in a wide range of overseas markets.

A very small number of those existing and potential investors have raised concerns about the current situation following some of the recent media coverage. Invest NI is working closely with these companies to reassure them that Northern Ireland remains a safe and competitive place to do business and to minimise the impact of any negative perceptions. No planned visits by potential investors have been cancelled and all recent scheduled visits have taken place without disruption.

Since the beginning of the year there have been a number of inward investment announcements such as Oxford Consulting Group promoting 33 new jobs and the expansion by Allen & Overy, who plan to create a further 67 jobs.

North/South Interconnector

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the proposed North South Interconnector.
(AQO 3308/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Minister for the Environment asked the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) to conduct a public enquiry into Northern Ireland Electricity's (NIE) planning application to build a new 400 kilovolt electricity interconnector between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The PAC opened its public enquiry on 6 March 2011. It was adjourned on the 20 March 2011, with further information being sought from NIE in relation to the environmental impact statement. No date for resumption of the enquiry has been set, however it is unlikely that this will be before Autumn 2013.

Cross-border Economic Development Zones

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what consideration has been given to the development of cross border economic development zones in border areas.
(AQO 3309/11-15)

Mrs Foster: None.

Jobs Fund: Under-25s

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how the number of jobs created to date through the jobs fund for under 25s compares with the target set by her Department.
(AQO 3310/11-15)

Mrs Foster: There is no separate Jobs Fund target for those aged under 25. That said, analysis of the jobs created by the Jobs Fund shows that 358 of the 2,200 jobs created to date have been filled by individuals under 25.

Young people have been particularly impacted by the economic downturn and the long term impacts of unemployment are greater for young people than other age groups. The unemployment rate for 18 – 24 year olds currently stands at 19.1%

(Sept – Nov 2012) while the employment rate is 48.8%. My Department and Invest NI remain committed to doing all we can to ensure that all of our talented young people can maximize their potential.

Investment Locations: Large Companies

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the reasons behind large companies, such as Google and Dropbox, choosing Dublin over Belfast as investment locations.

(AQO 3311/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The location of inward investment projects is determined by the company's operational needs, with a number of factors contributing to the decision, including skills availability, infrastructure and the cost and availability of property.

While Invest NI attempts to establish the reasons for companies locating outside Northern Ireland, these decisions are often commercially sensitive. As a result, companies are not always open about the reasons for choosing one location over another. However the low corporation tax rate is often commented upon as one of the significant factors influencing large companies to locate in the Republic of Ireland.

Invest NI: Vacant Land

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the action she is taking to utilise vacant land held by InvestNI.

(AQO 3312/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The policy remit under which Invest NI operates in relation to land holding is to acquire, develop and hold land for industrial use in locations where the private sector is unwilling or unable to do so.

This land is held in support of economic development projects brought forward by qualifying businesses and is proactively marketed to both foreign and indigenous investors, although the final decision on location rests with the investor.

The Agency employs a long term strategy in respect of its land and property holdings and does not hold land or properties in reserve. However, where land is held for a period of time prior to development, it may be made available for other uses, such as agricultural, and a rental income obtained.

In accordance with Department of Finance and Personnel guidelines, Invest NI keeps its landholding under continual review.

Any lands deemed surplus to requirements are considered for disposal as per the 'Disposal of Surplus Public Sector Property in Northern Ireland' guidelines issued by DFP Land & Property Services.

Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Order 1978

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether she has plans to establish a risk assessment process for farms similar to that required by the Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Order 1978.

(AQO 3395/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Health and Safety at Work (NI) Order 1978 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 apply to all workplaces in Northern Ireland, including farms. The Management Regulations require all employers to identify significant hazards arising from work activities, assess the risks arising from the hazards and to implement suitable measures to minimise these risks. These assessments must be recorded only where an employer, has five or more employees.

HSENI has developed, and promotes, a simplified risk assessment process specifically developed for farmers and endorsed by the other members of the Farm Safety Partnership.

The "Stop and think SAFE" approach provides a simple process for farmers to carry out risk assessments and implement a safe system of work to manage the risks based on the 4 main accident causes (Slurry, Animals, Falls and Equipment).

This approach has been embedded in guidance literature, press materials and training events and will feature in future media campaigns.

Department of the Environment

Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AWQ 14244/11-15, (i) what is involved in this review to ensure compliance with the Environmental Impact Assessment regulations; (ii) who will carry out the review; (iii) whether the review will be independent; (iv) when it will be completed; and (v) how the results will be conveyed to the Assembly.

(AQW 17637/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): The exercise involves checking that the screening for an Environmental Statement considered all the relevant issues.

The check is being carried out by staff in the Strategic Planning Division's Minerals Team with assistance from the Development Management Guidance Team where required.

Minerals planning applications along with other categories of application are subject to periodic review by the Compliance, Improvement and Review Team in Planning Policy Division.

This is an ongoing exercise and the review will be completed as soon as possible.

Non-Farming Rural Families

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of the Environment what changes he intends to make to planning policies to support non-farming rural families.

(AQW 17671/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Whilst PPS21 'Sustainable Development in the Countryside' does not include a bespoke policy for non-farming rural dwellers, almost all its policies are relevant to them. The policy already offers considerable opportunities for non-farming rural families wishing to live in the countryside by providing for:

- replacement dwellings;
- the conversion and reuse of non-residential buildings as dwellings;
- new dwellings within an existing cluster or ribbon of buildings;
- social and affordable housing schemes;
- development within designated Dispersed Rural Communities; and
- a dwelling to meet compelling personal or domestic circumstances.

I do however acknowledge the continued interest in this issue. As part of my operational review into PPS21 I met with former members of the Independent Working Group established by the previous Executive to examine this issue. Their views have been taken account of in the review.

The review into the operation of PPS21 is intended to ensure both consistency and increased flexibility of decision-making in line with the content and substance of the policy. This should benefit all those seeking to build in the countryside, including non-farming rural families.

By way of update, I can advise that I have been considering a draft report on the review recently, but have asked officials to consider a number of further matters before I bring this work to a close.

DOE: Professional Planners

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment how many professional planners are employed by his Department.

(AQW 17719/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department of Environment currently employs 415 professional planners.

Royal Town Planning Institute

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment whether his Department pays the membership fees of the planners in the Department who are members of the Royal Town Planning Institute.

(AQW 17722/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department pays the membership fees of planners who are members of the Royal Town Planning Institute on the basis that the payment of professional fees to specialist planning staff recognises their professional status and their particular and unique contribution to the Planning function.

The payment of fees encourages and supports the continual professional development of individuals. In this way it contributes to organisational and individuals' competence, standing and credibility, as planning operates in an increasingly complex business environment.

Royal Town Planning Institute

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment what is the annual cost to his Department of paying the membership fees of planners for the Royal Town Planning Institute.

(AQW 17723/11-15)

Mr Attwood: For the calendar year 2012, the Department has paid £44,588 to the Royal Town Planning Institute in relation to the membership fees of planners. I have enquired about the scale of this cost. There was a previous engagement with the Institute regarding "corporate" membership. This was not possible, but RTPI agreed to increase the number of professional events it would hold in NI. This is important, for example, given the need for training in the rundown to the transfer of planning to local councils.

Downpatrick Planning Office: Staff

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment whether he intends to review the enforcement caseload of the member of staff who was recently dismissed from the Downpatrick planning office.

(AQW 17765/11-15)

Mr Attwood: A planning officer who worked in Rathkeltair House, Downpatrick was suspended and subsequently dismissed from the NICS in September 2012. This dismissal followed an internal investigation which included a review of numerous case files dealt with by this officer or in which he may have had an involvement.

I have requested advice on the review of caseload in this case.

Tyres: Disposal

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment whether facilities exist for the disposal of tyres; and if not, has he any plans to help create a solution for used tyres, for example through the use of the Small Business Research Initiative.

(AQW 18022/11-15)

Mr Attwood: There are a number of waste management facilities which have been authorised by the Department to dispose of waste tyres. These facilities undertake processes such as:

- Retreading for re-use
- Shredding for use as leachate blankets in permitted landfills
- Crumbing for use at equestrian centres
- Baling and transporting on to Britain for recycling as carpet underlay, pathway construction, playground surfacing etc
- Baling and exporting on for heat recovery by incineration

I am fully aware and appreciate the serious risk to the environment and to human health posed by the inappropriate disposal of used waste tyres. The use of the Small Business Research Initiative (SBRI) is one option for helping to simulate solutions regarding used tyres, and my Department has made initial contact with the Technology Strategy Board which runs the SBRI. There are great opportunities for recyclates on the island and I am working to create business options.

Road Tax Discs

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of the Environment, in light of the consultation paper issued by the Department of Transport in Whitehall, whether he has any plans to scrap the display of road tax discs on car windscreens.

(AQW 18029/11-15)

Mr Attwood: As you are aware, vehicle licensing is a matter for the Secretary of State for Transport. My Department, through the Driver & Vehicle Agency, undertakes vehicle licensing work in Northern Ireland on behalf of the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA).

On 13 December 2012 the Department for Transport (DfT) issued a consultation on a number of proposals for the reform of motoring services delivered through its four executive agencies, including DVLA.

The document indicated that DfT was "considering the continuing need for the tax disc". However, I am advised that the proposals outlined in the document are for consultation only at this stage and that no decisions will be made until DfT and DVLA have considered the views of motorists and other stakeholders.

Landscape Management Services

Ms Lo asked the Minister of the Environment what arrangements he is making, while considering National Parks, for the further development and enhancement of landscape management services in the areas he has identified as the most important landscapes.

(AQW 18037/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department has long supported the development and enhancement of landscape management services in many areas including areas that could be candidates for national parks, if that is where matters go. Funding to sustain landscape management bodies for these areas is provided through the NIEA Natural Heritage Grant Programme.

NIEA currently provides financial support to the Mourne Heritage Trust and to the Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust to co-ordinate the implementation of AONB management plans and to undertake projects in their areas. NIEA has awarded additional funding to the Mourne Heritage Trust to support the development of sustainable visitor access and matched funding for a Landscape Partnership Scheme funded by Heritage Lottery Fund.

NIEA also provides financial support to a number of other organisations that provide landscape management services including the Belfast Hills Partnership, the Lough Neagh Partnership, Down District Council for the Strangford Lough and Lecale Partnership and Castlereagh Borough Council for the Lagan Valley Regional Park.

Landscape Partnership Scheme support for the Antrim Glens is currently under consideration by NIEA as is an application for support for a grassland project in Fermanagh.

As part of the Department's commitment to the Ulster Way, NIEA has recently provided financial support for a review of the Causeway Coastal Path and is providing funding toward the restoration of a path on Cuilcagh in the Fermanagh uplands.

Further project funding has been provided through partnerships with other funders such as the local authorities, Northern Ireland Tourist Board and the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The critical issue is the need for a strategic shift in resources and policy to the advantage of our natural heritage. I have been making this argument, presenting two papers to the Executive last Autumn. That is what is needed and that is where all should direct attention.

Drink-driving Limit

Ms Lo asked the Minister of the Environment, in relation to a reduction of the drink-drive limit from 80mg/100ml to 50mg/100ml, whether there is any evidence that a significant number of casualties are currently caused by people driving with a blood-alcohol level of between 50mg/100ml and 80mg/100ml.

(AQW 18038/11-15)

Mr Attwood: A collision will not be attributed to 'Impaired by alcohol - driver/rider' unless at least one driver has failed a preliminary breath test, or had a hospital procedure carried out where blood test results come back as above the legal limit or, in terms of fatalities, where the BAC result from forensics is returned where the level is above the legal limit.

The decision to reduce the drink drive limit fulfils a commitment in the Road Safety Strategy to 2020, published in March 2011. The case for reducing the limit on which that decision was taken is well established. The 2009 policy consultation that helped inform the decision assessed the impact of alcohol on the ability to drive safely and the impairing nature of low levels of alcohol below the current blood alcohol content (BAC) limit. A driver with between 50mg/100ml and 80mg/100ml alcohol is nearly three times more likely to be involved in a collision than someone with a zero BAC. In his report on the 'Review of Drink and Drug Driving Law' for the UK Government published in 2010, Sir Peter North CBE QC cited the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence which reported that drivers with a BAC between 50 mg/100 ml and 80 mg/100 ml have a risk of dying in a vehicle crash at least six times higher than those drivers who have no alcohol in their blood. In a Report published earlier this year called 'Drink Driving: Towards Zero Tolerance', the European Transport Safety Council said that driving with 50 mg/100 ml BAC increases the risk of being involved in a fatal crash by a factor of five.

Based on British projections, it was estimated that with a reduction to 50mg/100ml, at least one life could be saved and 13 serious injuries prevented each year in Northern Ireland. This assumed consistent levels of adherence to the new laws and enforcement of the new limits. There is no doubt therefore that reducing the main BAC limit to 50mg/100ml will reduce casualties and deliver significant road safety benefits.

Rathkeltair House, Downpatrick: Fraud Investigation

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of the Environment what measures he has taken to investigate the accusation of fraud in Rathkeltair Planning Office in Downpatrick; and whether previous applications will now have to be revisited.

(AQW 18087/11-15)

Mr Attwood: A planning officer who worked in Rathkeltair House, Downpatrick was suspended and subsequently dismissed from the NICS in September 2012. This dismissal followed an internal investigation and a review of numerous case files dealt with by this officer or in which he may have had an involvement.

Single Dwellings in the Countryside: Planning Policy Statement 21

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment how many applications for single dwellings in the countryside have been approved since Planning Policy Statement 21 was issued on 1 June 2010.

(AQW 18099/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Planning Policy Statement 21 was published on 1 June 2010. In the 2 year period from publication to end June 2012 a total of 6634 applications for single and replacement dwellings have been approved - 4806 applications for new single dwellings and 1828 applications for replacement dwellings.

Single Dwellings in the Countryside

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment how many of the applications for single dwellings in the countryside approved since 1 June 2010 were (i) replacement dwellings; (ii) infill dwellings; (iii) rounding of clusters of four or more dwellings; and (iv) renewals of a previous approval.

(AQW 18100/11-15)

Mr Attwood: From the 1st June 2010 to end of June 2012 a total of 6634 applications for single dwellings in the countryside have been approved.

It is not possible from the information held in the database to accurately categorise the number of applications which fall within infill, rounding of clusters or renewal of a previous approval and this would require a manual search of the 6634 applications.

However, the applications can be categorised as follows:

- (i) 1828 applications for replacement dwellings have been approved.
- (ii) 4806 applications for single dwellings have been approved.

I have asked Planning to upgrade the recording of planning details, to see if the system can capture in the future the particular information requested.

Downpatrick Planning Office: Finnebrogue Venison

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment whether the officer, who was dismissed from the Planning Office in Downpatrick, had been involved in enforcement action against Finnebrogue Venison.

(AQW 18103/11-15)

Mr Attwood: A number of staff from the Downpatrick Area Planning Office were involved in enforcement matters relating to the Finnebrogue site.

Senior officers, including a designated authorised officer, were involved in deciding the way forward on this particular case and all other cases.

Planning Decisions: Large-scale

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the time-frame for large scale planning decisions; and for his assessment of the implications of missing the deadlines associated with the process.

(AQW 18145/11-15)

Mr Attwood: In 2012/2013 the Programme for Government (PfG) target is to process 60% economically significant planning applications within 6 months. In the case of Article 31 applications the 6 month period is from receipt to a final recommendation to the Minister.

Clearly, undue delay in meeting the target has financial implications for developers and investors and negatively impacts on the ability to create much needed new employment opportunities.

In an attempt to ensure these negative impacts are avoided as far as possible I continue to press officials to process all planning applications in an efficient and timely manner. Since becoming Minister I have dealt with 40 Article 31 planning applications. This represents a reduction of 67% on the number of live Article 31s when I came into office. I will be making further decisions very soon. I recently announced permission of the Joint Services Training College at Desertcreat, Cookstown and the RUAS Showground facility at the former Maze/Long Kesh Prison site. Both these Article 31 applications met the new 6 month target.

The Department will report on all relevant PfG targets at the end of the current financial year.

Downpatrick Planning Office: Staff

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to to AQW 16908/11-15, as the individual concerned is no longer employed by his Department, why he stated that he cannot discuss internal disciplinary matters.

(AQW 18179/11-15)

Mr Attwood: While the individual has been dismissed from the Department an integral safeguard in the internal disciplinary process is the right of appeal. The individual has submitted an appeal to the Department.

When the disciplinary process is completed the name of the individual or any details of the case will not be disclosed as this would breach current Data Protection legislation.

Hydroelectric Schemes

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment (i) how many applications have been received by each planning division for hydro-electric schemes in each of the last five years; (ii) how many of these applications were refused; (iii) what assessment is made of the impact of hydro-electric schemes on fish stocks and fish migration when considering planning applications; (iv) what mitigation measures are required; and (v) for his assessment of the sustainability of licences for hydro-electric schemes that allow 90 percent water extraction.

(AQW 18180/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I welcome the contribution that renewable energy applications make to the drive to reduce carbon emissions in line with international and national commitments. The Department supports such renewable energy applications unless it would generate unacceptable adverse effects, which are not outweighed by the local and wider environmental, economic and social benefits of the development.

The main policy context for the assessment of such proposals is set out in Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 18 'Renewable Energy' which was published in August 2009. The aim of the PPS is to facilitate the siting of renewable energy generating facilities in appropriate locations within the built and natural environment in order to achieve Northern Ireland's renewable energy targets, and to realise the benefits of renewable energy.

In the period from April 2008 to September 2012, the Department received 69 applications for hydro-electric schemes and reached a decision on 35 applications, all of which were approved.

In the assessment of applications for hydro-electric schemes the hydrological, ecological and fishery impacts are material planning considerations to be taken into account in reaching a balanced decision. Where necessary, this assessment may be informed by consultation with a number of statutory and non-statutory bodies such as NIEA, the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure and Lough's Agency.

The applicant may be required to submit environmental information in order to assess the impact of the proposal and this may include, for example, surveys of the river corridor and river bed habitats, fish and other animals which may occupy the river habitat. The effects of changed flow regimes and water quality may also need to be assessed.

The risk to fish and other potential impacts can be minimised by careful design and adjustment of the seasonal operating schedule of the plant. The Department expects a high level of design for any proposed hydro-electric scheme utilising mitigation measures to protect the local ecology. Dams and weirs are designed to include structures allowing free passage of migratory fish, and afford fish and other freshwater animals protection from turbines while maintaining flows. Other mitigation measures may include the installation of an adequate fish pass; appropriate fish screens and restrictions on the maximum extraction daily volume of water. Some types of turbines potentially benefit the fish population by increased oxygenation of the river water.

Hydroelectric power applications made under The Abstraction and Impoundment (Licensing) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 are determined by a number of factors. Licences that permit the diversion of 90% of river flow to a hydroelectric power installation are only granted in very specific circumstances in waterways which are ecologically downgraded, and/or where a natural barrier prevents fish migration into the river reach, or where the fishery has been modified or downgraded as a result of other environmental pressures. In these cases due to the nature and variability of river flow the 90% flow diversion only occurs for a relatively short period within the year, as these short episodes are spread over several months.

I am content that this licensing practice reflects the accepted practice in the rest of the UK, and other EU countries and that PPS18 has a balanced approach in promoting renewable energy whilst protecting the environment in which we live.

Environmental Crime Unit: Barrack Hill, Lisburn

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 16395/11-15, whether the Environmental Crime Unit is investigating illegal dumping at Barrack Hill, Lisburn.
(AQW 18181/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Environmental Crime Unit has investigated this alleged incident. As the waste is site derived, as this material appears to be, it can legally remain onsite for up to 12 months. I will refer this matter to the DOE fly tipping team for further investigation.

Wind Turbines and Wind Farms: Setback Distances

Mr Frew asked the Minister of the Environment whether he plans to revise planning policy to mirror the position in England, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland and adjust wind turbine and wind farm setback distances from homes from the current minimum 500 metres to 1.5 - 2km, depending on turbine height.
(AQW 18216/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The jurisdictions referred to have not adopted as national planning policy a minimum separation distance of 1.5 – 2km between wind turbines and dwelling houses.

Policy RE1 of PPS 18 'Renewable Energy' states that, for wind farm development, a separation distance of 10 times rotor diameter to occupied property, with a minimum distance not less than 500m, will generally apply. This separation distance ensures that wind farm developments are sited appropriately whilst also supporting the achievement of Northern Ireland's renewable energy targets.

I therefore have no plans to revise planning policy in relation to the separation distance between wind energy development and dwellings.

Rates: Local Government Reform

Ms Lo asked the Minister of the Environment by what percentage local domestic rates are likely to rise in order to meet the costs of local government reform.
(AQW 18244/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I am aware of the concerns which have been expressed by elected representatives, the business sector, and others, about rates convergence and debt issues arising from the implementation of local government reform.

The Regional Transition Committee, which I chair, has commissioned the senior local and central government officers and officials in the Finance Working Group with examining the financial implications of rates and legacy debt convergence, developing plans and procedures for minimising any negative impact of change, and ensuring that those affected are treated as fairly and equitably as possible.

The group is currently developing detailed financial models to quantify the impact on rate levels, arising from local government reform, across each of the councils.

In parallel with this, the group is also examining a wide range of options for minimising the impact of these rate changes. The key options include:-

- transitional relief for individual ratepayers;
- transitional relief (i.e. grant) for councils;
- councils striking differential rates in each of the legacy council areas for a limited period; and
- councils borrowing to equalise the rate changes.

I have, of course, raised the issue of rates convergence with the Minister of Finance and Personnel and I can advise that a paper is being developed in relation to this matter to be considered by the Executive. In my strong view there will be a requirement to provide transitional rates assistance. As the member knows, be it through direct Executive support to the Councils, the provision of soft loans, the escalation of sharing and collaboration, the imperative for support for rates convergence (etc) demonstrating that my ambition and actions are to protect the ratepayer in the rundown to and after 2015.

Rates: Local Government Reform

Ms Lo asked the Minister of the Environment by what percentage local business rates are likely to rise in order to meet the costs of local government reform.

(AQW 18245/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I am very aware of the concerns which have been expressed by elected representatives, the business sector, and others, about rates convergence and debt issues arising from the implementation of local government reform. That is why I have made a big argument for upfront Executive support, soft loans and money for rates convergence.

The Regional Transition Committee, which I chair, has commissioned the senior local and central government officers and officials in the Finance Working Group with examining the financial implications of rates and legacy debt convergence, developing plans and ensuring that those affected are treated as fairly and equitably as possible.

The group is currently developing detailed financial models to quantify the impact on rate levels, arising from local government reform, across each of the councils.

In parallel with this, the group is also examining a wide range of options for the management of rates convergence, including:-

- transitional relief for individual ratepayers;
- transitional relief (i.e. grant) for councils;
- councils striking differential rates in each of the legacy council areas for a limited period; and
- councils borrowing to equalise the rate changes.

I have, of course, raised the issue of rates convergence with the Minister of Finance and Personnel and I can confirm that a paper is being developed in relation to this matter to be considered by the Executive. In my view, there is a requirement to provide transitional rates assistance.

In taking RPA forward I work to a number of principles including:-

- function's transfer with no financial impact on the Council and are rates neutral
- sharing and collaboration by Councils now can reduce burden on ratepayers later
- Executive support through a range of interventions to protect ratepayers.

I hope that there will be all party support for all of my proposed interventions.

Local Government Reform: Council on the North Coast

Ms Lo asked the Minister of the Environment how the councils on the North Coast that are due to merge under Local Government Reform are progressing with the transition.

(AQW 18247/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Ballymoney, Coleraine, Limavady and Moyle Councils, which make up the Causeway Coast and Glens Cluster, are currently engaged in planning for the merger of their council grouping.

The Transition Management Team, which supports the Voluntary Transition Committee, has held workshops to commence the process of developing local project plans for presentation to the Committee in February.

The cluster has also developed a communication plan for introduction across the constituent councils, updated the cluster Capital Programme and begun work on a draft Corporate Plan and organisational structuring.

I last met the Voluntary Transition Committee on 8 November 2012 in Coleraine and welcome the positive steps the Causeway Coast and Glens cluster have taken towards reform.

I look forward to a further update from the Transition Committee Chair at the next meeting of the Regional Transition Committee on 30 January 2013. I note their recent decision in relation to RPA funding. I am arguing that RPA should be funded by central and local government. I hope that this argument prevails.

Belfast City Council: Expansion of Boundaries

Ms Lo asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the work completed relating to the expansion of the boundaries of Belfast City Council to incorporate parts of Castlereagh and Lisburn.

(AQW 18248/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Belfast Voluntary Transition Committee and the Lisburn and Castlereagh cluster have begun a process of ongoing constructive engagement in planning for the effects of the boundary changes and extension of services.

Joint meetings have already been held between political representatives and senior officers of the councils to commence addressing some of the critical transition issues including rates convergence, service convergence, assets and liabilities and staffing matters.

I welcome this positive approach by the councils to explore in detail some of the key challenges presented by the reform of local government and particularly the expansion of the Belfast boundary.

I look forward to an update at the next meeting of the Regional Transition Committee on 30 January 2013.

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan: New Housing Units

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of new housing units planned under the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan, broken down by council area.

(AQW 18266/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The adopted version of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan will set out the Department's conclusions on the number of new houses required for each council area. I am currently working closely with officials to finalise the plan policies and proposals. The Department is currently assessing the recommendations contained within the Planning Appeals Commission's reports which were produced following the Public Inquiry.

It would be inappropriate to release the figures you requested ahead of the publication of the adopted plan, but I did publish the draft BMAP in 2012 as I believed it was necessary and reasonable for people to see its recommendations.

Planning Approvals

Mr Dallat asked Minister of the Environment to detail, for each planning district, (i) the number of outline planning approvals granted; and (ii) the number of outline planning approvals which have expired without development, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 18272/11-15)

Mr Attwood: In the period from 1st April 2007 to end September 2012, 9,779 outline planning applications were decided by the Department of which 6,883 (70%) were approved. Table 1 below details the number of outline applications approved from 1 April 2007 to 30 September 2012 categorised by local government district.

Table 1 Outline Planning Applications approved.

Local Government District	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Antrim	45	35	93	68	73	28
Ards	26	43	67	78	47	26
Armagh	269	76	59	54	63	32
Ballymena	58	45	106	67	79	37
Ballymoney	21	25	39	25	28	9
Banbridge	33	42	48	27	47	29
Belfast	36	36	24	13	11	9
Carrickfergus	12	17	20	15	13	2
Castlereagh	9	16	7	17	11	4
Coleraine	32	36	56	49	29	21
Cookstown	42	27	60	38	47	18
Craigavon	56	53	61	50	54	23

Local Government District	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Derry	35	22	40	16	29	17
Down	35	30	116	50	66	37
Dungannon	90	43	63	35	46	21
Fermanagh	103	53	41	44	38	21
Larne	29	29	61	35	27	11
Limavady	33	20	38	43	41	12
Lisburn	53	37	98	74	60	55
Magherafelt	62	54	145	77	47	22
Moyle	22	27	53	32	21	14
Newry and Mourne	147	94	166	72	101	48
Newtownabbey	11	10	38	21	29	6
North Down	37	39	30	17	19	6
Omagh	166	62	68	44	43	17
Strabane	39	47	39	27	36	10
Total	1,501	1,018	1,636	1,088	1,105	535

Notes: Information for 2012/13 is for Q1-Q2 ie April - September 2012 only

In terms of the number of outline planning approvals which have expired without development, the Department does not hold this information on its database. However, I can advise that over this same period 79,348 full planning applications were decided of which 94.5% were approved and 12,663 reserved matters applications of which 99.8% were approved.

Planning: Commercial Projects

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of commercial projects in each planning district that are currently on hold because of planning irregularities; and what steps are being taken to resolve these issues.

(AQW 18274/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department does not hold the processing of any planning application as they are validated on receipt and progressed through the various statutory processes as quickly as possible.

Applications do, however, differ in complexity and in quality of submission and attract varying levels of objection. Consultation with a number of statutory and non-statutory bodies is often required to inform the decision making process, and assessment of all material planning considerations can result in amendments being made to submitted plans. All of these issues may prolong the processing of an application. A project management approach is used by case officers and line managers in accordance with the Good Practice Guide which was published in June 2009. Instructions and guidance have also been issued to staff about prioritising applications which have economic and social benefits for the local community.

The number of commercial planning applications pending a decision in each of the local government districts at 14 January 2013 is as follows:

Government District	Number of Live Applications
Antrim	13
Ards	13
Armagh	20
Ballymena	10
Ballymoney	3
Banbridge	11
Belfast	95
Carrickfergus	0
Castlereagh	13

Government District	Number of Live Applications
Coleraine	13
Cookstown	9
Craigavon	14
Derry	58
Down	16
Dungannon	13
Fermanagh	21
Larne	8
Limavady	12
Lisburn	32
Magherafelt	12
Moyle	3
Newry and Mourne	56
Newtownabbey	19
North Down	12
Omagh	13
Strabane	10
Total	499

In order to improve and monitor performance across the Area Offices Area Planning Managers report monthly on how each area office is performing against the ambitious targets that I have set for 2012-13 for processing of planning applications.

A Performance Action Plan has also been put in place in order to improve and manage performance. This action plan identifies a number of initiatives and allows for the monitoring and active management of performance within agreed timescales.

As a result of these initiatives I am pleased to report that performance in Q2 of this business year has improved when compared to the same period last year, with the targets for intermediate and minor applications exceeded.

I will continue to work with key stakeholders to ensure that Planning delivers in an efficient and timely manner and continue to monitor performance to ensure consistency across the area office network.

Wind Farm Locations

Mr Frew asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the safety risks posed when wind farms are located where motorists need to pay particular attention, such as in the immediate vicinity of road junctions, sharp or unexpected bends and crossings for pedestrians and cyclists.

(AQW 18280/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 18 'Renewable Energy' Policy RE1 requires applications for wind energy development to demonstrate, inter alia, that no part of the development will have an unacceptable impact on road safety. The assessment of the road safety impacts of individual proposals for wind energy is provided on a case-by-case basis by the Department for Regional Development's (DRD) Roads Service in their role as a consultee to the planning process.

The Best Practice Guidance (BPG) that accompanies PPS18 advises that drivers are faced with a number of varied and competing distractions during any normal journey. Wind turbines should therefore not be treated any differently from other distractions a driver must face and should not be considered particularly hazardous.

I am satisfied that PPS18 and associated BPG along with the consultation arrangements with Roads Service adequately deal with any road safety concerns posed by wind energy developments.

Wind Turbine Policy: Down District Council

Mr Frew asked the Minister of the Environment (i) for his assessment of Down District Council's attempt to put in place a policy on the provision of wind turbines; (ii) how this policy would impact on current planning policy; and (iii) what influence it will have on individual applications, before and following the implementation of the Review of Public Administration.

(AQW 18282/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Currently the statutory authority to bring forward planning policy documents, development plan documents or make determinations on individual planning applications sits with my Department.

Any policy on wind turbines provided by Down District Council may be a material consideration in assessing wind turbine development within that council area. However applications for such development will continue to be assessed by the Department in accordance with the provisions of Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 18 'Renewable Energy', other relevant planning policies and any other material considerations.

Following the implementation of RPA the majority of planning functions will transfer to local councils. As a result councils will have the opportunity to bring forward policies in relation to renewable energy within their district in local development plan documents in line with regional policy prepared by my Department.

Smoke-free Zones

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment (i) whether there is a map or register of smoke free zones; (ii) what advice his Department gives to residents in smoke free zones; (iii) what enforcement action is taken against people who breach regulations in smoke free zones; (iv) what is the process for designating smoke free zones; and (v) whether there are any plans to increase the number of smoke free zones.

(AQW 18295/11-15)

Mr Attwood:

- (i) There is a dedicated website showing smoke control areas across the UK including Northern Ireland.
http://www.airqualityni.co.uk/laqm_sca.php?a=s&la_id

Each district council is also responsible for local air quality in their area and will have more specific details of individual streets and roads that are within a smoke control area designated by that council.

- (ii) The Department makes regulations under the Clean Air (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 which set out in detail the fuels that can be used, and the appliances that can be installed, in smoke control areas. When new regulations are made a notice is printed in the Belfast Gazette. Information about smoke control areas, including information on the relevant legislation, is available on the Department's website and on the nidirect website. Both websites have links to the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs website which provides further general information and details on smoke control areas in the United Kingdom, including current NI regulations on authorised fuels and exempted fireplaces.

District councils, as the enforcing authority under the 1981 Order, and subsequent regulations, would be responsible in the first instance for providing information to residents within designated smoke control areas.

- (iii) District councils are responsible for taking action against those who breach the smoke control legislation and they have enforcement powers under Article 39 of the Clean Air (Northern Ireland) Order 1981. A person found guilty of an offence shall be liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding £100.
- (iv) A district council may, by order confirmed by the Department, declare the whole or any part of its district to be a smoke control area. The Department has issued guidance to district councils to assist them in the preparation of Smoke Control Orders and in the declaration of Smoke Control Areas. A link to the Policy Guidance on Smoke Control Areas is attached.
http://www.doeni.gov.uk/local_air_quality_management_policy_guidance_on_smoke_control_areas_pdf_format.pdf
- (v) It is a matter for each district council to keep under review whether it is necessary for all or any part of its council area to be declared a smoke control area.

Single Dwellings in the Countryside: Applications

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how many applications for single dwellings in the countryside in North Down have been (i) approved; and (ii) rejected since 1 June 2010.

(AQW 18312/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Statistics relating to planning applications for single dwellings (including single replacement dwellings) in the North Down Countryside are presently available up to 30th June 2012.

A total of 53 applications for single dwellings in the North Down countryside were determined between 1 June 2010 and 30 June 2012. Of these, 43 were granted planning permission and 10 were refused.

Single Dwellings in the Countryside: Applications

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how many applications for single dwellings in the countryside have been rejected since 1 June 2010.

(AQW 18313/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Planning Policy Statement 21 was published on 1 June 2010. In the period 1 June 2010 to 30 June 2012 8148 decisions were issued on single dwellings, including replacement dwellings in the countryside. Of these 1514 (18.6%) applications were refused.

Planning Service: Economists

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment how many staff in the Planning Service are trained (i) economists; and (ii) in economic cost benefit analysis.

(AQW 18791/11-15)

Mr Attwood: There are currently 11 economists in the DOE. Planning, like other parts of the Department, can access the advice and support of these staff.

The Department also has access to economic advice from the pool of economists employed across the wider NICS.

Electricity-generating Tidal Developments: North Antrim Coast

Mr Allister asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the arrangements by which planning applications for electricity-generating tidal developments off the North Antrim coast will be handled and determined.

(AQW 18941/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The consenting bodies concerned with the proposed electricity-generating tidal developments, off County Antrim are the Crown Estate (TCE), Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), Department of Environment (DoE) Planning and DoE Marine Division.

In October 2012 TCE awarded conditional development rights to Fair Head Tidal Ltd (Fair Head site) and Tidal Ventures Ltd (Torr Head site) to develop the sites up to 100 Mega Watts each. TCE developments rights are conditional on the developers obtaining all the necessary consents and approvals from DoE Marine Division, DoE Planning, Department of Trade and Investment.

The DoE, through its Marine Division, is the appropriate licensing authority under section 113 (6) (b) of the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 (MCAA), Part 4 Marine Licensing. All Marine renewable projects will require a Marine Licence under MCAA.

The Marine Licence application and determination process is the key mechanism whereby marine renewable projects will be assessed in terms of protecting the environment, human health, preventing interference with legitimate uses of the sea and other matters as this authority thinks relevant. The determination of offshore renewable projects through the MCAA licensing process will include widespread statutory and stakeholder consultation.

DoE Planning has responsibility for planning permission above the low water mark. All marine renewable licences will have a landfall area for cabling and some will require large onshore electricity substations.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) requires any marine renewable installation to obtain a licence from DETI under the Electricity (Northern Ireland) Order, 1992 to generate electric and lay electricity cables. An Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is required to support these licences.

Environmental Impact Assessments are required for the onshore and offshore aspects of these proposals, but officials from Marine Division and Planning are working closely with DETI officials to enable developers to submit one single EIA, thus streamlining the process.

With regard to existing projects, both DOE and the developers have engaged very closely with the fishing communities of Ballycastle and Rathlin Island establishing working groups to ensure their valuable input is included in the consultation and assessment processes for the projects.

They recently presented to Moyle District council on the proposed projects, outlining the processes and timelines for the projects and how the local community and stakeholders will be given the opportunity to be involved throughout the projects evaluations.

Wind Turbines

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment whether planning service has kept the permitted radius between the development of wind turbines and residential areas up to date and in line with improvements in wind turbine technology.

(AQW 18985/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 18, Policy RE1 states that for wind farm development a separation distance of 10 times rotor diameter to occupied property (with a minimum distance not less than 500m) will generally apply. For individual wind turbines, the Best Practice Guidance that accompanies PPS18 recommends fall-over distance (i.e. the height of the turbine to the tip of the blade) plus 10% as a safe separation distance to occupied property.

The safeguards within PPS18 prevent development that would cause significant harm to the safety or amenity of any sensitive receptors, defined as habitable residential accommodation (although not necessarily occupied), hospitals, schools and churches.

Taking account of recent improvements in turbine technology, I am satisfied that the recommended separation distances remain valid for safety and amenity purposes, without unduly restricting the development of the infrastructure required to meet our renewable energy and carbon reduction targets.

Biodiversity: Targets

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment, given the fact that his Department missed the 2010 target to halt biodiversity loss, what steps he is taking to ensure that the 2020 target is met.

(AQW 19046/11-15)

Mr Attwood: It was recognised that, globally, the commitment to halt biodiversity loss by 2010 was not going to be achieved. To that end there has been a renewed commitment, both internationally and from a European perspective, for further action to halt global declines of biodiversity over a longer period with an interim target of 2020. For example the renewed commitment of the 192 parties (including the UK) to the Convention on Biological Diversity in Autumn 2010 in Nagoya, Japan.

Within the EC there are also many initiatives geared to halting biodiversity loss by 2020, including the Water Framework Directive, the Marine Strategy Framework Directive and also the reform of CAP and fisheries policies.

In Northern Ireland, I am responding to this renewed challenge to take action to halt biodiversity loss. I have initiated a review of the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy and, given the importance that I attach to this, have included this as a commitment in the Programme for Government. The review will take account of international and European commitments and new thinking.

Currently, my officials are liaising with the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group on the development of objectives and actions on which we can consult in the next few months. From this a new Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy will be developed to include a range of actions that will help contribute to a reduction in biodiversity loss for the period up to 2020. This strategy will be cross cutting and it is intended to include actions from central and local government, as well as other sectors.

From a governance perspective, it is intended that my Department will monitor progress annually with a view to identifying any potential difficulties and provide appropriate resolutions where required.

Gritting Arrangements

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of the Environment what action he will take to ensure that all councils come to an arrangement with Roads Service for shared gritting responsibility on footways and pedestrian areas.

(AQW 19166/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I keep the situation under regular review and have written recently to councils, where necessary, to encourage them to collaborate with Roads Service in the interests of their ratepayers and the wider community. All councils now have formal or informal working arrangements or understandings in respect of gritting footways and pedestrian areas in periods of severe winter weather.

Malone Conservation Area

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the enforcement actions taken in the past 12 months in relation to "To Let" signs in the Malone Conservation Area.

(AQO 3288/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department has opened 6 new enforcement cases in the past 12 months in relation to "to let" signs in the Malone Conservation Area. Three cases have now been closed because the signs have been removed. As regards the other three cases warning letters have been issued requesting the removal of the signs. The cases were opened in November 2012 and no formal enforcement action has taken place as yet.

On a general note, I am very aware of the proliferation of estate agents "to let" signs in areas such as Lower Malone and Stranmillis. Under the Advertisement Regulations, advertisements relating to the sale or letting of property may be displayed with deemed consent on condition that the advertisement is removed within 14 days after the sale is completed or the tenancy is granted. In areas such as Lower Malone and Stranmillis, "to let" signs very often remain on properties long after the property has been sold or let.

When a complaint is received the Department will normally issue a warning letter seeking the removal of the unauthorised sign. There are, however, difficulties in relation to enforcement. It is often difficult to establish the precise date that the tenancy of a property has been granted. Properties may be partially let with only one room remaining unlet, thus allowing the "to let" sign to remain in place. The seasonal nature of letting in these areas very often means that signs may be removed in winter only to reappear again in the summer months prior to the start of the new university term.

In recognition of these difficulties the Department maintains regular contact with local estate agents seeking their co-operation in the control of "to let" signs

Metal Theft Legislation

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of the Environment whether he plans to strengthen the current legislation to deal with metal theft.

(AQO 3291/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I am keen to assist in combating the problem of metal theft. However, environmental legislation will not address fully metal theft as it can only deal with waste management activities but it can be helpful to wider efforts by other agencies.

Therefore, with effect from 4th March 2013, the Department is commencing the powers contained in Articles 5, 9, 14, 15 and 16 of the Waste (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 and Sections 1 and 2 of the Waste and Contaminated Land (Amendment) Act (NI) 2011. When commenced these provisions will:

- Allow the Department to issue fixed penalty notices for certain offences;
- Allow authorised officers (and in some cases constables) to stop, search and seize vehicles and to detain seized property; and
- Provide the Department with powers to make subordinate legislation in relation to waste carriers, including the power to impose certain conditions on waste carriers and to inspect vehicles to ensure compliance with such conditions.

Other proposals being looked at by the Department include amending the Duty of Care Regulations to remove the 7-days' grace for waste carriers or holders to produce documentation to the Department upon request. The intention of this amendment is to make it a requirement to carry or hold the appropriate documentation with the waste to which it refers and make it an offence not to do so. This will allow authorised officers or the police to identify illegal transfer of wastes, including metal. I hope to introduce this legislation by early Summer this year.

Snares

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment why his Department has not brought forward proposals for the control of the use of snares.

(AQO 3294/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Preparation of the proposals to further regulate the use of snares in Northern Ireland has been delayed due to other priorities. However, work to finalise a consultation paper is on-going and the Department is committed to issuing this by late February/early March 2013.

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan: Sprucefield

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of the Environment to outline how the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan was used to restrict retail development at Sprucefield to bulky goods only.

(AQO 3295/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan published for consultation in November 2004 contained a policy which stated that within the designated Sprucefield Regional Shopping centre planning permission will only be granted for retail development which meets a number of listed criteria, one of which was that the type of goods to be sold is restricted to bulky comparison goods. This policy was informed by a retail study carried out during the plan preparation by retail consultants, Colliers CRE. This followed on from a commitment contained in the Lisburn Area Plan adoption statement in which the Department accepted the PAC recommendation that development proposals should be drawn up for Sprucefield but considered that this would be more appropriately achieved through BMAP.

Following the holding of a Public Inquiry in 2007 and 2008 to consider objections to the draft Plan, the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) reported its findings on retailing to the Department in January 2009.

The Department after consideration of the objections made, the report of the Planning Appeals Commission and all other material considerations, has decided to confirm the draft Plan policy. The material considerations include a changed regional planning policy context since the PAC reported to the Department in 2009 and the economic circumstances currently facing retailing in our city and town centres.

A new Regional Development Strategy (RDS) was published in March 2012 following approval by the NI Executive. Two of the 8 key aims of the revised RDS are to strengthen Belfast as the regional economic driver and to support our towns, villages and rural communities to maximise their potential. In light of ongoing legal challenge I have previously stated that the Department is giving no weight to draft PPS 5. The PAC in its recommendations to the Department had made a number of references to draft PPS 5 and the role of revised regional planning policy.

PPS 5 – Retailing and Town Centres, remains the relevant policy for determining planning applications for retail development. The draft BMAP and the BMAP decisions on retailing are material considerations. With regard to the latter the PAC specifically requested the early release of the BMAP position to assist all parties to the Public Inquiry currently being held under Article 31 of the Planning Order into a major planning application for a proposed retail, restaurant and associated infrastructural development at Sprucefield (Ref S/2009/1045/F) made by Sprucefield Centre Ltd.

Planning Policy Statement

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the timeframe for the development of a single Planning Policy Statement to replace the existing statements.

(AQO 3296/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Single Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) is required to be in place prior to the transfer of planning powers to Councils in 2015. It is my intention therefore to consult on a draft version of the SPPS later this year, with a view to publishing in final form in 2014.

Department of Finance and Personnel

North Down Constituency: Redundancy

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many people have been made redundant in the North Down constituency, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 18740/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): The table below details the number of confirmed redundancies in the North Down Parliamentary Constituency Area (PCA) and Northern Ireland as a whole in each of the last 5 years.

Please note that under the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 (amended 8 October 2006) companies are only legally required to notify the Department of impending redundancies of 20 or more employees. Also, redundancies do not necessarily equate to job losses, for example, employees who do not qualify for a redundancy package, those on temporary contracts, will not be incorporated into the redundancy figures.

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012*
North Down PCA	20	130	103	33	64
NI Total	2,782	4,596	2,096	1,808	3,297

* Total Confirmed redundancies notified to DFP Economic and Labour Market Statistics

Research Branch to 31st December 2012 and this figure may be revised at a future date.

Peace Bridge, Londonderry

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the EU funding (i) received for; and (ii) spent on the Peace Bridge in Londonderry.

(AQW 18837/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The River Foyle Foot and Cycle Bridge (also known as the Peace Bridge) was awarded funding of £14,497,723 under the PEACE III Programme. Of this, the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) contribution is £9,792,220.34 (approximately 67.5 per cent).

To date, verified expenditure for this project is £12,463,887.55, with an additional £1,177,542.14 of submitted claims yet to be verified. SEUPB expects further expenditure claims for this project to be submitted in the near future.

Rate Relief Schemes

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the success of each rate relief scheme, including (i) any proposed changes to these schemes; (ii) the effectiveness of the use of bankruptcy proceedings; and (iii) the impact on struggling businesses.

(AQW 18842/11-15)

Mr Wilson: As you may be aware there are several rate relief schemes currently in place to help the struggling business sector.

This extensive range includes the small business rate relief, small business rate relief for post offices, empty shops rates concession, empty property relief, charitable exemptions, sport and recreation rate relief, residential homes rate relief, industrial derating, non-domestic vacant rating, hardship relief, ATMs in rural areas and shop windows displays.

My Department has carried out, or plans to carry out, evaluations on a number of these schemes. The details of the main ones are outlined overleaf.

A full policy review was carried out in 2008 on industrial derating and freight transport relief by my Department, informed by a study undertaken by the Economic Research Institute for NI. Both reliefs are unique to Northern Ireland. As a result of its findings the Executive agreed to hold the two reliefs at their existing levels for the remainder of that mandate. This policy was taken forward into this current mandate as part of the budget review and no change in policy is planned. For this reason the matter will not be revisited during the life of this Assembly.

An evaluation of empty property relief was carried out by my Department in 2009 and the Executive decided to follow its recommendation to retain it at 50% until the economy recovers (which is in contrast to the full rate liability that applies in England and Wales).

My Department also undertook an in year review of recent changes made to small business rate relief. Following that Review the Executive agreed to significantly increase the upper threshold for entitlement as part of the Economy and Jobs Initiative. I also took the opportunity to extend the life of the empty shops concession as it was my assessment that it has already proved to be a relative success; which has been borne out by the decision of the Scottish Government to copy our scheme this year.

The case for an extension to these reliefs was made in my statement and I attach a link to this for the Member's reference:-

<http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/statement-261112-non-domestic-rating.pdf>

The Department also plans to carry out a full evaluation of small business rate relief in late 2014, in advance of the business rates revaluation in 2015. This will naturally look at other business reliefs as part of that process

On the second part of your question, Land & Property Services(LPS) have advised me that it is difficult to provide information on the effectiveness of the use of bankruptcy proceedings.

The majority of bankruptcy proceedings in which LPS is involved have been instigated by other organisations. In 2011–12, there were a total of 1,569 bankruptcy orders of which LPS was the petitioner in 189 cases. Of the 219 company insolvencies, LPS was the petitioner in 17 cases and HMRC was the petitioner in nearly half of the cases (104). When an individual or company becomes bankrupt or insolvent, LPS is required to write-off any outstanding rating debt. I would also like to add that bankruptcy proceedings are just one of the options available to LPS in order to facilitate collection of debt.

As for the impact of struggling businesses, rating liability is one of a number of issues which affects businesses. It is worth noting in this context that in a recent speech to the CBI in Belfast, the Governor of the Bank of England advised that a number of factors are affecting the recovery, including the squeeze on many people's take home pay, the rising cost of food and energy as well as tax changes which have resulted in an unusually weak recovery in consumer spending therefore contributing to number of closures on our high streets.

I believe that the range of measures described above are the right mix of policies that put business needs first, recognising that there are limits to the concessions we can make while still raising enough money to help pay for essential public services.

Project Managers: Payments to Subcontractors

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQO 3126/11-15, to outline the number and detail of the random checks made by project managers since July 2012 to ensure that sub-contractors had been paid the money due to them by the main contractors.

(AQW 18942/11-15)

Mr Wilson: All main contractors on contracts let by Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) since July 2012 are required to provide a monthly report on subcontractor payments. Project Managers are then required to follow this up through random checks with subcontractors to confirm that payments have been received on time.

As a result of this policy, random checks have been undertaken by CPD on seven construction works contracts to date. Feedback from industry has indicated that this process is making an impact on the poor payment practices that are widespread across the industry.

However, I recognise that more needs to be done and this is why I announced that Project Bank Accounts will be included as part of the contract conditions for all construction works contracts greater than £1m with a significant subcontract element.

I have asked CPD to monitor the application and effect of this process across government and will be happy to share this information with you when it is available.

Prompt Payment of Subcontractors

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQO 3126/11-15, to list the contractors which have been excluded from tender opportunities due to a failure to comply with prompt payment of sub-contractors.

(AQW 18943/11-15)

Mr Wilson: There have been no instances where a contractor has been excluded from tender opportunities due to a failure to comply with prompt payment of subcontractors. Central Procurement Directorate has not been advised of any payment irregularities which would result in such action having to be taken.

Project Bank Accounts: Payments to Subcontractors

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQO 2934/11-15, what progress has been made on the introduction of project bank accounts; and when he expects these to be in place, given the urgency and problems of late payment to sub-contractors.

(AQW 18944/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) has introduced a requirement to include Project Bank Accounts (PBA) on all contracts over £1m that have a significant subcontract element. Initially this will apply to those contracts where subcontractors are assessed as part of the tender submission. This typically includes Mechanical and Electrical subcontracts.

Once Government departments and the construction industry have had an opportunity to trial PBAs on this basis, the intention is to extend coverage to the wider supply chain. In CPD PBAs have now been included in two contracts where the tender process commenced in January 2013. It may be up to six months before PBAs are actually brought into operation, after allowing time for the tender and award processes. It is anticipated it may take a further six months to test the application of the process before extending it to greater numbers of subcontracts.

CPD has also asked the Centres of Procurement Expertise to pilot the PBA process. This will provide an opportunity to test its suitability in a number of different situations and make any adjustments which may be necessary to suit the Northern Ireland construction sector.

Public Procurement Building Contracts: Payments to Subcontractors

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the Executive's policy on retention within public procurement building contracts, including the level of retention and the checks undertaken to ensure that main contractors pay subcontractors retention on time.

(AQW 18945/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The use of retentions is standard practice throughout the construction industry. They help ensure contractors complete works in accordance with contract requirements and specifications. This is particularly relevant to making good any defects after completion of the work and during the maintenance period, usually a period of 12 months after completion of work on site.

Retentions will remain an important measure in government construction contracts for the foreseeable future.

The release and payment of subcontract retentions is dealt with in the same manner as any other aspect of the payment process. They must be claimed, legitimately, in accordance with the terms of the subcontract and the main contractor invoiced. The project manager would then monitor reimbursement of them in line with the subcontractor payment progress arrangements.

Capital Spend

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the capital spend since May 2011, broken down by constituency area.

(AQW 19031/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Unfortunately departmental capital expenditure is not held centrally by my department at the level requested.

Within each Northern Ireland department capital expenditure is recorded to facilitate analysis from many perspectives from the highest level of gross investment and receipts to analysis by individual economic category. The detail recorded also enables analysis in line with the sub pillars of the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland, but not to the level of electoral constituency.

Departmental Expenditure Limits/Annually Managed Expenditure

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the amount of (i) Departmental Expenditure Limits; and (ii) Annually Managed Expenditure administered by the Executive in each financial year from 2006-07 to 2011-12.

(AQW 19077/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Departmental Expenditure Limits (DEL) for each of the years requested were set as part of successive HM Treasury Spending Reviews. Changes to DEL are determined using the Barnett Formula and my department agrees a Final Budget Plan position for each year with HM Treasury.

Annually Managed Expenditure (AME) by its nature is more volatile and forecasts are provided by the Northern Ireland departments twice a year reflecting the most up to date position. My department submits Final AME Budget forecasts to HM Treasury each year. While AME expenditure is administered by the Northern Ireland departments, the nature of this expenditure means that it is outside of the direct control of the Executive.

Table 1 below shows the Final Budget Plan position for each of the years requested in respect of both DEL and AME as reported at that time.

Table 1:

						£million
	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
DEL	8,175.7	8,892.3	9,253.9	10,234.4	11,330.0	11,010.2

						£million
	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
AME	10,742.0	7,894.1	8,558.2	8,137.9	7,955.5	8,096.7

Departmental Expenditure Limit: Barnett Formula

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the relationship between the Barnett formula and the allocation of Departmental Expenditure Limit.

(AQW 19078/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Changes to the Northern Ireland Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) Budget are determined through the Barnett Formula, which allocates a population-based share of changes to comparable Whitehall department public expenditure allocations.

Barnett allocations to Northern Ireland are, in most circumstances, unhypothecated, meaning that they are available for allocation locally in line with the Executive's priorities. There is therefore no direct relationship between the operation of the Barnett Formula and the allocation of resources as determined by the Northern Ireland Executive.

Public Spending and Geographical Location

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the relationship between public spending and geographical location.

(AQW 19081/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The main source of funding for public spending within Northern Ireland remains the Block grant from HM Treasury. Barnett Allocations made to the Executive are unhypothecated meaning that the Executive can allocate funding locally in line with its priorities.

The allocation of public expenditure in Northern Ireland at the last Budget settlement in March 2011 was determined in line with the Executive's key priorities but also took into account issues raised during the Budget consultation process. Allocations were not made with specific regard to geographical location.

Reserve Fund

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many times the Reserve Fund has been accessed by Departments since 2006/07; and for what reason the fund was accessed in each instance.

(AQW 19082/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The HM Treasury Statement of Funding Policy (SFP), first published in 1999, sets out the arrangements which apply when setting budgets for the devolved administrations.

While devolved administrations are expected to contain budget pressures by re-allocating resources internally, the SFP provides for access to the HM Treasury DEL Reserve in certain circumstances.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury granted the Northern Ireland Executive access to the HM Treasury Reserve in 2010-11, 2011-12 and in 2012-13. This was for two specific reasons.

Firstly the financial package accompanying the devolution of policing and justice provided for access to the HM Treasury Reserve, principally to address exceptional security costs. Access was granted in each of the three years for this purpose.

Secondly to meet the cost of increased Student Loan Subsidy Impairment within the Department for Employment and Learning (in line with similar pressures being experienced by Department for Business Innovation and Skills) in 2011-12 and 2012-13.

Departmental Expenditure Limit: Spending Pressures

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how spending pressures associated with the Departmental Expenditure Limit are addressed.

(AQW 19083/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Departmental Expenditure Limit budget is managed by the Executive and is allocated in line with the Executive's priorities as set out in the Programme for Government.

Any spending pressures emerging after the Budget has been set, which cannot be addressed through internal departmental reallocations, can be considered by the Executive as part of its monitoring round process.

Departmental Spending Pressures

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to identify the manner in which spending pressures are addressed by Departments.

(AQW 19084/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Long term departmental spending pressures are addressed through the Executive's budget process.

Any departmental pressures emerging after the Budget has been set can be addressed through the Executive's in-year monitoring process. Departments should also try and address budget pressures through internal reallocations.

Family Law

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the review on Family Law.

(AQW 19141/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I am, at present, reflecting on the terms of the review.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the departmental functions that are currently proposed to be transferred to local government under the Review of Public Administration.

(AQW 19163/11-15)

Mr Wilson: No powers or functions within my department have been identified for transfer to local government under the Review of Public Administration either at the current time or previously.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

South West Acute Hospital

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why it was necessary to bid for a further £2.5m resource funding for the South West Acute Hospital in the January monitoring round; and, in light of the refusal of the request, how the shortfall will be met.

(AQW 18781/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): It was necessary to bid for a further £2.5m resource funding because the Western Trust has incurred additional one-off costs associated with the move from the Erne Hospital to the new South West Acute Hospital, including:

- Nurse training in new equipment and hospital orientation;
- Nurse backfill to enable increased staffing levels before, during and in the immediate aftermath of the transfer to the new hospital;
- Additional technical staff input for set-up of new equipment in ICT and Facilities Management; and
- Running costs of both sites during the handover period.

As this bid was not met, the impact will be considered alongside all other pressures as part of the ongoing financial management of the Department and its Arms Length Bodies.

Cystic Fibrosis

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are diagnosed with cystic fibrosis; and what proportion of these people have the faulty G551D gene.

(AQW 18800/11-15)

Mr Poots: In Northern Ireland there are a total of 470 patients diagnosed with cystic fibrosis, of these 34 or 7.25% carry the G551D gene.

Children in Foster Care

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many children were in foster care in each of the last five years.

(AQW 18825/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) The number of children in foster care in each of the last five years can be found in 'Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2011/12' available at the following link on the Department's website:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/statistics_and_research-cib-pub/children_statistics/stats-cib-children_order.htm

- (ii) Figures for the average number of children in foster care at any one time are not available. However, of the 2,644 Looked After Children at 31 March 2012 1,946 (74%) were in Foster Care Placements. This was an increase of fifteen percentage points since 31 March 2007 when 1,389 children (59% of the total number of Looked After Children) were in Foster Care Placements.
- (iii) Table 1 below details the number of Foster Carers in Northern Ireland at 31 March 2012.

Table 1: The Number of Foster Carers in Northern Ireland at 31 March 2012

Type of Foster Carers	No. of Foster Carers
Foster Carers Registered with Trusts	2,010
Other Foster Carers	270
Total	2,280

- These figures have been sourced from HSC Board Delegated Statutory Functions/Corporate Parenting Returns and have not been validated by DHSSPS.
 - Other Foster Carers includes carer's registered with Independent Foster Care Providers & Carers providing care to disabled children and are not able to care for Looked After Children
 - Independent Foster Care Providers place children into foster placements on behalf of the Health and Social Care Trust. Some are profit making companies while others are charities or not for profit companies. Organisations working in Northern Ireland include Barnardos, Action for Children and Kindercare Fostering.
- (iv) Figures for the average length of time of a foster care placement are not centrally available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Children in Foster Care

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many children, on average, are in foster care at any one time.

(AQW 18826/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) The number of children in foster care in each of the last five years can be found in 'Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2011/12' available at the following link on the Department's website:
- http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/statistics_and_research-cib-pub/children_statistics/stats-cib-children_order.htm
- (ii) Figures for the average number of children in foster care at any one time are not available. However, of the 2,644 Looked After Children at 31 March 2012 1,946 (74%) were in Foster Care Placements. This was an increase of fifteen percentage points since 31 March 2007 when 1,389 children (59% of the total number of Looked After Children) were in Foster Care Placements.
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- (iv) Figures for the average length of time of a foster care placement are not centrally available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Foster Carers

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of current registered foster carers. (AQW 18827/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) The number of children in foster care in each of the last five years can be found in 'Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2011/12' available at the following link on the Department's website:
- http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/statistics_and_research-cib-pub/children_statistics/stats-cib-children_order.htm
- (ii) Figures for the average number of children in foster care at any one time are not available. However, of the 2,644 Looked After Children at 31 March 2012 1,946 (74%) were in Foster Care Placements. This was an increase of fifteen percentage points since 31 March 2007 when 1,389 children (59% of the total number of Looked After Children) were in Foster Care Placements.
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- (iv) Figures for the average length of time of a foster care placement are not centrally available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Foster Care Placement

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the average length of time foster care placement.

(AQW 18828/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) The number of children in foster care in each of the last five years can be found in 'Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2011/12' available at the following link on the Department's website:
- http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/statistics_and_research-cib-pub/children_statistics/stats-cib-children_order.htm
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- (iv) Figures for the average length of time of a foster care placement are not centrally available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Dental Practices: New Health Service Patients

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety which dental practices in North Down are currently accepting new Health Service patients.

(AQW 18829/11-15)

Mr Poots: As General Dental Practitioners are independent contractors neither my Department nor the Health and Social Care Board maintains a list of dentists or practices that are accepting patients for Health Service treatment and care. However, between February 2012 and January 2013, 52 of the 60 dentists in North Down registered at least one new patient for Health Service treatment and care. The addresses of the surgeries these dentists practise in are set out in the table below.

32 Abbey Street	Bangor	BT20 4JA
29A Hamilton Road	Bangor	BT20 4LF
109G Clandeboye Road	Bangor	BT20 3JW
38 Brunswick Road	Bangor	BT20 3DU
4 Hamilton Road	Bangor	BT20 4LE
107 Hamilton Road	Bangor	BT20 4LN
16 Hamilton Road	Bangor	BT20 4LE
2 Bingham Lane	Bangor	BT20 5DR
32 Shore Road	Holywood	BT18 9HX
38 Hamilton Road	Bangor	BT20 4LE
Springhill Surgery, 4A Killeen Avenue	Bangor	BT19 1NB
97 Brunswick Road	Bangor	BT20 3DW
1 Moira Drive	Bangor	BT20 4RN
22A Groomsport Road	Bangor	BT20 5LN
64 Donaghadee Rd	Bangor	BT20 4QX
Castlebawn Dental Practice, 32-34 Victoria Road	Bangor	BT20 5EX
Balloo Dental Practice, Office D2, Balloo Office Park, Balloo Drive	Bangor	BT19 7QY
32 Abbey Street	Bangor	BT20 4JA
116 High Street	Holywood	BT18 9HW
128 High Street	Holywood	BT18 9HW
The Maypole Dental Practice, 94-96 High Street	Holywood	BT18 9HW
1A Station Road	Helens Bay	BT19 1TN

Health and Social Care Trusts: Prompt Payments

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain the reasons for the Health and Social Care Trusts performance in making prompt payments to their suppliers; and what measures are in place to address this issue.

(AQW 18839/11-15)

Mr Poots: The main reasons why HSC Trusts have paid invoices late are:-

- The constraints of the IT systems on which the trusts' payment function depends and the consequent reliance on manual processes;
- The wide geographical spread of sites within the organisations which can lead to delays in receiving invoices or obtaining approval for payment;
- Delays in receiving appropriate or complete information from suppliers; and

- Staff resources have been temporarily directed towards the implementation of the new finance payments system as part of the Business Services Transformation Programme (BSTP) which has had a direct effect on the prompt payment performance over recent months.

My Department and the HSC Trusts are committed to ensuring that all suppliers are paid as quickly as possible and have a range of measures in place, including:

- Issuing guidance to Trusts which sets out their duty in relation to prompt payment (including requirements of Managing Public Money NI and the Late Payment of Commercial Debts Act);
- Monitoring the monthly prompt payment performance of the Trusts;
- Reporting monthly performance to the Departmental Board, raising formally at Trust accountability meetings and reporting overall performance for the year in the annual statutory accounts;
- Targeted interventions, such as Finance staff providing awareness sessions to other staff to improve the payments process and providing clearer instructions to managers and suppliers on submission of invoices;
- The introduction of new financial systems as part of the BSTP is now under way. When these systems are fully embedded across all of the Trusts, they are expected to have a positive impact on the prompt payment performance by eliminating some of the manual interventions and problems related to the wide geographical spread of sites.

Adoption

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many freeing for adoption proceedings have been brought within the court system in each of the last five years; and what was the outcome in each case.

(AQW 18882/11-15)

Mr Poots: The number of Freeing Order applications made by Health and Social Care Trusts in each of the last 5 years, and their outcomes, are set out in Table 1 below;

Table 1: No of Freeing order proceedings in the last 5 years and the outcome.

Year	No of freeing order proceedings	Outcome
2007/2008	47	Freeing Order granted in 46 cases 1 application withdrawn
2008/2009	49	Freeing Order granted in 46 cases 2 applications refused 1 application withdrawn
2009/2010	59	Freeing Order granted in all cases
2010/2011	71	Freeing Order granted in 70 cases 1 ongoing appeal
2011/2012	75	Freeing Order granted in 72 cases 2 have not yet concluded 1 ongoing appeal
Total	301	293 Freeing Orders granted 2 applications refused 2 applications withdrawn 2 applications under appeal 2 applications not yet concluded

Vulnerable Young People: Upper Bann

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action his Department is taking to address the needs of vulnerable young people in the Upper Bann constituency.

(AQW 18890/11-15)

Mr Poots: One of my key priorities for Health and Social Care is to ensure that the most vulnerable in our society are looked after effectively across all our services. Within the Health and Social Care sector, there are a number of key initiatives underway to address the needs of vulnerable young people throughout Northern Ireland; these are being taken forward by the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership and the Public Health Agency. They include the development of Family Support Hubs under the family and parenting strategy, Families Matter and a range of universal and specialist Child Mental Health Services (CAHMS) for vulnerable young people within the stepped care model framework. In addition, the Southern Health and Social Care Trust has developed specific initiatives to meet the needs of young people with physical and sensory disabilities and young people with alcohol and substance misuse issues.

The extent of vulnerability in some young people may require them to become 'looked after' by the statutory authorities. In line with the recommendations of the Care Matters Strategy for Northern Ireland, a range of initiatives are being taken forward for looked after children. Responsibility for those initiatives lies with my Department, the Health and Social Care Board and Trusts,

working in partnership with other Departments and the voluntary sector. They include policy initiatives aimed at improving the outcomes of looked after children, including health, education and safeguarding outcomes. They also include the provision of specialist mental health services and services specifically targeted at young people on the edge of care and leaving care.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder since 1998.

(AQW 18906/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information requested is not collected centrally and was requested from the Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts. The response from each HSC Trust is listed below:

Belfast HSC Trust:

The information requested could only be provided at disproportionate cost. Information on admissions for ICD10 Diagnosis PTSD (F431) could not be provided in the time frame provided.

Northern HSC Trust:

Clients Discharged from Hospital 01.01.1998- 31.12.1012 - Episode Diagnosis of F43.1 - Post-traumatic stress disorder

Year	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Clients Discharged from Hospital	8	25	33	34	31	15	23	18

Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Clients Discharged from Hospital	19	25	21	12	17	11	20

	Total
Clients Discharged from Hospital	312

Source - Epex3 - Scan used DIAGF43

Please note: Community Clients diagnosis is not recorded

Please note: Diagnosis recording coverage is currently at 75%.

South Eastern HSC Trust:

Number of Admissions to South Eastern HSC Trust Wards from 1 January 1998 – Present with Primary or Secondary ICD10 Diagnosis PTSD (F43.1)

Locality	Primary Diagnosis	Secondary Diagnosis	Grand Total
Belfast *	2	2	4
South Eastern	24	6	30
Grand Total	26	8	34

* Patients within the Belfast catchment area being treated in the South Eastern Trust

Southern HSC Trust:

Finished Inpatient Episodes

Primary Diagnosis - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Period 01/04/07-31/12/12

Hospital on Admission	Primary Diagnosis	Year	Admissions
Bluestone Unit	F43.1	2007	4
Bluestone Unit	F43.1	2008	4
Bluestone Unit	F43.1	2009	2
Bluestone Unit	F43.1	2010	3
Bluestone Unit	F43.1	2011	1

There were no admissions to St Luke's with ICD 10 (F43.1).

Western HSC Trust:

The information requested could only be provided at disproportionate cost, however information is available on those diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) who have had inpatient treatment.

Admissions to Western HSC Trust Psychiatric Wards 1 January 1998 - Present with ICD10 Diagnosis PTSD (F431)

Year	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Number of Admissions	7	16	16	20	12	7	5	6

Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Number of Admissions	2	3	3	5	2	6	4

Total admissions for F431 during the specified period are 114. The admissions above relate to 75 individuals. There are currently no psychiatric inpatients in Western HSC Trust with F431 recorded as a diagnosis at present although diagnosis is normally coded on discharge.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people (i) in Belfast; and (ii) outside of Belfast are currently diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.
(AQW 18907/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information requested is not collected centrally and was requested from the Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts. The response from each HSC Trust is listed below:

Belfast HSC Trust:

The information requested could only be provided at disproportionate cost. Information on admissions for ICD10 Diagnosis PTSD (F431) could not be provided in the time frame provided.

Northern HSC Trust:

Clients Discharged from Hospital 01.01.1998- 31.12.1012 - Episode Diagnosis of F43.1 - Post-traumatic stress disorder

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Clients Discharged from Hospital	8	25	33	34	31	15	23	18

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Clients Discharged from Hospital	19	25	21	12	17	11	20

	Total
Clients Discharged from Hospital	312

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Please note: Community Clients diagnosis is not recorded

Please note: Diagnosis recording coverage is currently at 75%.

South Eastern HSC Trust:

Number of Admissions to South Eastern HSC Trust Wards from 1 January 1998 – Present with Primary or Secondary ICD10 Diagnosis PTSD (F43.1)

Locality	Primary Diagnosis	Secondary Diagnosis	Grand Total
Belfast *	2	2	4
South Eastern	24	6	30
Grand Total	26	8	34

* Patients within the Belfast catchment area being treated in the South Eastern Trust

Southern HSC Trust:**Finished Inpatient Episodes****Primary Diagnosis - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder****Period 01/04/07-31/12/12**

Hospital on Admission	Primary Diagnosis	Year	Admissions
Bluestone Unit	F43.1	2007	4
Bluestone Unit	F43.1	2008	4
Bluestone Unit	F43.1	2009	2
Bluestone Unit	F43.1	2010	3
Bluestone Unit	F43.1	2011	1

There were no admissions to St Luke's with ICD 10 (F43.1).

Western HSC Trust:

The information requested could only be provided at disproportionate cost, however information is available on those diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) who have had inpatient treatment.

Admissions to Western HSC Trust Psychiatric Wards 1 January 1998 - Present with ICD10 Diagnosis PTSD (F431)

Year	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Number of Admissions	7	16	16	20	12	7	5	6

Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Number of Admissions	2	3	3	5	2	6	4

Total admissions for F431 during the specified period are 114. The admissions above relate to 75 individuals. There are currently no psychiatric inpatients in Western HSC Trust with F431 recorded as a diagnosis at present although diagnosis is normally coded on discharge.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what services are available to sufferers of post-traumatic stress disorder; and what measures are being taken to ensure that patients are not disadvantaged from receiving appropriate treatment and support.

(AQW 18908/11-15)

Mr Poots: Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is recognised as an effective treatment for PTSD. 'A Strategy for the Development of Psychological Therapies Services' was published by my Department in 2010 and has been underpinned by an additional £4.4m per annum.

While it is not possible to quantify separately the resources provided by Health and Social Care Services for the treatment of PTSD, £227.5 million was spent on specialist services for people with mental health problems in 2011/12. This does not include expenditure on primary care services and voluntary organisations which may support patients with post traumatic stress disorder.

The adequacy of services that are available to deal with post-traumatic stress disorder cases is primarily for the Health & Social Care Board to address as part of its commissioning role.

Water Supply: Fluoridation

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the proposals to fluoridate the water supply.

(AQW 18929/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am still considering my position on fluoridation of the water supply in Northern Ireland and continue to consult with Executive colleagues on the matter before I come to a decision.

If a proposal to fluoridate the water supplies is made, we are required under, The Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 to consult and ascertain public opinion. Should such a consultation proceed, we would welcome the views of all interested parties, at that time.

Hospitals: Patients with Address in Republic of Ireland

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients, with an address in the Republic of Ireland, attended hospitals in Northern Ireland under (i) private funding arrangements; and (ii) contract arrangements in 2011/12.

(AQW 18938/11-15)

Mr Poots: Health and Social Care is first and foremost a resource for the residents for Northern Ireland. Generally access to health services in Northern Ireland is based on whether a person is “ordinarily resident” here. This requires them to reside in Northern Ireland on a lawful continuous and settled basis with an identifiable purpose for their residency here. Usually residency of a 6 month period or longer is required.

In addition there is a reciprocal arrangement between the UK and the Republic of Ireland on the provision of healthcare i.e immediate necessary care when on a visit to Northern Ireland.

Each Health and Social Care Trust gathers data on the patients they treat in different ways. It is not possible for Trusts to provide a breakdown of Republic of Ireland patients treated specifically under contract or private arrangements

Review of Public Administration

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety which departmental functions will be transferred to local government under the Review of Public Administration.

(AQW 18952/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety does not have any plans to transfer any of its functions to local government under the Review of Public Administration.

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.

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust: Community Engagement

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what community engagement the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has undertaken with families in need to help them to avail of local support services.

(AQW 18991/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Children and Young People’s Strategic Partnership (CYPSP), who have regional responsibility for Family Support services, held a public consultation in 2011 on its plans for family support. This went on to inform the CYPSP Plan 2011 – 2014. These documents and an outline of the process can be found at: www.cypsp.org

The South Eastern Outcomes Board involved statutory, voluntary and community organisations in putting together and submitting a more local action plan to the Children and Young People’s Strategic Partnership. In addition, a workshop was held on the 9th January 2013 to refine and reprioritise plans for Family Support in the area. This event was attended by over 30 statutory, voluntary and community groups.

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust: Community and Voluntary Sector

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what funding service level agreements the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has reached with the community and voluntary sector over the last three years, broken down by office.

(AQW 18997/11-15)

Mr Poots: The table below shows the number and value of service level agreements / funding packages in place with the voluntary and community sector in the South Eastern Trust area.

Information to enable me to distinguish between service level agreements and funding packages is not held.

Year	Funding Packages/Service Level Agreements	Funding
2010/11	167	10,680,200
2011/12	171	9,428,220
2012/13	161	11,371,900

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust: Community and Voluntary Sector

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what funding packages the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has agreed with the community and voluntary sector over the last three years, broken down by office.

(AQW 18998/11-15)

Mr Poots: I refer my colleague to the answer provided to AQW 18997/11 -15.

Children on the At Risk Register: South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many children in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust are on the At Risk register, broken down by council area.

(AQW 18999/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is assumed that what is meant by the 'At Risk Register' is the Child Protection Register.

- (i) Information regarding the number of children on the Child Protection Register is not broken down geographically beyond Health and Social Care Trust areas.
- (ii) Table 1 below details the numbers of children on the Child Protection Register at 31 December 2012 by Health and Social Care Trust.

Table 1: Children on the Child Protection Register by Health and Social Care Trust at 31 December 2012

Health and Social Care Trust	No. of Children on the Child Protection Register at 31 December 2012
Belfast	462
Northern	560
South Eastern	401
Southern	303
Western	283
Total	2,009

Source: Community Information Branch Quarterly CPR4 Return

Note: These figures are provisional and potentially subject to change before publication

Quarterly Child Protection figures can be sourced from the Department's website at the following link:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/statistics_and_research-cib-pub/children_statistics/children_order_quarterly.htm

Children on the At Risk Register

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many children in each Health and Social Care Trust are on the At Risk register.

(AQW 19000/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is assumed that what is meant by the 'At Risk Register' is the Child Protection Register.

- (i) Information regarding the number of children on the Child Protection Register is not broken down geographically beyond Health and Social Care Trust areas.
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Mental Health Facilities: Children and Young People

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what actions have been taken to improve mental health facilities and services for children and young people; and what proportion of the mental health budget is allocated to children and young people's services.

(AQW 19028/11-15)

Mr Poots: There have been considerable improvements and investment in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in recent years, including the development of a £16M 33-bedded Regional Child and Adolescent Mental Health Inpatient Unit (Beechcroft) which opened in 2010, and developments in services for eating disorders and crisis intervention.

The HSCB and Trusts have commenced implementation of the Regional Service Model for CAMHS which my Department published in July 2012. The CAMHS Service Model aims to promote consistency in service provision across Northern Ireland. Improvements to services will include an increased focus on early intervention, better multi-disciplinary working and better collaboration with the community and voluntary, education and youth justice sectors.

The HSCB has recently invested an additional £2.27M in CAMHS, which in the main will be used to establish Primary Mental Health Teams and Crisis Resolution and Home Treatment Services across all Trusts.

Expenditure in specialist CAMHS is currently in the region of £19M which is approximately 8% (7.9%) of the total Mental Health budget. This figure does not include investments made by PHA in a wide range of young people's emotional health services, nor does it include expenditure on the wide range of children's services that contribute towards addressing the emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people such as family support services, safeguarding, and primary care services. Other government departments also invest in the improvement of emotional health and well being of children and young people.

Fire Station: Cushendall

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the Fire and Rescue Service abandoned its business plan for a new fire station in Cushendall.

(AQW 19055/11-15)

Mr Poots: The timing of business case preparation, appraisal and approval is set to ensure that appropriate approval is in place in time for any proposed expenditure as set out in the capital programme for DHSSPS and its arms length bodies. The business case for the Cushendall Fire Station has not been abandoned but will proceed to completion and approval when money becomes available to progress the scheme.

The DHSSPS capital programme is constrained by the allocations set out in Budget 2010 and, in the longer term, by the indicative allocations set out in the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland. The highest priority projects are profiled within that period but I do not have sufficient funding available to undertake all of the projects which are needed.

The Cushendall Fire Station is not sufficiently high up the list of priorities to be profiled for expenditure in the current budget period.

Northlands Independent Treatment Centre, Foyle

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why it was deemed that the Northlands Addiction Treatment Centre in Foyle had to be Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority regulated when only 10 percent of its service is residential care.

(AQW 19116/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Northlands Addiction Treatment Centre is defined as a residential care home under the Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003. Whilst the treatment prescribed at the Centre includes group and individual counselling for persons in need of personal care by reason of past or present dependence on alcohol or drugs, it may also provide residential accommodation as part of a residential treatment and rehabilitation programme. In line with the 2003 Order, Northlands Addiction Treatment Centre was required to make an application to register with RQIA and was registered as a residential care home by RQIA on 13 March 2012.

Neurology: Appointment Waiting Times

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the average waiting time to see a neurologist on the Health Service; and what is the longest time waited for a neurologist appointment in the last three years.

(AQW 19132/11-15)

Mr Poots: Data are collected in aggregate time bands, based on the length of time a patient is waiting for a first outpatient appointment, therefore it is not possible to calculate an average waiting time. It is, however, possible to calculate the median time band, a similar statistical measure.

The waiting time for a first outpatient appointment with a consultant in the Neurology specialty, at 30th September 2012, the most recent quarter for which official statistics are available, is outlined in the table below.

	Patients Waiting for an Appointment, by Weeks Waiting							Total Waiting
	0-6	>6-9	>9-13	>13-18	>18-21	>21-26	>26	
Northern Ireland	1,633	656	561	427	161	142	198	3,778

Source: Departmental Return CH3

The median waiting time band, for a first outpatient appointment with a consultant in the Neurology specialty, at 30th September 2012, was between 6 and 9 weeks.

My Department collects waiting time information on the basis of how long patients are currently waiting for a first outpatient appointment and not the completed length of time they waited before attending. I refer you to the table above, which indicates that at 30th September 2012, the longest waiting time for a first outpatient appointment with a consultant in the Neurology specialty was in the time band 'greater than 26 weeks'.

Health Service: Patient Referrals

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) what is the cost of referring a Health Service patient to a private sector neurologist; (ii) how many patients were referred during the last twelve months; and (iii) what is the cost of referring a patient for an appointment with a Health Service neurologist.

(AQW 19133/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) The current agreed tariff for a new neurology outpatient assessment in the independent sector is £400. This includes the average cost of any associated diagnostic tests.
- (ii) My Department does not collect information on the number of patients referred to the independent sector. My Department collects information on the number of patients treated in the independent sector, by new and review appointments, for the neurology specialty. In the period September 2011 to September 2012 (latest information available), there were 1,634 new appointments and 119 review appointments.
- (iii) The 2011-12 Northern Ireland average cost for a neurology outpatient attendance is £447. This includes the average cost of any associated diagnostic tests and also includes capital charges.

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust: Referrals

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many referrals have been made to the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust from (i) Child Protection; (ii) Gateway; (iii) Family Intervention Teams, broken down by the Trust offices in (a) Newtownards; (b) Downpatrick; and (c) Lisburn, for each of the last five years.

(AQW 19162/11-15)

Mr Poots: All referrals to the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) are dealt with by Gateway Teams, where they are subject to screening and initial assessment. It is assumed that this Assembly Question relates to how many referrals, after initial assessments, have been allocated as Child Protection referrals or Family Support referrals.

Table 1 below contains the number of Child Protection and Family Intervention referrals received by each of the three Trust offices in the last four years.

It was not possible to collect figures for 2007/08, as it was only from 2008 onwards that Gateway/FIT Teams were established and the tracking tools put in place.

Please note that new referral coding practices were introduced in November 2010, in line with the 'Regional Agreement on the use of SOS CARE within Children's Services.' Therefore referral figures from 2010/11 onwards are not directly comparable with previous years.

Table 1: Child Protection & Family Intervention Referrals received by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust 2008/09 – 2011/12

Office	Type of Referral	Year			
		2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Ards	Child Protection Referrals	401	693	839	666
	Family Intervention Referrals	1,738	1,985	2,516	4,331
	Total	2,139	2,678	3,355	4,997

Office	Type of Referral	Year			
		2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Down	Child Protection Referrals	202	259	301	325
	Family Intervention Referrals	1,039	1,332	1,471	2,434
	Total	1,241	1,591	1,772	2,759
Lisburn	Child Protection Referrals	427	550	580	491
	Family Intervention Referrals	1,525	1,732	2,457	3,360
	Total	1,952	2,282	3,037	3,851
Total	Child Protection Referrals	1,030	1,502	1,720	1,482
	Family Intervention Referrals	4,302	5,049	6,444	10,125
	Total	5,332	6,551	8,164	11,607

Source: SOS CARE/Information as of 01/02/2013

Note: This data has not been validated by Community Information Branch, DHSSPS

Fluoridation Trials: Hollywood and Tandragee

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether any health records were kept before, during, and after the Hollywood and Tandragee fluoridation trials, and where and how these records may be accessed. (AQW 19182/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department does not hold health records from before, during, or after the Hollywood and Tandragee fluoridation schemes. My officials have carried out an extensive search of Departmental records, including the archives of the Public Records Office to check for such records.

Death Certificates: Southern Health and Social Care Trust

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he will take to remove the delays in the issuing of Death Certificates at Southern Health and Social Care Trust Hospitals, which cause further distress to families. (AQW 19190/11-15)

Mr Poots: Registered Medical Practitioners have a legal duty to provide, without delay, a certificate of cause of death if, to the best of their knowledge, that person died of natural causes for which they had treated that person in the last 28 days.

The Southern Health and Social Care Trust have advised that it is not aware of any recent delays in issuing death certificates. The Trust has policies in place that provide nursing and medical staff with clear guidelines on their roles and responsibilities following the death of a patient.

All Trusts within Northern Ireland have been issued with the Departmental document, "Guidance on Death, Stillbirth and Cremation Certification". This document outlines the role and responsibilities of Doctors when writing a Medical Certificate of Cause of Death, including when a death should be referred to the Coroner and the circumstances in which a Death Certificate can and cannot be legally issued.

Death Certificates: Health and Social Care Trusts

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the procedures used by all Health and Social Care Trusts for the issuing of Death Certificates, including when out-of-hours doctors are involved. (AQW 19191/11-15)

Mr Poots: All Trusts within Northern Ireland have been issued with the Departmental document, "Guidance on Death, Stillbirth and Cremation Certification". This document outlines the role and responsibilities of doctors when writing a Medical Certificate of Cause of Death (MCCD), including when a death should be referred to the Coroner and the circumstances in which an MCCD can and cannot be legally issued.

Trusts have procedures in place to issue a MCCD based on the guidance issued by the Department.

A doctor completing a MCCD must have treated the patient for the condition of which they died within the last 28 days of life otherwise that Doctor cannot complete the MCCD. In those cases, where the doctor confirming death is unable to complete the MCCD, the doctor treating the patient will be asked to complete the MCCD as soon as possible.

Paediatric Congenital Children's Services

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the Terms of Reference for the Independent Review Panel on the Safe and Sustainable Review on Paediatric Congenital Children's Services.

(AQW 19195/11-15)

Mr Poots: A copy of the Terms of Reference for the "Safe and Sustainable Review of Children's Congenital Heart Services" being undertaken by the Independent Reconfiguration Panel in England can be accessed via the following link: -

<http://www.irpanel.org.uk/lib/doc/sos2br%20tofr2%2010.12.12.pdf>

Ambulance Deployment Point, Crossmaglen

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 18133/11-15, when the discussions will finish and action will be taken regarding an ambulance deployment point in Crossmaglen.

(AQW 19203/11-15)

Mr Poots: I have been advised by the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) that final arrangements to allow NIAS staff to access the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service station will be completed this week. Operational Crews and Emergency Ambulance Control will be informed of the arrangements as soon as possible after completion.

Slievemore House, Derry

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the situation at, and the future of, Slievemore House in Derry.

(AQW 19342/11-15)

Mr Poots: Slievemore Nursing Unit is an 18 bedded unit providing specialist services for people with dementia who present with challenging behaviour. There are currently 10 patients in Slievemore.

The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) carried out an inspection of Slievemore Nursing Unit in early January 2013. They raised concerns in relation to the model of service provision and consequently also the registration status and environmental requirements for the facility. Given these concerns it has been decided to suspend admissions to the Unit. The concerns raised by RQIA are not in relation to the quality of nursing care being provided.

The Trust will now consider alternative options as to how and where the service currently provided at Slievemore Nursing Unit is delivered and will undertake to engage and consult with patients, relatives, staff and their representatives on the way forward.

Health Inequalities: Committee Report

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline how he will implement the recommendations in the report of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety on its Review of Health Inequalities.

(AQO 3321/11-15)

Mr Poots: I welcome the Health Committee's Report of its Review of Health Inequalities, which was forwarded to my department on 17 January. It contains 9 recommendations some of which are beyond the sole remit of my Department and will require consideration with other departments and Executive colleagues.

In July of last year I published a draft cross-cutting public health framework "Fit and Well – Changing Lives" for public consultation. Officials are currently considering the outcomes of that consultation and moving forward with a process to finalise the framework. This will include further work with stakeholders, including within Health and with other departments, and has been timetabled to be concluded in Spring 2013.

The recommendations made by the Committee in their report on health inequalities are timely and will also be considered as part of this process, and I have undertaken to provide the Committee with a detailed response in due course, and prior to finally publishing the framework.

Ulster Hospital: Waiting Times

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain why the number of patients at the Ulster Hospital, who waited for longer than twelve hours to be treated and either discharged or admitted, increased from 136 to 286 between October and December 2012.

(AQO 3322/11-15)

Mr Poots: The increase in Emergency Department waiting times for people who waited longer than 12 hours at the Ulster Hospital in December was due to several factors. These include a gap in bed capacity at the Ulster Hospital, which the Health and Social Care Board and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust are working to address. There was also an increase in admissions in December and an increase in the severity of sickness and complexity of those who attended the Emergency Department.

The Trust also experienced norovirus and gastroenteritis outbreaks across a number of wards in December which made it necessary to close wards for a defined period to contain and control the outbreaks. Similar outbreaks in nursing and residential homes also affected the Trust's ability to discharge patients efficiently. While recognising that some of these factors were outside the control of the Trust, I find it unacceptable that patients are experiencing excessive waiting times and I look to the Board to work with all Health and Social Care Trusts to ensure that a focus remains on improving the performance of our emergency departments.

Hospitals: Cancelled Operations

Mr F McCann asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what use will be made of the additional money allocated to help hospitals which have cancelled operations due to winter pressures.
(AQO 3316/11-15)

Mr Poots: I announced on 22 January that I had secured an additional £10 million funding to help frontline service delivery. This includes £7 million to support Trusts in dealing with the additional demand on emergency departments and other acute health services as a result of winter and unscheduled care pressures. This money will fund: staffing increases to improve seven day working; extended hours for Emergency Department nurse practitioners; and, supporting community services to be able to respond to hospital discharge demands. The Executive also made available an additional £19 million in 2012 to address backlogs in elective care specialities where there are significant waiting times.

Care Homes: Residential Areas

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how he monitors the success of locating residential and special needs care homes in residential areas.
(AQO 3320/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Health and Social Care system does not monitor the success of locating residential and special needs care homes in residential areas. Such homes are now mainly built by the private or community/voluntary sectors and their actual location is subject to planning application and consultation processes. These functions are not within the remit of my Department. However, my Department and HSC organisations do work collaboratively with other Government departments, local agencies and individuals and carers to assess the needs of the individual. This includes consideration of a range of community options.

I believe that society should do all that it can to promote social inclusion. I would assure the member, that my overriding priority is to ensure the safety and well being of all of the people placed in care. The "success" of residential care homes, including those for people with special needs, is measured by monitoring the wellbeing of their residents on at least an annual basis, through the Care Management process which also involves the resident themselves, and their family whenever possible. In addition, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Agency also has a role in assessing care provision against standards.

Daisy Hill Hospital, Newry

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what role he envisages for Daisy Hill hospital in the future delivery of health care.
(AQO 3323/11-15)

Mr Poots: Hospitals within the Southern Health and Social Care Trust area operate in a network, making best use of infrastructure, skills and resources. Daisy Hill is an integral and essential part of that acute hospital network, providing high quality care to many patients every day. Daisy Hill is a hospital that has served the local community well for many years and will do so for many more.

The Southern HSC Trust has in recent years demonstrated its commitment to Daisy Hill by investing £2.5m to improve infrastructure and services at the site with a further investment of £4.7m to upgrade theatres planned for the next financial year.

Hospitals: Emergency Care

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the percentage of patients attending Type 1 emergency care departments, who were treated and discharged or admitted within four hours, fell to 71.7 percent between October and December 2012.
(AQO 3324/11-15)

Mr Poots: The lower performance rate for Type 1 Emergency Departments between October and December 2012 reflects the higher volume of patients and more complex cases which presented to these hospitals. In addition, there were 362 more admissions to hospitals from emergency departments with fewer beds being available for admission as a result of winter bug outbreaks in acute hospitals and in nursing and residential homes. This situation resulted in greater numbers of people needing care in emergency departments for longer periods

While recognising that some of these factors were outside the control of Trusts, I find it unacceptable that patients are experiencing excessive waiting times and I look to the Health and Social Care Board to work with all Trusts to ensure that a focus remains on improving the performance of our emergency departments.

Marie Stopes International

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many abortions have been carried out in the Marie Stopes clinic in Belfast.

(AQO 3325/11-15)

Mr Poots: This information is not held by the department.

It is my intention that data about all terminations that take place in Northern Ireland should be recorded and officials are exploring the best way to achieve this.

Ambulance Depot, Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether there are any plans to make the Ambulance Depot in Carrickfergus permanent.

(AQO 3326/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Ambulance Station in Carrickfergus is permanent and I am advised by the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service that it has no plans to change its status.

Northern Health and Social Care Trust: Chairperson

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what arrangements have been put in place to appoint a new Chairperson to the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQO 3327/11-15)

Mr Poots: An open public appointments competition will be held to appoint a new Chairperson to the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. The advertisement for this position will appear in the three regional newspapers week commencing 4 February 2013.

Department of Justice

Beech House, Hydebank Wood

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice why inmates in Beech House, Hydebank Wood have not had association for over six weeks.

(AQW 18619/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): Due to temporary staff shortages it has been necessary to restrict evening association for all prisoners in Hydebank Wood. Although Beech House has been affected by these restrictions, inmates have had the opportunity to avail of association throughout the day in the form of attendance at activities including education, vocational training, physical education and visits. Prisoners not engaged in any form of activity during the day are, where possible, permitted association time on their landing.

Inmates located on a landing subject to restricted regime during evening association, are afforded an appropriate amount of time out of cell to shower, use the telephone, and to make the necessary preparations for the evening and following day.

Prisoner Assessment Unit

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, given his intention to reopen the Prisoner Assessment Unit, whether he will authorise the publication of the full version of the report into the closure of the unit, without any redactions, with the exception of where personal security is at risk, in the interests of transparency and to ensure that previous errors have been addressed for the unit's reopening.

(AQW 18620/11-15)

Mr Ford: I refer the Member to my answer to AQW/14000/11-15.

Prison Officers: Return to Work

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of prison officers who have taken sick leave as a result of injury caused by a prisoner have returned to work on light duties.

(AQW 18621/11-15)

Mr Ford: Information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost to the public purse.

Prison Service Management Board

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail why the minutes of the November and December 2012 meetings of the Prison Service Management Board have not been published on the Department's website and when they will be published. (AQW 18622/11-15)

Mr Ford: A note of the meetings of the Prison Service Management Board is not published until they are approved by the Board members at the next scheduled Board meeting. As no meeting was scheduled for December, November's note of the meeting was only approved at the January Board meeting held on the 8 January.

A note of the November Board meeting has now been published on the NIPS website.

Prison Service: Caps

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice whether new recruits to the Prison Service are issued with caps bearing the badge of Her Majesty's Prison Service. (AQW 18624/11-15)

Mr Ford: Custody Officers are issued with caps bearing the badge of the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

Magilligan Prison: Signage

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice to detail any works order that has been submitted to replace the signage at HMP Magilligan and how the content will differ from the current signage. (AQW 18625/11-15)

Mr Ford: The table below details a list of Works Orders issued for signage at Magilligan Prison during the past twelve months (since January 2012):

Date	Order Nr	Nature of Signage
22 February 2012	190001194	"Unauthorised / Prohibited Articles"
13 March 2012	190001207	"No Physical Contact permitted at Table"
25 May 2012	190001229	"Name of Staff Member Health and Safety Officer"
3 September 2012	190001316	"Visitors Reception"

The content of these signs did not differ from the signs they replaced.

Young People: Crime

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what funding is available through his Department for programmes aimed at deterring young people from crime. (AQW 18640/11-15)

Mr Ford: There are a number of funding streams available within my Department for the purpose of deterring young people from crime.

The Youth Justice Agency offers funding of around £540,000 to a range of voluntary and community groups for programmes that are agreed annually. It also operates a scheme with an annual value of around £120,000, through which voluntary and community groups can apply for small grants of up to £2,500, to support local projects that work to keep young people out of the criminal justice system.

My Department also makes available over £200,000 annually through its Priority Youth Intervention programme, the purpose of which is to deter young people from anti-social behaviour and criminal activity.

Further funding is made available to Policing and Community Safety Partnerships, some of which is allocated to programmes aimed at deterring young people from crime. This includes, for example, projects providing early interventions and diversionary activities for those young people involved in, or at risk of becoming involved in, anti-social behaviour, and work to help young people develop healthy relationships; as well as education projects to raise awareness of the risk factors for young people.

Additionally, funding is being provided for youth diversion activity through small grants made available under the Assets Recovery Community Scheme.

Finally, my Department has directly funded projects that offer innovative and promising solutions and align with our overall aim of reducing offending. This is often in partnership with other Departments and Agencies to emphasise the importance of a joined-up approach to addressing problems before they lead young people into crime.

Prison Service: Code of Conduct and Discipline

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to allegations that a prison officer planted details in a prisoner's cell concerning Governor Steve Rodford and in terms of the Northern Ireland Prison Service Code of Conduct and Discipline, to detail (i) the date the officer became aware that he was under investigation; (ii) the date of interview; (iii) the date the disciplinary report was submitted to the Northern Ireland Prison Service; (iv) the outcome, including the date of decision and name of authorising personnel; (v) the current status of the prison officer; and (vi) the Terms of Reference of the disciplinary investigation.

(AQW 18682/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Prison Service is unable to provide the Member with the details requested as disclosure would be contrary to the Data Protection Act 1998.

Legal Services Commission: Funding

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission requested additional funding for the financial year 2011/2012, and if so, how much was granted and when was it sought and paid.

(AQW 18695/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Legal Service Commission's (NILSC) initial budget allocations for legal aid funds 2011/12 are set out in the table below, with comparison against annual expenditure levels.

Table 1: Legal aid budget and expenditure for 2011/12

2011/12	£m	£m
Main Budget Allocation		83.6
Additional Funding granted:		
Monitoring Round 1	2.3	
Monitoring Round 2	12.3	
Monitoring Round 3	1.1	
Monitoring Round 4	9.6	
Total Additional Funding granted		25.3
Total Funding granted		108.9
Total Net Spend		108.2

Note: Figures relate to civil and criminal legal aid and running costs.

The Department of Finance and Personnel's (DFP) in-year monitoring process provides a formal system for subsequent review of spending plans to ensure that resources are directed towards the highest priority areas, offering an opportunity for Departments to bid for additional funding allocation, if required.

As set out in the above table, additional resources of £25.3m were allocated to the NILSC via Budget Monitoring Rounds in 2011/12. The NILSC met all liabilities, amounting to £108.2m throughout this period.

Prison Service: Prisoner

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant AQW 17826/11-15, to detail (i) why this particular prisoner was afforded special treatment, particularly given that his partner was included and the costs met by Northern Ireland Prison Service; (ii) what made this person unique amongst the prisoner population; (iii) which specific person or agency was instrumental in suggesting and authorising this course of action; and (iv) whether he intends to investigate this case, particularly in respect of financial outlay, and to establish if this action was fully required and proved beneficial to those in question.

(AQW 18697/11-15)

Mr Ford: The treatment afforded to this prisoner was proportionate to his assessed risk of reoffending.

Each case is considered on its own merit and appropriate interventions agreed to assist the prisoner to resettle back into the community.

The multi disciplinary process, led by the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS), determined the most appropriate course of action for this prisoner.

NIPS is presently reviewing the circumstances surrounding the interventions provided to this prisoner and his wife and is satisfied that the treatment provided was appropriate. The review has highlighted that NIPS did bear the cost associated with the programme of interventions as previously stated in AQW 17826/11-15. However, this did not include transport costs.

Thompson House, Belfast

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) how much has been paid to Thompson House to accommodate offenders in each of the last two years; and (ii) to how many offenders do these figures equate.

(AQW 18698/11-15)

Mr Ford: My Department does not make payments to Thompson House. Funding for the accommodation is provided through the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Supporting People Programme.

Prison Service: Disciplinary Process

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to the disciplinary process following the discipline investigation into the death in custody of Colin Bell at HMP Maghaberry in June 2008 to detail (i) the composition of the internal Northern Ireland Prison Service independent appeal panel that dismissed all disciplinary charges in respect of ten night custody officers; (ii) the arrangements in respect of the remaining officers and the outcome; (iii) whether such arrangements were compliant with the Northern Ireland Prison Service Code of Conduct and Discipline; and (iv) if so, detail why the three healthcare staff involved in the Deery case were not afforded similar treatment and arrangements in accordance with the Northern Ireland Prison Service Code of Conduct and Discipline.

(AQW 18700/11-15)

Mr Ford: The independent three person appeal panel comprised a solicitor; a retired official of the Prison Officers' Association, England & Wales; and a retired Scottish Prison Service Governor.

Disclosure of the information requested in part (ii) would be contrary to the Data Protection Act 1998.

The arrangement to convene an Independent Panel was made in agreement with the POA, NIPS senior management and the Labour Relations Agency.

As the cases referred to in part (iv) of the question are still ongoing, I am unable to provide the Member with the details requested.

Supporting Prisoner at Risk Documentation

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 17887/11-15, to detail how managers, who are responsible for staff that are dealing directly with vulnerable and suicidal prisoners, ensure that relevant policies, procedures, prison rules and best practice are adhered to, including the completion of Supporting Prisoner at Risk documentation and multi-disciplinary reviews on prisoners.

(AQW 18757/11-15)

Mr Ford: Managers on a daily basis have responsibility for managing specific tasks within the prison, including the use of the Supporting Prisoner At Risk (SPAR) procedures. In addition, the Northern Ireland Prison Service has in place a performance management system for all managers and staff, where key objectives are set with the agreement of the job holder and manager. Performance is monitored and assessed against these objectives and managed throughout the year with a mid year and annual review report completed.

Safer Custody managers also carry out audits of safer custody policies and procedures, which includes reviewing Supporting Prisoner at Risk documentation and any issues will be reported to line managers.

Prison Service: Head of Professional Standards

Lord Morrow asked Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 17980/11-15 and AQW 17821/11-15 to detail (i) the date on which the Head of Professional Standards of the Northern Ireland Prison Service was appointed, as referred to in the November minutes of the Northern Ireland Prison Service Management Board meeting; and (ii) the grade of the person concerned.

(AQW 18758/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Grade 7 who will manage the Professional Standards Unit was appointed on 16 January 2012.

Prison Service: Staff with Disabilities

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many people with disabilities are employed by the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

(AQW 18759/11-15)

Mr Ford: The number of people currently employed by the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) and recorded as having declared a disability is 79. This equates to 3.8% of the total number of staff in post.

Prison Service Staff: Suspension/Dismissal

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether the Prisoner Ombudsman is open to legal challenge in instances where a recommendation is made for suspension and/or dismissal of a staff member which is accepted the Northern Ireland Prison Service, but later overturned on appeal.

(AQW 18760/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Prisoner Ombudsman does not make recommendations covering the suspension and/or dismissal of staff, but may recommend that the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) consider conducting an internal disciplinary investigation into a staff member's actions. In those circumstances, NIPS will investigate the facts in line with the disciplinary process set out in the NIPS Code of Conduct.

An individual officer who is concerned about a recommendation made by the Prisoner Ombudsman may make a complaint to the NIPS Director of Operations directly. If such complaints cannot be resolved internally then there is scope for a person to make a complaint via an MLA to the Assembly Ombudsman.

It may also be possible for a recommendation of the Prisoner Ombudsman to be challenged by way of a judicial review application.

Prisoners: Drug Testing

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail what percentage of sentenced prisoners tested positive for illegal and/or non-prescribed drugs, per prison facility, including Hydebank Wood, in 2012.

(AQW 18761/11-15)

Mr Ford: The percentages of positive drug tests showing the presence of illegal and/or non-prescribed drugs per prison facility in 2012 are shown below.

Establishment	Percentage of Positive Drug Tests
Maghaberry	15.35%
Magilligan	8.39%
Hydebank Wood	8.37%

The results of positive drug tests from remand and sentenced prisoners are not recorded separately.

Prison Service: Staff Exit Scheme

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) why he chose to bid for a further £31.6m of resource funding in the January monitoring round to fund the Northern Ireland Prison Service Staff Exit Scheme; and (ii) the consequences for the delivery of the exit scheme if the agreed allocation is only £10m of the funding requested.

(AQW 18783/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Voluntary Early Retirement (or VER) scheme was launched on 8 November 2011 following approval of the business case by the Department of Finance and Personnel which allowed the release of 360 staff under the scheme. 544 members of the Northern Ireland Prison Service applied for the VER Scheme. Prison Service Management is committed to ensuring as many staff as possible are afforded the opportunity to leave the Service under the Scheme in the context of operational necessity and affordability. Progress is being kept under review.

In this context, my Department submitted a bid to the Department of Finance and Personnel for the additional budget required to fund all officers who applied for the Scheme. The £10m allocation will be used to facilitate the departure of the staff as outlined in the business case. Work is ongoing to firm up detailed costings. It will be necessary to secure additional funding in order to allow all officers to leave under the Scheme.

Supporting Prisoner at Risk Procedures

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 17555/11-15 and in light of the recommendations contained in the report on an inspection of Maghaberry Prison on 19-23 March 2012 in relation to the improvement of Supporting Prisoner at Risk procedures, will he reconsider his decision not to amend the opening and closing of Supporting Prisoner at Risk procedures and instead have them remain open for vulnerable or at risk prisoners.

(AQW 18804/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Prison Service is not considering amending the Supporting Prisoners at Risk procedures to have it applied to vulnerable prisoners at all times.

Domestic Violence Programme

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the status of the 2012 proposed domestic violence programme for prisoners at Maghaberry and to clarify when it (a) was implemented or (b) is intended to be implemented in 2013.

(AQW 18805/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Prison Service addresses offenders' needs on an individually assessed basis which takes into account violence which is sexual, alcohol or anger driven. NIPS has a range of group programmes which address these serious types of offending including Controlling Anger and Learning to Manage it (CALM), Alcohol Related Violence (ARV) and the Sexual Offender Treatment Programmes (SOTP). Where high risk offenders present with a "mixed" pattern of general and domestic violence they are eligible to be referred to the Cognitive Self Change Programme (CSCP) as research and clinical experience shows that the underlying attitudes and beliefs held by these perpetrators are often closely related.

The outcomes for existing domestic violence programmes are disappointing, and therefore the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) is currently revising and developing its domestic abuse perpetrator programmes. NIPS, through its partnership with NOMS, will be monitoring this progress and in future may introduce a new evidence based group intervention at Maghaberry.

Prisoner programme needs for 2013/2014 are currently being assessed and it is anticipated that all of these programmes that address serious violence will continue to be delivered.

Prison Service Staff: Civil Service Appeal Board

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) whether any officer dismissed from the Prison Service in connection with the death in custody of Colin Bell submitted an appeal to the Northern Ireland Civil Service Appeals Board; (ii) to detail the number of appeals and the outcomes; (iii) the number of officers who received compensation; (iv) from which appeal forum; and (v) the total cost to the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

(AQW 18806/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Prison Service is unable to provide the Member with the details requested, as disclosure would be contrary to the Data Protection Act 1998.

National Offender Management Service

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail how the 2012/13 target cost per prisoner of £67,600 compares with that of the National Offender Management Service.

(AQW 18808/11-15)

Mr Ford: The National Offender Management Service (NOMS) measures the annual 'cost per place' but has not published a target for 2012-13. The last full year for which it published this cost was 2011-12 when it was £37,648. The 'cost per prisoner place' (CPPP) for the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) in that year was £71,398.

Economies of scale lead to higher costs in Northern Ireland.

There is also the added complication, exclusive to NIPS, of separated paramilitary prisoners which leads to increased running costs and reduced operational flexibility of accommodation.

In addition the calculation here includes different elements. For example, NOMS does not include all of its education costs in its calculation.

However, the NIPS CPPP has reduced by £9,942 from 2008-09 to £71,398 in 2011-12 and is set to reduce by a further £3,798 this year as the 2012-13 target of £67,600 is currently on track for achievement.

It is also anticipated that this target will be further reduced when the current reform process is complete. This will be subject to the successful delivery of the voluntary early retirement scheme and construction of new accommodation as part of the Estates Strategy.

Thompson House, Belfast

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how much is paid to Thompson House per offender, per week and which agency meets these costs.

(AQW 18810/11-15)

Mr Ford: I refer the Member to the answer I gave to AQW/18698/11-15. Funding for approved premises is provided through the Housing Executive's Supporting People Programme.

Prisons: Drug Smuggling

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many visitors to prisons have been convicted of smuggling, or attempting to smuggle, drugs into prison, in each of the last two years, broken down by prison facility.

(AQW 18868/11-15)

Mr Ford: NIPS request PSNI to attend an establishment, when suspicion warrants, in regard to visitors smuggling drugs. They may subsequently be cautioned, proceeded against by summons or charged for offences either under the Misuse of Drugs Act or the Prison Act. This process cuts across PSNI, Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunal Service and Public Prosecution Service.

PSNI are able to provide figures on the number of persons arrested. However, under the Data Protection Act, NIPS is unable to obtain individual names in order to ascertain through the PPS whether any of the persons arrested were subsequently convicted of smuggling or attempting to smuggle drugs into prisons.

Producing the information could only be obtained by manually checking all warrants and the completion of this exercise would be at a disproportionate cost to the public purse.

People Trafficking

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Justice how many people have been (i) prosecuted; and (ii) convicted of people trafficking in each of the last five years, broken down by (i) Crown Court; and (ii) Magistrates Court.

(AQW 18870/11-15)

Mr Ford: People trafficking offences may be prosecuted under Sections 57(1)(a), 57(1)(b), 58(1) and 59(1) of the Sexual Offences Act 2003, and Sections 4(1) and 4(2) of the Asylum and Immigration Act 2004.

The Department's formal convictions database shows that one person was convicted of such offences in 2008 and was dealt with in the magistrates' court. In addition we understand from the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunal Service and Public Prosecution Service that two persons were prosecuted for and convicted of people trafficking offences in the Crown Court in 2012.

There are a number of cases in which decisions have been taken to prosecute on indictment in the Crown Court for offences of Human Trafficking which have not yet concluded.

There are also a number of human trafficking related cases which have been submitted to the PPS which are currently under active consideration.

It is worth highlighting that there have been a number of other prosecutions of individuals where the evidence was insufficient to prosecute for the actual offence of human trafficking, but evidence was sufficient to prosecute for other offences, such as controlling prostitution. The prosecution of these offences is also effective in disrupting the activities of human traffickers. Effective prosecution of offenders will help to make Northern Ireland a hostile environment for human traffickers.

Class A Drugs

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Justice how many people have been (i) prosecuted; and (ii) convicted of the supply of class A drugs in each of the last five years, broken down by (a) Crown Court; and (b) Magistrates Court.

(AQW 18871/11-15)

Mr Ford: The supply of Class A drugs may be prosecuted under Section 4 (3) of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, Section 5 (3) of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, Article 3(1) of the Criminal Attempts and Conspiracy (Northern Ireland) Order 1983 and Article 9(1) of the Criminal Attempts and Conspiracy (Northern Ireland) Order 1983.

The table below gives the number prosecuted for the supply of Class A drugs for the calendar years 2005 and 2006 (the latest year for which figures are currently available) and convictions for the supply of Class A drugs for the calendar years 2005 to 2009 (the latest year for which figures are currently available) by court type.

Number of prosecutions and convictions for supply of class A drugs offences by Court Type, 2005 to 2009

	Convictions			Prosecutions		
	Magistrate Court	Crown Court	Total	Magistrate Court	Crown Court	Total
2005	3	43	46	8	44	52
2006	7	41	48	20	49	69
2007	8	69	77	N/A	N/A	N/A
2008	11	68	79	N/A	N/A	N/A
2009	19	68	87	N/A	N/A	N/A

The offences included are supplying class A controlled drug, offering to supply class A controlled drug, being concerned in supply of class A controlled drug and being concerned in offer to supply of class A controlled drug.

Data are collated on the principal offence rule; only the most serious offence for which an offender is convicted is included.

Data for 2005 to 2006 should not be directly compared with data from 2007 to 2009 as the data sets are sourced from different systems.

Class A Drugs

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Justice what proposals he has to make offences of supply of class A drugs triable only on indictment.

(AQW 18873/11-15)

Mr Ford: As indicated in my answer to AQW/18871/11-15, the majority of prosecutions for supply of Class A drugs are already brought on indictment and I have no plans at present to change the mode of prosecution. Legislation on the misuse of drugs is a matter of cross-jurisdictional importance and in any event is a reserved matter under the Northern Ireland Act 1998. I believe it is appropriate to maintain a consistent approach across jurisdictions.

Court Costs Orders

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Justice what is the total of Court costs orders made against defendants in the Magistrates Courts in each of last five years; and how this figure compares with England and Wales.

(AQW 18874/11-15)

Mr Ford: The term "Court costs orders" is taken to refer to extra costs and other party costs orders made at the Magistrates' Court.

The total of these orders made in each of the last five financial years at the Magistrates' Court is set out in the table below:

Financial Year	Extra Costs £	Other Party Costs £	Total £
2007/08	50,652	291,438	342,090
2008/09	76,318	294,265	370,583
2009/10	52,201	295,588	347,789
2010/11	54,332	239,319	293,651
2011/12	49,131	214,380	263,511

Extra costs and other party costs orders cover a range of types of costs and can include service fees for summonses and evidence served on the defendant, analysis fees, witness costs, solicitor and/or counsel fees. It is not possible to break down the figures further into types of costs.

My Department does not hold information in respect of England and Wales court costs orders. However, published information for the last three years in respect of prosecutor costs orders is set out below. These figures are for both Crown and Magistrates' Courts in England and Wales and are not directly comparable to figures for Northern Ireland, since prosecutor costs orders are routinely applied for by the Crown Prosecution Service in England and Wales in all cases, but in Northern Ireland the PPS does not seek prosecution costs in police cases.

Financial Year	Prosecutors' Costs £	Crown Prosecutors' Costs £	Total £
2009/10	60,781,000	41,735,000	102,516,000
2010/11	55,261,000	44,286,000	99,547,000
2011/12	55,898,000	42,452,000	98,350,000

Prison Service: Code of Conduct

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 17821/11-15 and AQW 12222/11-15, and given that the Pearson Review Team Report of 9 June 2009 at Paragraph 63 states that an effort was underway to review and rewrite the Northern Ireland Prison Service Code of Conduct, to outline the complexities in developing a new Code of Conduct; and for his assessment of the length of the delay in producing the Code.

(AQW 18877/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Department of Finance and Personnel has overall policy responsibility for Conduct and Discipline in the Department of Justice. The new Prison Service Code of Conduct has therefore had to be developed with appropriate input from the Department of Finance and Personnel as well as Trade Union partners.

I am satisfied that a robust and fair disciplinary system is being developed for the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

Prisoners: Breach of Conditions

Lord Morrow asked Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 18106/11-15, how many prisoners were charged for breaching their conditions; and what was the nature of the breaches.

(AQW 18878/11-15)

Mr Ford: The ten prisoners and one young offender who failed to abide by their home leave conditions all had adjudications opened. Of these eleven adjudications, two were not concluded as the prisoners are now time served, three have been found guilty, two have been adjourned until a later date, three have been withdrawn and one was dismissed.

The breaches were for breach of curfew; consuming alcohol; missed appointment with the Probation Officer and returned late to prison.

Prisoners: Life Sentences

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the status of the 'lifer' policy drafted in February 2012; and (ii) the provision of 'lifer' training for disciplinary staff; and to outline the number of times annually that prisoners who are serving life sentences are reviewed by Prison Service key workers.

(AQW 18880/11-15)

Mr Ford: Maghaberry prison commenced the development of a revised strategy for life sentenced prisoners during 2011. Implementation of the draft strategy was suspended pending a corporate decision on the future of the Prisoner Assessment Unit and the development of a revised offender management policy and standards (to include life sentenced prisoners) as part of the work under the Northern Ireland Prison Service Strategic Efficiency and Effectiveness (SEE) programme.

The training needs and development of offender supervisors and other members of staff working with indeterminate prisoners will be considered as part of the introduction of the revised offender management arrangements. In the interim, immediate training needs are currently being looked at within offender management units.

The current arrangement for life sentenced prisoners is that those cases within three years of their tariff date are reviewed on a 3-monthly basis. As far as possible all other life sentenced prisoners are seen by discipline managers and designated staff once per year.

Flag Protests: East Antrim

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Justice what discussions he has had with the PSNI on the flag protests in the East Antrim constituency.

(AQW 18893/11-15)

Mr Ford: While I have had discussions with the Chief Constable and other officers about the protests, these have covered all areas.

Conditional Discharge

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Justice whether a Conditional Discharge constitutes as conviction if the subject does not breach its terms.

(AQW 19272/11-15)

Mr Ford: An order for a conditional discharge is treated as a conviction in particular circumstances. It is treated as a conviction for the purpose of the proceedings in which the order is made; for the purposes of any disqualification, such as a driving disqualification, that may be imposed and for the purposes of any notification requirements under the Sexual Offences Act 2003. If a person who is subject to a conditional discharge re-offends during the period specified in the order, the court may deal with the person afresh for the original offence.

Criminal record disclosure certificates may include information on conditional discharges. For a Basic Certificate a conditional discharge is not disclosed after the date on which the order ceases, or one year, whichever is the longer. For Standard and Enhanced certificates a conditional discharge is always disclosed.

Prison Facility: Millisle

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 18454/11-15, to clarify if the site at Millisle has now been ruled out as a site for a contingency/emergency prison.

(AQW 19310/11-15)

Mr Ford: Millisle has been ruled out as a site for a contingency/emergency prison facility.

Diesel Fuel

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Justice to detail his plans, as referenced in responses he gave to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, to create new licensing legislation solely governing the retailing of diesel fuel including licences, which could be revoked with penalties in the instance of proprietors who are detected selling laundered diesel fuel.

(AQW 19326/11-15)

Mr Ford: As my response to the recommendation in the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (NIAC) report on fuel laundering and smuggling in Northern Ireland said, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's Fuel Oils Forum concluded that an amendment to petroleum licensing legislation would not address the problem, as this legislation is designed to achieve health and safety objectives rather than as a tool to combat crime. Selling laundered fuel is already an offence and were

proprietors found to be knowingly selling such fuel, testing could identify that and prosecutions could follow. The Department will continue to work with colleagues in the Organised Crime Task Force to see what else can be done, for instance, the alteration of the marker in diesel fuel. A tender process is ongoing to develop a new marker technology and testing.

We are also seeking to make maximise publicity where illegal plants are discovered, such as that near Jonesborough, on 30 January 2013. Tackling this crime type remains a priority for the OCTF.

Human Trafficking

Mr Gardiner asked Minister of Justice for his assessment of the level of human trafficking which does not involve immigrants. (AQO 3328/11-15)

Mr Ford: I am sure Members will be at one in condemning this heinous crime of human trafficking, regardless of the nationalities of the victims who are trafficked.

During the financial year 2011 to 2012 a total of 33 potential victims of human trafficking were referred to the National Referral Mechanism – the NRM - from Northern Ireland. Almost a quarter (eight) of these potential victims were UK nationals who had been trafficked internally to Northern Ireland from other parts of the United Kingdom. The second and third largest nationality groups represented were Chinese and Ghanaian nationals, with seven and six potential victims recovered from these nationality groups respectively.

The number of cases of potential victims referred to the NRM from Northern Ireland has dropped in the first three quarters of the 2012 to 2013 financial year, with only eight potential victims referred so far, of whom six were Chinese, one was a UK national and one was a Romanian national.

However it is important to recognise that these figures relate only to those potential victims of human trafficking who have been referred to the NRM. As such the figures do not present the full picture of the level of human trafficking within Northern Ireland; for example, there may be some potential or suspected victims of trafficking who currently remain undetected or others who, whilst recovered, do not want to be referred to the NRM.

That is why my Department is working closely with partners in other Government Departments and law enforcement agencies, and across both the statutory and non-statutory sectors to provide a joined-up response to tackling human trafficking.

A key part of the work being undertaken by officials, in conjunction with partners, is to improve data collection. We want to develop a more comprehensive picture of human trafficking across Northern Ireland.

Policing and Community Safety Partnerships: Independent Members

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Justice whether there are any independent members still to be appointed to the Policing and Community Safety Partnerships. (AQO 3331/11-15)

Mr Ford: All appointments were finalised by October 2012.

While all partnerships are now fully operational and delivering on the ground for the benefit of the local community, the Policing Board has advised that there is currently one vacancy – resulting from a resignation – on South Belfast District Policing and Community Safety Partnership (DPCSP). Arrangements are being made to fill this position.

Prison Officers: Early Retirement

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the number of prison officers who are expected to take early retirement during 2013. (AQO 3339/11-15)

Mr Ford: 544 members of staff applied to leave NIPS under the terms of the Voluntary Early Retirement Scheme. To date 287 individuals have left the Service. Business Case approval has been given for a total of 360 staff to leave the Service. A Business Case seeking approval to extend the Scheme to cover all those who initially applied will be submitted to DFP shortly.

Department for Regional Development

Roads Service: Repair Works, North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development how many repair works in the North Down area were carried out by Roads Service in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 17983/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): Details of road repair works carried out by Roads Service in the North Down area, in each of the last three complete financial years, and the current year to date, are set out in the table below:

Year	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13 (Apr – Dec)
Number of repairs	4,126	4,035	3,788	3,296

The fact that the number of defects identified and repaired has been decreasing is a strong indicator of an improvement in the condition of the network. This may be, in no small measure, due to the record levels of structural maintenance expenditure - £120 million in 2011/12 and currently £106 million in 2012/13.

Rathgael Road, Bangor: Road Safety

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to improve road safety on the Rathgael Road, Bangor.
(AQW 18688/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service receives information on personal injury collisions from the PSNI. This allows officials to plan collision remedial schemes for locations that meet the initial intervention level of four collisions in a three year period, and where there is a common pattern of collisions which can be addressed by engineering methods.

A review of the records of personal injury collisions available to Roads Service for the Rathgael Road, between the A2 and A21 junctions, has not identified a particular problem.

In addition, the Rathgael Road is also inspected on a cyclical basis, in accordance with Roads Service's Maintenance Standards, and any actionable defects identified are prioritised and programmed for repair.

As I am sure you are aware, Rathgael Road is subject to a 30mph speed limit from the A2 Bangor Road to the A21 Newtownards Road. To help highlight this speed limit to drivers, Roads Service has recently provided larger 30mph speed limit signs at the junction with the A2 Bangor Road, to increase their visibility for drivers entering Rathgael Road.

Information on completed and proposed roads schemes for the current financial year can also be found in Roads Service's Spring and Autumn Reports to Councils. These reports can be accessed from my Department's internet site at the following web address:

http://www.drdni.gov.uk/index/freedom_of_information/customer_information/cinformationtype-results.htm?signpost=Customer+information&informationType=Roads+Service+reports+to+councils

Budgets and work programmes for the 2013/14 financial year have yet to be determined, however, when finalised, details of the schemes to be undertaken will be published in the afore-mentioned Council Reports.

Adoption of Private Streets

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development whether there is a relief fund allowing for the adoption of private streets where the developer is bankrupt and has no bond in place.
(AQW 18754/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Developers are responsible for providing new roads in housing developments, and for making provision for the costs of doing so, in the event they are unable to complete the works.

Unfortunately, where a developer has gone bankrupt and a bond has not been put in place to provide for the cost of constructing the streets in a development, my Department is unable to adopt such private streets, until they have been completed to appropriate standards.

There is currently no relief fund that allows my Department to complete and adopt such private streets, where a bond has not been put in place.

Northern Ireland Railways: Railway Lines

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amounts allocated for the maintenance of Northern Ireland Railways lines to (i) Newry/Portadown; (ii) Londonderry/Portrush; (iii) Bangor; and (iv) Larne, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 18756/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink has advised that the table below sets out the amounts allocated for maintenance of Northern Ireland Railways lines in each of the last five years.

The information is provided on the basis of recognised NIR line sections, which is how such costs are allocated within Translink.

Amounts allocated to maintenance inevitably depend on line condition in the first place, thus no conclusion can be drawn from the figures.

**Northern Ireland Railways
Line Maintenance Costs 2007/08 to 2011/12**

Line	2011/12	2010/11	2009/10	2008/09	2007/08
Larne Line	680,366	937,064	481,913	469,169	961,196
Bangor Line	471,207	454,233	465,705	425,702	522,589
Portadown / Newry / Lisburn / Cross Border Line	1,684,725	1,757,350	1,667,481	1,286,088	1,361,085
Londonderry / Coleraine / Bleach Green Line	1,940,170	1,944,700	1,907,698	1,491,709	1,564,849
	4,776,469	5,093,348	4,522,796	3,672,668	4,409,719

Parking Enforcement Notices: Cookstown District Council Area

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of parking enforcement notices that have been issued in the Cookstown District Council area, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 18762/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Details of the number of Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) issued in the Cookstown District Council area, in each of the last three years, are provided in the table below:

Year	PCNs Issued In Cookstown District Council Area
2010	1,813
2011	1,964
2012	1,588

Parking Enforcement Notices: Magherafelt District Council Area

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of parking enforcement notices that have been issued in the Magherafelt District Council area, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 18763/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Details of the number of Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) issued in the Magherafelt District Council area, in each of the last three years, are provided in the table below:

Year	PCNs Issued In Magherafelt District Council Area
2010	2,000
2011	2,633
2012	1,795

Parking Enforcement Notices: Cookstown District Council Area

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of appeals that have been lodged for parking enforcement notices that have been issued in the Cookstown District Council area, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 18764/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service does not maintain details of challenges to Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) by town or council area. However, details of the number of challenges to PCNs issued in Northern Ireland and the number that have been successful, in each of the last three years, are provided in the table below:

Year	Challenges to PCNs issued in Northern Ireland	Successful Challenges to PCNs issued in Northern Ireland
2010	15,001	8,984
2011	16,496	9,657
2012	19,906	9,105

When a challenge to a PCN has been successful, the PCN is cancelled. However, when a challenge to a PCN has been unsuccessful, the PCN may be paid. Should the PCN remain unpaid, a Notice to Owner is issued. Roads Service does not maintain details of PCNs at the various processing stages for cases where there has been an unsuccessful challenge.

Parking Enforcement Notices: Magherafelt District Council Area

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of appeals that have been lodged for parking enforcement notices that have been issued in the Magherafelt District Council area, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 18765/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I refer the Member to my answer to his Assembly Question AQW 18764/11-15.

Parking Enforcement Notices: Cookstown District Council Area

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of parking enforcement notices that have been successfully appealed in the Cookstown District Council area, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 18766/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I refer the Member to my answer to his Assembly Question AQW 18764/11-15.

Gritting

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of how Roads Service is meeting the demand for gritting roads in light of the recent snowfall.
(AQW 18772/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has worked hard to keep the strategic road network open during the recent cold spell. Some areas have experienced difficulties and as with all such significant weather events, Roads Service will examine the operational effectiveness of its response and take on board any lessons to be learned.

Paint Spillages

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department accepts liability for paint spillages on roads and footpaths.
(AQW 18775/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department has a duty under Article 8 of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 to maintain the structure (fabric) of roads to a reasonable standard. However, paint or any other object / material deposited on the road surface does not form part of the fabric of the road and, as such is not covered under Article 8.

The Department assesses each claim for compensation on the basis of the individual circumstances of the case and consideration as to whether the Department has discharged its statutory obligations appropriately, before making a decision regarding acceptance of liability.

An individual also has the option of initiating legal proceedings against the Department and it would therefore be a matter for the courts to determine if the Department was liable.

A5 Scheme

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the progress of the A5 scheme.
(AQW 18776/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Member will be aware that the A5 project is the subject of an ongoing legal challenge which is scheduled to be heard in court on 12-14 February 2013. In the meantime, my Department's Roads Service is continuing with preliminary works considered essential to mitigate the impact of delays associated with the legal challenge. These works include fencing, vegetation management, service diversions, ecology and archaeology works. Commencement of the main works will be dependent on the outcome of the legal challenge.

Londonderry Railway Line: Refreshment Trolley

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Regional Development why Translink has ceased the refreshment trolley service on the Londonderry Railway Line.
(AQW 18787/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink has advised that it ceased the operation of a refreshment trolley on the Londonderry-Belfast railway line in late 2005. It was not profit making.

Comber Greenway at Ballyrainey Road, Newtownards

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps are being taken to address the problems with access to the Comber Greenway at Ballyrainey Road, Newtownards following the installation of a bridge at this location.
(AQW 18795/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Due to the provision of a new bridge over the Ballyrainey Road, in addition to the associated earthworks and embankments, it was not possible to retain the existing accesses onto the Greenway at this location.

Roads Service officials have been exploring a number of options in the hope of providing an alternative access point onto the Greenway Cycle route, in the vicinity of Ballyrainey Road junction, which, to date, are proving to be financially prohibitive. Land issues are also proving to be problematic, due to the requirement to acquire land which is not in public ownership.

Regrettably, my Department, taking account of current funding levels and other competing priorities, is unable to pursue this matter further at this time.

Roads Maintenance: Expenditure by District Electoral Ward

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 17873/11-15, to provide a breakdown of expenditure on roads maintenance by District Electoral Ward.
(AQW 18799/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service does not maintain an analysis of expenditure on roads maintenance by District Electoral Ward.

Gransha Road, Bangor: Road Safety

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what more his Department can do to improve road safety on the Gransha Road, Bangor.
(AQW 18834/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Roads Service monitors road traffic collision data with a view to identifying recurring factors or patterns that can be addressed through engineering methods. Personal injury collision information available to Roads Service does not indicate there are any particular issues along Gransha Road, Bangor.

However, as part of the planning approval for the new Bangor Grammar School, to which Roads Service provided input as a consultee, the education authority carried out a number of improvement works including:

- widening the footways at the site frontage along Gransha Road;
- installing a new Puffin enhanced road crossing;
- the relocation of two pedestrian islands on Gransha Road;
- creating a right turn pocket and new road markings on Gransha Road;
- installing 'Safe Routes to School' solar signs;
- the provision of a pedestrian guard rail at entrance of the school;
- providing school bus boarding and drop off points within the school premises;
- creating a dedicated bus lay-by, with lowered kerbs for easier access;
- providing drop-off lay-bys for parents to use on Gransha Road; and
- installing a new bus shelter on Gransha Road.

Roads Service also reviewed the road junctions serving residential areas close to the school entrance which officials considered had adequate sight splays and footway provision to provide safe access.

It should be noted that previously the Gransha Road in the vicinity of the school site had been provided with central hatching, right turn pockets and central pedestrian refuge islands, which channel the traffic and make it safer for pedestrians to cross the road. In addition, Roads Service has also recently widened the junction of Cranley Road to allow a left turning vehicle to safely pass a right turning vehicle.

I can assure you that Roads Service is aware of public concern relating to road safety on the Gransha Road and it intends to monitor the operation of the junctions to determine if any further measures are deemed necessary.

Parking Enforcement Notices: Magherafelt District Council Area

Mr I McCreagh asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of parking enforcement notice appeals that have been successful in the Magherafelt Council District area in each of the last three years.
(AQW 18851/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I refer the Member to my answer to his Assembly Question AQW 18764/11-15.

Translink Rail Services

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development what impact the weather conditions from 18 January 2013 to 22 January 2013 had on Translink's rail services.

(AQW 18875/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink advise that during the period Friday 18 January to Tuesday 22 January 2013, NI Railways were scheduled to operate 1,491 services. Only one service was cancelled and 16 were delayed due to the weather conditions.

Penalty Charge Notices

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development how many Penalty Charge Notices were issued in (i) Ballymena; (ii) Belfast; (iii) Enniskillen; (iv) Newry; (v) Omagh; (vi) Newtownards; (vii) Dungannon; (viii) Strabane; (ix) Magherafelt; (x) Cookstown; (xi) Carrickfergus; and (xii) Larne in 2012; and how this compares with 2011.

(AQW 18876/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Details of the number of Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) issued in 2012 and 2011, for the areas requested are provided in the table below:

Town/City	PCNs Issued 2012	PCN Issued 2011
Ballymena	4,693	6,855
Belfast	32,155	36,355
Enniskillen	5,389	6,517
Newry	5,202	8,501
Omagh	4,249	5,098
Newtownards	2,959	3,058
Dungannon	2,168	2,333
Strabane	2,086	2,659
Magherafelt	1,686	2,439
Cookstown	1,588	1,964
Carrickfergus	1,432	1,547
Larne	1,317	1,374

Larne Railway Line: Price Rises

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development what impact the price rises on the Larne railway line will have on the development of the route as a viable alternative for commuters in East Antrim before the commencement of major works on the A2.

(AQW 18894/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink advise that there has been no recent price rise on the Larne railway line. The last fare increase on the NI Railways network was in April 2012.

Lay Pipes on Private Property

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what powers his Department has to lay pipes on private property.

(AQW 18911/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has powers under Article 45 of The Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993, to construct and lay road drains in land adjacent to or adjoining a road. The Department may also scour, cleanse and repair road drains as required.

Northern Ireland Water has powers under Article 220 of the Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 to lay pipes in private land for the purpose of carrying out its water and sewerage functions.

Water Supply: Fluoridation

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the proposals to fluoridate the water supply.

(AQW 18930/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: NI water at present does not use fluoride in its drinking water processes.

Any decision to increase the fluoride levels in water for health reasons is a decision for the Minister of Health, who is empowered to make regulations under the Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006.

Translink Bus Depots: Newtownards and Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development whether the Translink bus depots at Newtownards and Bangor have the capacity to store additional buses.

(AQW 18954/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: This is an operational matter for Translink, however it has advised me that neither Newtownards nor Bangor depots are currently at full capacity.

Parking Enforcement Notice Appeals: South Down

Mrs McKeivitt asked the Minister for Regional Development, in relation to the each town in South Down, to detail the number of (i) parking enforcement notice appeals that have been issued; and (ii) the number parking enforcement notice appeals have been successful, in the last two years.

(AQW 18992/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service does not maintain details of challenges to Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) by town or council area. However, details of the number of challenges to PCNs issued in Northern Ireland and those which were successful, in each of the last two years, are provided in the table below:

Year	Challenges to PCNs issued in Northern Ireland	Successful Challenges to PCNs issued in Northern Ireland
2011	16,496 (approximately 13% of all PCNs)	9,657 (approximately 58% of all challenges received)
2012	19,906 (approximately 15% of all PCNs)	9,105 (approximately 54% of all challenges received)

When a challenge to a PCN has been successful, the PCN is cancelled. However, when a challenge to a PCN has been unsuccessful, the PCN may be paid. Should the PCN remain unpaid, a Notice to Owner is issued. Roads Service does not maintain details of PCNs at the various processing stages for cases where there has been an unsuccessful challenge.

Car Parking Fines: South Down

Mrs McKeivitt asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the revenue generated by car parking fines issued in South Down, in each of the last two years.

(AQW 18993/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service does not maintain details of revenue generated from Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) issued on a town or constituency basis. However, the total revenue generated from PCNs issued in Northern Ireland in 2010/11 and 2011/12 was, £4.5M and £4.6M respectively.

Details of the number of PCNs issued in Downpatrick, Newcastle, Ballynahinch and Kilkeel in each of the last two years (shown as a percentage of the overall Northern Ireland figure) are provided in the table below:

Town	PCNs Issued	
	2011 (% of total no of PCNs)	2012 (% of total no of PCNs)
Downpatrick	1,452 (1.2%)	1,514 (1.3%)
Newcastle	1,044 (0.8%)	1,157 (1.0%)
Ballynahinch	374 (0.3%)	292 (0.3%)
Kilkeel	119 (0.09%)	150 (0.13%)

Carlingford Lough: Navigation Channel

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development, while the Warrenpoint Harbour Authority is responsible for the maintenance of the navigation channel in Carlingford Lough, where does the legislative competence lie in relation to any authority necessary to obstruct or interfere with this waterway.

(AQW 19002/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Responsibility for the maintenance of the navigation channel in Carlingford Lough is principally the responsibility of the Carlingford Lough Commissioners except within the limits of Warrenpoint Harbour where Warrenpoint Harbour Authority is responsible. Upstream of Warrenpoint Harbour Authority limits (on the Newry River) neither body has responsibility.

Within their respective limits, Carlingford Lough Commissioners and Warrenpoint Harbour Authority have a statutory responsibility to maintain the navigation channel within Carlingford Lough and this would include the removal of obstructions in the channel. As a general principle, extinguishment of public rights of navigation requires legislation, exercise of a statutory power or destruction of the subject matter of the public rights of navigation.

Narrow Water Bridge Project

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development in relation to the Narrow Water bridge project, which agency will be responsible for the maintenance of (i) the bridge; and (ii) the link road to the bridge from the roundabout on the Northern Ireland side, and will the link road and bridge, or any part thereof, be adopted by Roads Service.

(AQW 19003/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Narrow Water Bridge project is being progressed by Louth County Council, in partnership with Newry and Mourne District Council and East Border Region Limited.

The operation and maintenance of the bridge, together with maintenance of the link road from the existing roundabout to the bridge, will be carried out by Newry and Mourne District Council (through an agreement with Louth County Council).

No part of the bridge or link road would be adopted by Roads Service.

Asbestos Pipes: Water System

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of asbestos pipes currently being used in the water system; and (ii) how many EU countries still use asbestos pipes to deliver water to homes.

(AQW 19098/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that (i) the water supply network has 1,381 kilometres of asbestos cement pipes currently in use which represents around 5% of the water supply network. The replacement of asbestos cement pipe with newer industry material is taken on a serviceability basis such as burst history. (ii) NIW does not hold information on the number of EU countries using asbestos cement pipes. However a Review Paper for the Drinking Water Inspectorate in May 2002 concluded that "Asbestos cement pipes have been widely used for drinking water distribution and there are many kilometres to be found all over the world, including many European countries."

NIW is satisfied that there are no associated health risks with the use of asbestos cement pipes to supply drinking water. The World Health Organisation has undertaken a number of studies on the subject and concluded that, while inhaled asbestos is a known health risk, there is no consistent or convincing evidence that ingested asbestos is hazardous to health. The health concerns regarding asbestos cement pipes are related to occupational exposure during their manufacture, installation and disposal and these are covered by industry regulations. Any work undertaken by NIW staff on asbestos cement pipes is in accordance with legislative requirements and associated Health and Safety guidance.

Magee Campus, University of Ulster

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on parking provision in the Magee Campus area of the University of Ulster.

(AQW 19113/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Details of a Traffic Management proposal in relation to this matter, including a one-way system and waiting restrictions, were forwarded to the Aberfoyle Residents Association in February 2012 to initiate consultation and gauge resident support, or otherwise, for the scheme. The Residents Association responded in October 2012 to my Department's Roads Service, however, it was noted the consultation that had been carried out did not include some areas of Aberfoyle Crescent and Dill Park.

At that time, Roads Service officials advised the Residents Association to engage with the residents of those areas not included in the initial consultation, thus allowing Roads Service to determine the merits, or otherwise, of beginning the lengthy legislative process required to implement the scheme. To date, no further feedback has been received from the Residents Association.

Roads Service has received correspondence from one resident of Aberfoyle Crescent who has stated they would not be in support of the scheme.

Enniskillen and Altnagelvin Hospitals: Pilot Scheme

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the success of the pilot scheme connecting Enniskillen and Altnagelvin Hospitals.

(AQW 19145/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The pilot service commenced on 5 September 2012. Up to the 27 December 2012 a total of 261 end-to-end passenger journeys were made from Enniskillen to Altnagelvin hospital, out of a total of 967 journeys on that route.

Translink are of the view that the service is still at the early stages of establishing patronage.

Belfast Harbour Commissioners: Funding

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 2101/11-15, and his acknowledgement in the Assembly that the anticipated £40 million funding from the Harbour Commissioners to the Executive budget will not be obtainable, to set out the reasons why this is the case and why this was not known when the initial announcement was made that such funding would be extracted.

(AQW 19202/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: When Budget 2011-15 was agreed by the Executive in March 2011 there were a wide range of revenue generating proposals advanced following discussions between ministers. The Minister of Finance has informed me that the Executive were aware of the significant level of financial reserves retained by Belfast Harbour Commissioners (BHC) and there was agreement that BHC should therefore make a contribution towards improving the infrastructure network. The detail on delivering this was delegated to the Budget Review Group.

The Budget Review Group agreed that the Department should focus on working collaboratively with the Belfast Harbour Commissioners on release of value projects. Following a meeting of the Budget Review Group on 27 September and between representatives of that Group and the Harbour Commissioners on 11 October it was agreed that the Commissioners would take forward, from within their resources, proposals for investment in Foreign Direct Investment accommodation in 2013/14 and consider other suitable projects in future years.

Northern Ireland Water: Sewage Pollution, Holywood

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Regional Development when Northern Ireland Water will commence and finish the project to alleviate the problem of sewage solution pollution in the Kinnegar area, Holywood and the total budget earmarked for such.

(AQW 19298/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the £3.5 million infrastructure project to resolve the sewage pollution at Kinnegar Lagoons, Holywood is progressing well and is on target to be delivered within its PC13 Business Plan which covers the period April 2013 to March 2015. Subject to the usual statutory approvals and budgetary constraints, NIW propose to commence the project early within the next financial year with a construction period of approximately twelve months.

While this project will prevent pollution to the Lagoons, a second complementary project will consider the remediation options for the Lagoons and particularly the odours emanating from the mud at low-tide. NIW has also commenced work on this second phase and it is progressing well with several environmental studies and mud samplings completed. Further impounded water sampling and flood analysis is also planned and the emerging findings will be known in the Spring of 2013. At that time the financial and programming implications, will be considered in relation to the recommended remediation option.

Belfast on the Move

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the estimated reduction in car usage in Belfast city centre each month since the introduction of Belfast on the Move.

(AQW 19355/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Prior to the start of the implementation of the Belfast on the Move Sustainable Transport Enabling Measures traffic flow surveys were carried out on the arterial routes into and through the city centre. Following the completion of these works, which is scheduled for June 2013, further surveys will be carried out to measure the success of the project.

Data is not available to provide information on a monthly basis with the works being implemented on an incremental basis and therefore subject to constant changes in traffic movements. However preliminary data for October 2012, which followed the implementation of the bus priority measures on Oxford Street, May Street, Donegall Square South and Howard Street in September 2012, indicates that traffic levels are lower across the city centre and that some of the 'through' traffic has diverted to more strategic routes.

Specifically this preliminary data shows traffic on Oxford Street and May Street has reduced by around 40%, which is approximately 5000 vehicles per day, and traffic on Chichester Street has reduced by around 20%, which is approximately 2000 vehicles per day. Traffic levels on the Westlink have increased by around 5%, which is approximately 4000 vehicles per day. This would indicate that some of the through traffic from the city centre has re-routed to strategic routes.

Once the works are completed and the further surveys are carried out we will be able to measure the full impacts of the project.

Belfast on the Move

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the effect of Belfast on the Move on passenger journeys on Metro and Ulsterbus services since its introduction.

(AQW 19358/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: In October and November 2012, compared to the same period in 2011, 1,500 additional passenger journeys per day were made on Metro services in Belfast. In the same period 1,500 additional passenger journeys per day were also made on Ulsterbus. In addition bus journeys to and from Belfast's dedicated Park & Ride sites have shown an average increase of 15%.

Translink have also indicated that bus reliability in Belfast has improved by 20% since September/October 2011.

Once the works are completed in June 2013 we will be able to measure the full impacts of the project on public transport usage and reliability.

Belfast on the Move

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total cost of phases one and two of Belfast on the Move.

(AQW 19359/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The total cost of the Sustainable Transport Enabling Measures of the Belfast on the Move project will be approximately £4.2m.

Of this £2.5m has been spent on the works completed prior to Christmas 2012 (Phase 1) and the remainder, £1.7m, will be spent between January 2013 and the end of the works in June 2013 (Phase 2).

Department for Social Development

Disability Living Allowance: Higher Rate Mobility Component

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the (i) total number of people who were in receipt of the Higher Rate mobility component of Disability Living Allowance; and (ii) ratio of recipients to population, in each constituency on 31 December 2011.

(AQW 18510/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development):

- (i) As at December 2011, there were 96,360 people receiving the higher rate mobility component of Disability Living Allowance.
- (ii) The table below shows the breakdown of this total by Assembly Area, and the ratio of recipients to population in each Assembly Area.

Assembly Area	DLA recipients receiving Higher rate Mobility	2010 Population	% of population per Assembly Area
Belfast East	4,700	90,400	5.2%
Belfast North	7,450	101,400	7.3%
Belfast South	3,870	103,700	3.7%
Belfast West	8,780	90,800	9.7%
East Antrim	3,760	89,200	4.2%
East Londonderry	4,030	97,200	4.1%
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	4,670	104,300	4.5%
Foyle	6,840	103,000	6.6%
Lagan Valley	4,110	100,400	4.1%
Mid Ulster	5,190	97,900	5.3%
Newry and Armagh	6,580	113,100	5.8%
North Antrim	4,450	107,000	4.2%
North Down	3,400	90,200	3.8%
South Antrim	4,330	99,500	4.4%
South Down	5,790	109,600	5.3%
Strangford	4,180	90,400	4.6%
Upper Bann	7,190	118,400	6.1%
West Tyrone	6,610	93,000	7.1%
Unknown	430		

Assembly Area	DLA recipients receiving Higher rate Mobility	2010 Population	% of population per Assembly Area
Total	96,360	1,799,500	5.4%

Disability Living Allowance: Appeals

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Disability Living Allowance appeals that have been (i) lodged; (ii) processed; and (iii) ruled in the claimants favour in North Down, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 18522/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format sought and The Appeals Service cannot provide the required information before June 2007.

The Appeals Service arranges for Disability Living Allowance (DLA) appeals to be heard at venues throughout Northern Ireland. The selection of venues for appeal hearings is determined by the postal district within which the appellant resides. The data is only available by appeal hearing venue.

Any appeal lodged with the Social Security Agency is subject to reconsideration and may therefore not progress to The Appeals Service. Appeals may not be dealt with in the same year that they are received.

The Chairman of the Tribunal records whether the decision made on appeal was either more or less advantageous than a previous decision. A more advantageous decision may increase the allowance or direct that a new award be made. A less advantageous decision may reduce the allowance or make no change to the original determination. The table below sets out the available information for the last five years in respect of DLA appeals within the postal districts of Newtownards and Bangor:

Period	Number of appeals received	Final outcomes: Number of appeals determined	More advantageous appeals
2007-08 (From June 2007)	356	251	78
2008-09	455	362	102
2009-10	377	356	127
2010-11	390	339	99
2011-12	302	263	93

Assistance for Low-income Families

Mr I McCreá asked the Minister for Social Development what help is available for low income families to (i) reduce fuel costs; and (ii) insulate their homes.

(AQW 18618/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department continues to fund the Warm Homes Scheme which offers a range of insulation and heating measures to eligible householders. The Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme (NISEP) also allocates 80% of its annual funding to energy efficiency schemes for vulnerable Boiler Replacement Scheme claimants. There is no doubt that improving the energy efficiency of homes can significantly reduce fuel costs.

Help may also be provided through the social security system. Anyone who is receiving Pension Credit, Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance (income based) and Employment and Support Allowance (Income Related) may qualify for Cold Weather Payments. Cold Weather Payments provide help to meet heating costs incurred, or likely to be incurred during periods of exceptionally cold weather, in the area where they live. In addition Winter Fuel Payments are paid each year to assist with the payment of heating bills during the winter months.

Flats: Rathmullan Drive, Newtownards

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the proposed stock transfer of flats in Rathmullan Drive, Newtownards.

(AQW 18630/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that, in relation to current owners of former Housing Executive properties, any grant aid that could be considered towards the removal of high risk asbestos from such properties would only be through discretionary grant. Discretionary grants however can only be considered where there are clear exceptional circumstances. Furthermore, any grant aid would be subject to a means test being undertaken on individual owners to determine their ability to contribute towards the decontamination works, and would also require that the decontamination works be certified.

Kilcooley Estate, Bangor: Women's Centre

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what funding for childcare is available through his Department that can be accessed by the Kilcooley Women's Centre, Bangor.

(AQW 18648/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Kilcooley Women's Centre Bangor currently accesses funding from the Women's Centre Childcare Fund (WCCF). They are one of fourteen women's centres across Northern Ireland in receipt of this funding.

Development of Young People

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what funding is available through his Department for the development of young people.

(AQW 18650/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Within my Department there is no specific funding programme for the development of young people. However there are a number of Programmes accessible to young people, these include the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme, the Volunteering Small Grants Programme and the Volunteering Innovation Fund.

Funding through the above Programmes may be made available for the development of young people where a priority need has been identified and resources can be made available.

Dunclug Estate, Ballymena: Empty Properties

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development how many properties in the Dunclug Estate, Ballymena are currently empty.

(AQW 18663/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Neither my Department nor the Northern Ireland Housing Executive hold information on the number or addresses of empty homes. The Housing Executive has informed me that it currently has 282 properties in the Dunclug area having already sold 441 properties there through the House Sales Scheme. 25 of the NIHE's properties are vacant at present.

Dunclug Estate, Ballymena: Empty Properties

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development what action he is taking to reduce the number of empty properties in the Dunclug Estate, Ballymena.

(AQW 18664/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Neither my Department nor the NIHE hold information on the number or the addresses of empty homes. I am advised that, of the Housing Executive's 282 properties, 25 are vacant at present in the whole Dunclug area, of these:-

- 3 are pending demolition;
- 4 are on offer;
- 9 either requiring or are undergoing repairs; and
- 1 property purchased under the Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings (SPED) scheme.

The remaining eight properties are available to let. The Housing Executive has reported that it is difficult to predict when these eight properties will be allocated as they are considered difficult to let due to perceived anti social behaviour in the area. However, work is ongoing to place tenants there.

I have tasked the Housing Executive and my officials with developing a Northern Ireland-wide empty homes strategy and action plan which I expect to see finalised by 31 March 2013. One of the aims of the Empty Homes Strategy and action plan will be the identification and location of empty homes in the private sector. I remain committed to bringing empty homes back into use throughout Northern Ireland.

Social Housing Newbuilds: Coleraine and Limavady

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development how many new build social housing apartments, houses or flats will be provided in the (i) Coleraine; and (ii) Limavady council areas, in the course of the next three years.

(AQW 18715/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The new three year Social Housing Development Programme for the period 2013/14 to 2015/16 includes a total of 36 new homes for the Coleraine Council Area and 16 new homes for the Limavady Council Area. Details are as follows:-

Coleraine

2013/14 - 31a Hazelbank Road, Coleraine (11 units)
 2013/14 - Darkfort Drive, Portballintrea (9 units)
 2013/14 - Harpurs Hill, Coleraine (12 units)
 2014/15 - Temple Park, Castlerock (4 units)

Limavady

2014/15 - Hass Road, Dungiven (10 units)
 2015/16 - Tullyverry Drive, Greysteel (6 units)

The Social Housing Development Programme 2013/14 to 2015/16 is published on the Housing Executives website. The link is:- http://www.nihe.gov.uk/index/services/housing_need.htm

Home Insulation

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development which organisation his Department recommends to private home owners for independent advice and consultations on home insulation.

(AQW 18733/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department, through the Housing Executive, part funds and recommends the Bryson Energy advice number 0800 14 22 865 to private home owners for independent advice on all aspects of energy efficiency advice, including home insulation.

The Energy Saving Trust www.energysavingtrust.org.uk/northernireland and NI Direct www.nidirect.gov.uk are also excellent sources of energy saving advice.

Winter Fuel Payment

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what is the qualifying time period of consecutive days where the temperature is below freezing for the Winter Fuel Payment process to be triggered.

(AQW 18769/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Payment of Cold Weather payments are triggered when the average temperature is, or forecast to be, zero degrees centigrade or below for 7 consecutive days from 1 November to 31 March. This information is supplied to the Social Security Agency by the Met Office based on recordings and forecasts at 7 separate weather stations located at Aldergrove, Castlederg, Glenanne, Katesbridge, Magilligan, Stormont and Thomastown, each of which cover a range of designated post code areas. Payments are at a rate of £25 for each 7 day cold weather period and are issued automatically. They provide help to vulnerable people, regardless of age, to meet heating costs incurred, or likely to be incurred during periods of exceptionally cold weather, in the area where they live.

To qualify for a Cold Weather Payment a claimant must be receiving:

- State Pension Credit, or income-related Employment and Support Allowance (main phase) for at least one day in a period of cold weather; or
- They, or their partner, must be in receipt of Income Support, income-based Jobseekers Allowance or income-related Employment and Support Allowance (in the assessment phase) for at least a one day in the period of cold weather and:
 - have a dependant child aged under five; or
 - have a relevant pensioner or disability premium; or
 - be entitled to Child Tax Credit for child or qualifying young person who is disabled or severely disabled

Disability Living Allowance: Mobility Component

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development what changes will be made to the qualifying criteria for the mobility component of Disability Living Allowance, in relation to the minimum distance of mobility claimants are moved to Personal Independence Payment; and what assessment has been made of the potential impact on claimants who have permanent, exacerbating or fluctuating conditions.

(AQW 18774/11-15)

Mr McCausland: To be eligible to receive the mobility component of Disability Living Allowance due to walking difficulties, a person must:

- (i) be unable to walk or virtually unable to walk to receive the higher rate; or
- (ii) need someone with them to provide guidance and supervision for most of the time when they are outdoors on unfamiliar routes to receive the lower rate.

Under Personal Independence Payment, the enhanced rate of the mobility component will be automatically payable to anyone who cannot stand and move more than 20 metres, aided or unaided. An individual who can move more than 20 metres may also receive 12 points and the enhanced rate if they cannot do so safely, to a necessary and appropriate standard, repeatedly and in a timely manner. The standard rate will be payable to anyone who can reliably stand and move unaided more than 20 metres but no more than 50 metres. In addition, the ability to plan and follow a journey is also taken into account when assessing mobility.

The Personal Independence Payment assessment criteria have been revised throughout the development process taking into account the testing of current Disability Living Allowance customers, including people from Northern Ireland, and a lengthy consultation and engagement process with disabled people and their representative organisations. A formal consultation on

the assessment criteria was completed in 2012, and as a result of the responses received, the assessment criteria for the 'moving around' activity was re-written to make the policy intent clearer.

In the final assessment criteria the activity has been clarified by including the ability to stand and removing reference to different aids. It was always intended to differentiate within the group of people who can move distances of less than 50 metres, giving those whose mobility is most limited the enhanced rate and the remainder the standard rate. The intention was not to tighten the activity, and the policy intent behind the activity remains the same.

In comparison to Disability Living Allowance, Personal Independence Payment will have a more systematic and active award review mechanism with a more personalised approach; decisions on award duration and review frequency will be made on the basis of individual needs and the likelihood of the health condition or impairment changing. Thus, the regular reviews will help to ensure that the awards given to people with deteriorating conditions remain correct.

The Personal Independence Payment assessment will also take account of health conditions and disabilities that have fluctuating symptoms or impacts. A descriptor will apply if the impact of a health condition or impairment is experienced on the majority of days over a twelve month period rather than the 'majority of the time' as in Disability Living Allowance, i.e. if a descriptor applies at any point during a 24 hour period, it is considered to apply for the entire day, whereas in Disability Living Allowance it would have to apply for the 'majority of the day'. The assessment will also take into account whether claimants can complete activities reliably, i.e. safely, to a necessary and appropriate standard, repeatedly and in a timely manner.

Double Glazing Replacement Schemes

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development what work on the replacement of double glazing in Housing Executive homes is currently taking place; and when this work is due to finish.

(AQW 18801/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In excess of 6,000 double glazing installations were started by the end of December 2012 and I have approved a further 13 schemes for some 2,400 dwellings. This will help the Housing Executive achieve the target of 8,600 dwellings to have double glazing installed by 2012/13.

A further 9,000 dwellings are programmed for 2013/14 and the remaining 4,000 approximately are programmed to be completed in 2014/15. This will achieve the PfG target by 2015.

Double Glazing Scheme

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development when he will announce the new specifications for the double glazing scheme.

(AQW 18803/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that the procurement for their double glazing requirements is scheduled to commence with an Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU) notice on 26 February 2013. The documentation will be available from e-SourcingNI and will include the new double glazing specification.

Double Glazing Scheme

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development what consideration his Department will give to the value for money of (i) hinges; (ii) guarantees; and (iii) the length of guarantees when deciding on the type of windows that will be used in the double glazing scheme.

(AQW 18807/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I asked the Housing Executive to research the specifications used in double glazing as I was concerned that the Housing Executive's specification for the supply and fitting of double glazing did not offer best value for money and also that the specification for hinges and handles was much higher than the industry standards for domestic properties.

In relation to value for money, the use of casement hinges as opposed to fully reversible hinges demonstrates:

- cost differential and potential for savings, estimated at approximately £0.5m;
- based on "actual cost data" supplied by sole hinge agent (for the island of Ireland) – MILA supply costs for both hinge types with the 3 key features – child restriction, easy clean and egress;
- fully reversible hinges = £20.00/pair;
- casement hinges = £13.00-15.00/pair;

In terms of guarantees, standard casement hinges generally range from one to ten years in terms of a mechanical guarantee. The new/revised specification will require that a casement friction stay hinge provides a ten year mechanical guarantee and the suppliers of these will be required to demonstrate compliance to the Housing Executive with this performance standard.

The Housing Executive's Board has approved the new specification and that fully reversible hinges will still be an integral part of the specification. The preferred option now is casement style windows to all low and medium rise stock, which is the usual style opening window in privately owned houses, and reversible hinges will continue to be used in Medium and High Rise dwellings (4-20 storeys).

Child Maintenance and Enforcement Division

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development what measures are in place to ensure that any groups that receive public funding comply with the legal requirements and requests from the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Division.

(AQW 18811/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Article 32(8) of the Child Support NI Order 1991 makes it an offence for any employer who does not comply with a deduction from earnings order or any regulation under this specific Article.

Where an employer fails to comply with such a request, the Department may pursue legal action, irrespective of whether the employer receives public funding.

Victoria Square Project

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Social Development how much public money was spent on the Victoria Square project (i) before the completion of construction work; (ii) between completion of construction and official opening; and (iii) after the official opening; and to whom this money was allocated.

(AQW 18823/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Department for Social Development did not provide any public funding towards the cost of the Victoria Square Development. The development was fully funded by CGI, a German investment bank. The Department used its statutory regeneration authority for comprehensive development to acquire/dispose land and the extinguishment of public rights of way.

Regeneration Scheme, Donaghadee

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the timeframe and funding allocation for the proposed regeneration scheme in Donaghadee.

(AQW 18824/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Ards Borough Council is in the process of running a competition to appoint an Integrated Consultancy Team to prepare the concept design and economic appraisal for a public realm scheme in Donaghadee. The team is due to be appointed in April 2013 and it will take them in the region of 5 months to complete this work and send the economic appraisal to DSD for consideration. DSD has included £1 million towards a public realm scheme in Donaghadee in its forward work programme for 2014/15, subject to funding being available and all necessary approvals being in place. Ards Borough Council has advised that they will match fund the Department's contribution.

Laps Scheme, North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development why there have been further delays in the Laps scheme in North Down.

(AQW 18830/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I would refer the Member to the answer I gave to AQW 18361/11-15 on 24 January 2013. The Housing Executive has advised me that this is still the position.

Bangor Providence Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what his Department can do to encourage Bangor Providence Trust to carry out repairs to the pensioner bungalows at Skipperstone Park, Avenue and Drive areas of Bangor.

(AQW 18831/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Department has responsibility for the regulation, funding and monitoring of registered Housing Associations only. Bangor Providence Trust is not a registered Housing Association and therefore the Department cannot take any action to encourage the Trust to carry out repairs of their housing stock.

Housing: Loughview Estate, Holywood

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the timescale for the new build of housing at Loughview Estate, Holywood.

(AQW 18832/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Clanmil Housing Association continues to work towards starting the construction of 37 new social homes at West Green, Holywood by March 2013, subject to all necessary approvals being in place.

A planning application submitted in November 2012 is progressing and the association is hopeful of a positive outcome before 31 March 2013.

Street Improvement Works, Randalstown

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the current status of street improvement works in Randalstown.

(AQW 18860/11-15)

Mr McCausland: A phased Environmental Improvements programme for Randalstown town centre was drawn up by DRD Roads Service, DSD and Antrim Borough Council in 2009. The first phase of the scheme was completed in March 2010 and improved the footways and roads at the southern entrance to the town, including the Maine River Bridge.

A further three phases of the works for the remainder of the town centre was provided for in the Department's capital programme. The scheme has been delayed to allow the Department to deal with issues raised by Randalstown Chamber of Trade.

Proposed Schemes, Randalstown

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the implications arising from the proposed schemes in Randalstown not proceeding within the identified budget timeline.

(AQW 18861/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The proposed remaining phases in the Randalstown Environmental Improvements programme did not proceed as planned. This would have caused slippage in the Department's 2012/13 capital grants programme. Consequently the capital programme budget earmarked for this scheme was re-allocated to other high priority schemes by the Department. Funding for the Randalstown scheme will now be subject to the programme budget available for 2013/14.

Street Improvement Works, Randalstown

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the nature of any delay with the street improvement works in Randalstown.

(AQW 18862/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Randalstown environmental improvements programme has been delayed due to concerns raised by the local Chamber of Trade regarding the duration of the works, its timing and the quality of materials. There are ongoing discussions between officials in DSD, DRD, Antrim Borough Council, local politicians and representatives from the Chamber of Trade to resolve these issues. Funding for an agreed scheme will be subject to the available Departmental budget in 2013/14 capital programme.

Homeless Young People: Upper Bann

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development how many young people have been assessed as being homeless in the Upper Bann constituency; and how their needs are being addressed.

(AQW 18887/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not routinely collate information by Parliamentary constituency. However, they have provided information for their District Office areas of Lurgan, Portadown and Banbridge on homeless applications from young people in two age bands: 16 & 17 year olds; and 18 – 25 year olds.

The table below details the number of young people in the two age bands that were accepted as homeless at 31 December 2012: -

Age	Housing Executive District Office		
	Lurgan	Portadown	Banbridge
16&17	2	3	0
18-25	6	1	3

The service and accommodation needs for young homeless people are being addressed by a Northern Ireland regional group co-chaired by the Health and Social Care Board and the Housing Executive. The needs for this client group are being looked at across each Health Trust taking into account the assessed needs for service in each location.

The Information provided in this response is governed by the Principles and Protocols of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. This is enforced by UK Statistics Authority.

Underoccupation Penalty: Upper Bann

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development how many people or families are at risk of financial penalty for under-occupation in each district within the Upper Bann Constituency.

(AQW 18888/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not routinely collate information by Parliamentary constituency. However, the table below details the estimated number of cases at risk of financial penalty for under occupation in the Housing Executive's Lurgan, Portadown and Banbridge District Office areas. The information is provided in terms of housing benefit claimants affected which includes families, couples and single people.

Housing Executive District Office Area	Estimated number of Housing Benefit Claimants Affected
Lurgan	844
Portadown	469
Banbridge	539
Total	1852

It should be noted that these figures are based on the current regulations in Great Britain and may change.

Homeless Young People: Lurgan

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development, following the closure of the Supporting People Service provided by Shankill Projects in Lurgan, how his Department plans to meet the needs of homeless young people.

(AQW 18889/11-15)

Mr McCausland: A housing needs assessment has been initiated by the NIHE/Southern Health and Social Care Commissioning Group.

Initial meetings have taken place and an exercise has been carried out which captures the housing support needs of young homeless and "Looked after children" within the Southern Trust.

It is anticipated that the data will be collated and finalised shortly.

This exercise will inform the future need and commissioning of any supported accommodation for young homeless/looked after children across the southern Health Trust area.

Fold Housing Association: Housing Project

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Social Development to provide details of the proposed housing project, being managed by the Fold Housing Association, on the old Northern Regional College site; and for an update on any progress that has been made since July 2012.

(AQW 18896/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The site of the former Northern Regional College, Fountain Street, Antrim initially appeared on the Surplus Public Sector Lands trawl in April 2012. This is a large site (approx 9.35 acres) and the Housing Executive expressed an interest in acquiring a portion of it for social housing. In May 2012, Land and Property Services indicated that apportionment of the site was feasible and the Housing Executive moved to nominate a Housing Association to take forward a 15 unit scheme.

Fold Housing Association was duly nominated and is currently in the process of procuring a design team to review the best design options for the part of the site they are interested in purchasing.

Fold Housing Association aims to make a planning application in May 2013, so as to achieve an on-site start currently scheduled in the Social Housing Development Programme for 2014/15.

Welfare Reform

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development what measures are being taken to ensure that people who are likely to be most affected by Welfare Reform will be the most informed about the changes to the system.

(AQW 18909/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I am committed to keeping all claimants informed about the Welfare Reform changes, particularly those people who are likely to be most affected by changes to the system.

I have commissioned a dedicated resource within the Social Security Agency to identify the needs of claimants, and bring forward a range of actions that will ensure claimants are kept informed.

The work completed so far has been extensive and includes research, detailed claimant insight work, public information sessions, direct correspondence with claimants, and the publication of online information to keep the public informed of the changes.

My Department is also working closely with community and voluntary organisations to ensure that information reaches those who are likely to be most affected by Welfare Reform. This work will continue as we move closer to implementation.

Voluntary Organisations: Funding

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister for Social Development, in light of the decision to review how his Department supports the voluntary sector, to detail the funding arrangements for voluntary organisations in relation to the volunteering infrastructure for the next financial year.

(AQW 18926/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I am committed to ensuring effective infrastructure support for volunteering as part of Northern Ireland's first ever Volunteering Strategy. My Department is presently considering delivery options for infrastructure support for volunteering. I expect any new arrangements to be put in place later this year. Where necessary interim arrangements will be put in place to ensure the continued support for volunteering and my officials will be meeting with existing providers during February setting out the new arrangements.

Voluntary Organisations: Collaborative and Partnership Initiatives

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister for Social Development what collaborative and partnership initiatives his Department has instigated with voluntary organisations since the decision in September 2012 to review how it supports the sector.

(AQW 18927/11-15)

Mr McCausland: New Regional Infrastructure Support arrangements came into effect from October 2012. These new arrangements are geared to provide key infrastructure support which allows Voluntary and Community Sector organisations to function effectively to deliver government objectives and maximise the impact of the work they do.

Under the new arrangements generic infrastructure support will be provided to the Voluntary and Community Sector by a consortium comprising NICVA, Community Evaluation Northern Ireland, Rural Community Network and CO3. Support will also be provided for the faith sector through Churches Community Work Alliance and for the voluntary advice sector through a consortium comprising of the Citizens Advice Bureau, Advice NI and the Law Centre.

Interim support is being provided for volunteering and for women in disadvantaged and rural areas until new arrangements are developed.

Voluntary Organisations

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the concerns of local volunteering organisations that the decision in September 2012 to review how his Department supports the sector could result in discouraging participation in volunteering.

(AQW 18928/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I am fully committed to implementing Northern Ireland's first ever Volunteering Strategy which aims to create the conditions that will encourage volunteering to flourish. I appreciate the concerns of volunteering infrastructure organisations following my decision in September to conduct further research into the infrastructure support that is needed. I remain committed to providing effective infrastructure support for volunteering as part of the Volunteering Strategy. My Department is presently considering delivery options for infrastructure support for volunteering. I expect any new arrangements to be put in place later this year.

Community Benefit Office: Shantallow, Derry

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Social Development to outline his future plans for the Community Benefit Office in Shantallow, Derry.

(AQW 18936/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In addition to its regional network of 35 Jobs and Benefit Offices/Social Security Offices, the Social Security Agency also has three Community Benefit Offices located in Ballyclare, Crossmaglen and Londonderry. The Community Benefit Offices currently provide only a limited range of services which often require the claimant to subsequently attend a local Jobs and Benefits Office. In line with the Agency's commitment to deliver a modernised Welfare System to all claimants, a review of these offices is currently underway. The outcome of the review is expected to be known shortly which will then be communicated to relevant stakeholders and staff.

Welfare Reform: Bedroom Tax

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development whether he has discussed under occupancy with Lord Freud, and more specifically the impact of the bedroom tax on people with disabilities or on people who require an extra bedroom to accommodate contact with dependent children overnight; and whether there is any scope for implementing recommendations 13 and 14 of the Report on Welfare Reform by the Ad Hoc Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements.

(AQW 19130/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I recognise that the under occupancy restriction is a serious issue for Northern Ireland and I recently had a very productive meeting with Lord Freud, the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

My officials are working with the Housing Executive to develop a range of support measures to complement those outlined in my housing strategy, which aim to mitigate under occupancy for those affected, support households through the transition and ensure that everyone has access to affordable housing.

The size criteria will allow a disabled claimant or partner who needs a non-resident overnight carer one extra room. In the case of shared access to children the child is treated as living with the parent who has main responsibility. If there is reason that another room is necessary, either as a result of disability or to accommodate the shared access to children, help may be available through the Discretionary Housing Payments Scheme.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Commission Meetings

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission to detail (i) how many meetings of the Commission have been called since 1 December 2012; (ii) how many have taken place; and (iii) the parties that have been represented at each meeting.

(AQW 18692/11-15)

Mr Weir (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): In response:

- (i) Four meetings of the Commission have been convened since 1 December 2012;
- (ii) One meeting of the Commission took place on 4 December 2012 with all parties represented on the Commission being present;
- (iii) Two meetings of the Commission which were convened for December 2012 were inquorate. The DUP and UUP were represented on both these occasions; and
- (iv) One meeting of the Commission took place on 30 January 2013. The DUP, UUP and Alliance were represented on this occasion, the meeting was adjourned to resume on 5 February 2013.

Revised Written Answers

This section contains the revised written answers to questions tabled by Members.

The content of the responses is as received at the time from the relevant Minister or representative of the Assembly Commission, and it has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process or changed.

Revised Written Answers

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

In this Bound Volume, page WA 6, please replace AQW 18219/11-15 with:

Farm Inspections

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether her Department has target times for responding to queries that arise following farm inspections.

(AQW 18219/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): My Department aims to respond to queries that arise following farm inspections according to DARD's Customer Service Standards as follows:

- To see 95 % of customers, with a pre-arranged appointment within 10 minutes of agreed time;
- To see 95 % of customers, without an appointment within 15 minutes of their arrival time;
- To acknowledge 95% of letters / faxes / emails requiring a response within 3 working days;
- To provide a full response to 95% of letters / faxes / emails within 15 working days of receipt; and
- Ensure all telephone calls are answered as quickly as possible and within 6 rings.

Specifically, with regard to queries arising from Single Farm Payment inspections, the claimant may use a Client Referral Form if they wish to query their initial farm inspection findings. Following an inspection, claimants receive this form, along with letter, field report and an updated map that outlines the initial findings of the inspection. My Department aims to action and complete these queries within 15 working days of receipt.

Department of the Environment

In Bound Volume 80, page WA 357, please replace AQW 17795/11-15 with:

Littering

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the responses he has received to his letter to local councils concerning their lack of action on littering; and what additional action councils are now taking.

(AQW 17795/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): The Department wrote to all District Council Chief Executives on 18 October 2012 highlighting the fact that annual fixed penalty notice figures indicate that some Councils are much more proactive than others in taking enforcement action against litter offenders and to ascertain why the figures are as they are.

18 of the 26 Councils responded to the Department, namely Limavady, Larne, Belfast, Newtownabbey, Fermanagh, Coleraine, Magherafelt, Craigavon, Antrim, Ballymoney, Ballymena, Dungannon, Cookstown, Omagh, Lisburn, North Down, Moyle and Carrickfergus. Detailed and informative responses were received from many of these Councils. The following table provides details of key points made by each Council. The table also provides details of additional action by the Councils.

Council	Litter Fines Issued 2011/12	Extracts/summaries of key points made by Councils
Antrim	30	Strongly committed to a policy of robust enforcement and environmental education programmes. A small number of complaints are received concerning cleanliness issues and Council is of the view that current balanced approach of enforcement and education is appropriate.
Ballymena	30	Employs 2 enforcement wardens covering a wide range of duties, including litter enforcement. Resources for litter related work is carefully targeted to gain maximum benefit. Enforcement is only one arm of the battle against litterproactive work includes community clean-up operations; targeting hot spots to educate rather than criminalise children; to introduce an educational "yellow card" scheme to be followed by a fine for reoffending. Additional action: currently exploring the possibility of identifying sufficient funding to allow a dedicated resource to be put in place.

Council	Litter Fines Issued 2011/12	Extracts/summaries of key points made by Councils
Ballymoney	4	The approach taken as regards litter enforcement is proportionate to the "problem" within the Borough and available resources are targeted to need in light of intelligence obtained from a number of sources...The use of fixed penalty notices is but one approach to addressing the litter issue and its use within this Borough reflects that fact.
Belfast	1534	<p>...there is a dedicated enforcement team consisting of Enforcement Officers and Litter Wardens. The Enforcement Officers are based in districts throughout the city and have a remit covering domestic and commercial waste, littering, graffiti and fly-posting. The Litter Wardens are based in the city centre and detect littering and fly-posting offences. One of the Council's key service performance outputs is to determine an annual target in respect of the number of fixed penalty notices issued for littering in a financial year.</p> <p>Additional action: The target for fixed penalty notices in 2012/13 is 2000.</p>
Carrickfergus	19	<p>...recently undergone a number of staff changes within the Pollution Control Team which has impacted on ability to undertake litter patrols.</p> <p>Additional action: Developing a litter and dog fouling strategy aimed at looking at how the Council can better target its resources in order to address this type of low level environmental crime. The Council recently committed to recruiting a second Enforcement Officer to educate the public in order to improve the environmental quality of the Borough and to increase the number of fixed penalties issued by Council. Targets are to be set for the issuing of fixed penalty notices. Enforcement Officers will undertake a wide range of duties including litter enforcement. Litter enforcement is being taken seriously by the Council and it is anticipated that there will be a reduction in litter and fouling complaints and resultant improvements in environmental quality through greater numbers of fixed penalty notices being issued in 2013.</p>
Coleraine	16	<p>Employs 2 enforcement wardens undertaking a wide range of duties including litter enforcement. Zero tolerance policy for litter offenders over the age of 18. Figures for 2011/12 were down due to long term sickness of one of the enforcement wardens. The Council's Environment Officer concentrates on education within schools, youth groups and community groups promoting anti litter and coastal awareness.</p> <p>Additional action: will be reviewing work procedures to adopt a more pro-active approach in taking enforcement action against litter offenders.</p>
Cookstown	12	The Council does not have any dedicated litter wardens, however, all officers are authorised for the purposes of Clean Neighbourhoods legislation and the Litter Order. The Council takes a zero tolerance approach to all littering offences that are detected. Council is of the view that a proactive and robust enforcement mechanism must be in place to ensure that the regulatory message is clear and succinct. The Council has been proactive in taking forward its Clean Neighbourhoods Programme which focuses on education, community engagement and regulation.
Craigavon	1046	<p>The Council takes a zero tolerance approach to litter throughout the Borough. It employs 4 environmental wardens to help to address the litter problem.</p> <p>Additional action: currently looking at the possibility of appointing another warden in the next financial year.</p>
Dungannon & South Tyrone	1	The Council does not have a written litter strategy. All complaints received are investigated and action taken as appropriate in each individual case. The Council does not employ litter wardens and as a result any action in respect of litter is dependent on Environmental Health Officers being a witness to the offence. The pressures on current resources are also likely to have had an impact on the level of fixed penalties served.

Council	Litter Fines Issued 2011/12	Extracts/summaries of key points made by Councils
Fermanagh	8	<p>The Council believes that a major contributory factor to the success in the cleanliness of our streets is the Council's initiative where orderlies have responsibility for a range of duties in all our towns, villages and hamlets. Each, generally living in his/her own area, develops a sense of pride and ownership, which is rarely adopted by those remote from their area. The issue of fixed penalties is not the only method of changing attitudes to litteringThe Council has adopted an approach whereby the natural environment is improved, good facilities provided and users educated in responsible behaviour.</p> <p>Additional action: will continue to monitor the effectiveness of the entire initiative going forward.</p>
Larne	23	<p>The Council takes a proactive and robust approach to enforcement and whilst the number of fixed penalty notices issued in 2011/12 reduced considerably from the previous 2 years, this was a result of the long-term absence of a member of staff.</p>
Limavady	4	<p>The Council employs one Enforcement Officer who is also responsible for a wide range of duties and therefore the resources to proactively patrol the Borough to detect litter offences is restricted. The Council has always taken a consistent approach in dealing with litter offences. Complaints are always investigated thoroughly and if there is sufficient evidence a fixed penalty notice will be issued.</p> <p>Additional action: the Council is in the process of developing a litter enforcement policy.</p>
Lisburn	42	<p>The Council does not have any litter wardens and instead it utilises staff that are authorised under the legislation to issue fixed penalty notices in addition to their other duties. Any comparison between councils is skewed by the scale of the resources dedicated to this area. Lisburn City Council has achieved a commendable performance with the resources available to us. While the increased level of fine may act as more of a deterrent against offending, the additional income generated is insignificant when compared to the cost of employing dedicated litter wardens...</p>
Magherafelt	40	<p>The Council administers the issuing of fixed penalty notices for litter through its enforcement officer whose duties cover a wide range of issues in addition to litter enforcement. The Council targets areas where litter has been reported as an issue and has been more proactive since the introduction of the Clean Neighbourhoods legislation.</p> <p>Additional action: during the 6 month period (April to September 2012) it issued 38 fixed penalty notices for litter which is a significant pro rata increase on previous years.</p>
Moyle	5	<p>The Council takes the issue of litter enforcement very seriously and regular patrols to detect littering offenders are carried out. Fixed penalty notices are issued in all cases where littering offences are detected. The Council has the smallest population in Northern Ireland and this is reflected in the number of fixed penalties issued.</p>
Newtownabbey	150	<p>The Council employs 2.5 full time employment enforcement officers. It carries out all enforcement activities in line with its Enforcement Policy. The Council believes in firm but fair regulation. The number of fixed penalty notices issued does not reflect the level of educational initiatives undertaken by the Council to curb littering.</p> <p>Additional action: the Enforcement Policy is reviewed every 2 years to ensure that it remains relevant to new legislation for which the Council has enforcement responsibilities.</p>
North Down	4	<p>While the actual number of fixed penalty fines issued is low, it does not necessarily indicate that this Borough is strewn with litter. The Council has a firm, responsible and fair approach to dealing with those who litter and approaches this through education, appropriate street cleaning and enforcement. The Council undertakes limited targeted patrols in the Borough to detect littering offences. The Council does not have the resources to employ specific litter wardens unlike other Councils such as Belfast and Craigavon. The Council Enforcement Officers have a demanding workload and deal with a wide range of issues, including littering.</p>

Council	Litter Fines Issued 2011/12	Extracts/summaries of key points made by Councils
Omagh	24	The Council employs 1 litter warden who patrols the district to enforce Council policy regarding litter abatement. The figures for 2011/12 are down from the previous year and this is attributed to a more rigorous awareness campaign. The litter warden also issues formal warnings and carries out an education programme with the local schools.
Ards	12	No response
Armagh City & District	14	No response
Banbridge	12	No response
Castlereagh	26	No response
Derry	41	No response
Down	60	No response
Newry & Mourne	89	No response
Strabane	22	No response

It is disappointing that 8 Councils did not respond to this exercise. However, the information received so far helps to put the figures from Councils into a local context, and factors such as the employment of dedicated litter wardens would appear to equate to a more proactive enforcement policy with higher numbers of fixed penalty notices issued for littering offences.

I am satisfied that Councils take their duties in respect of litter enforcement seriously and other initiatives such as education and awareness have an important role to play. However, evidence of robust enforcement of the anti-litter laws in local neighbourhoods across all of Northern Ireland is necessary in order to send out a clear and consistent message that littering will not be tolerated, it is an offence to drop litter and those who commit that offence are likely to be fined, and if fines are not paid offenders will face prosecution in the Courts. I am not satisfied that this is the message which has applied in some Council districts over recent years in view of the very small numbers of fines actually issued in those districts. Litter fines are a valuable and effective deterrent and there is clearly room for improvement in their use to tackle littering in some Council districts.

I will therefore be carrying out a further assessment of the overall Northern Ireland situation after the end of this financial year by which time I would expect to see some improvements.

There is already some evidence of a more proactive and focussed approach being adopted in some Council districts in view of the additional action highlighted in the above table. For example, the challenging targets set by Belfast City Council, interim results from Magherafelt for the first 6 months of this financial year, significant plans to take effect in Carrickfergus, the possibility of a dedicated resource in Ballymena and an additional enforcement officer in Craigavon and the development of a litter enforcement policy in Limavady. I also note that reviews are taking place in Coleraine, Newtownabbey and Fermanagh. These are all encouraging developments and I am hopeful that my next assessment of the situation after the end of this financial year will provide further evidence of more effective action against littering offenders.

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Journal of Proceedings

Minutes of Proceedings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 21 January 2013

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 Deferred votes - Commitment to Inclusivity, Mutual Respect, Peace and Democracy

The Motion and the Amendment were debated on 15 January 2013 but the votes were deferred because a valid Petition of Concern was presented under Standing Order 28 on 15 January 2013 in relation to the Amendment.

Proposed:

That this Assembly reaffirms its commitment to the principles of inclusivity, mutual respect, peace and democracy; condemns all acts of violence and intimidation against police officers, elected representatives, other members of society, homes and property at all times; and calls on all political parties to support the spirit of the Belfast Agreement.

*Mr M Nesbitt
Mr R Swann*

2.2 Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'times;' and insert:

'and calls on all political parties to give full effect to their commitment to the consent principle which recognises Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom.'

*Mr G Campbell
Mr R Newton
Mr S Hamilton*

The Question being put, the Amendment **fell** on a cross-community vote (Division 1).

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** (Division 2).

3. Speaker's Business

3.1 Royal Assent

The Speaker advised Members that Royal Assent had been signified on 18 January 2013 to the Historical Institutional Abuse Act (Northern Ireland) 2013 and the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2013.

4. Assembly Business (Cont'd)

4.1 Motion - Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Robin Swann replace Mr Danny Kinahan as a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr R Swann
Mrs S Overend

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

4.2 Motion: Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Ms Bronwyn McGahan replace Mr Barry McElduff as a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning; and that Mr Barry McElduff replace Mr Phil Flanagan as a member of the Committee on Procedures.

Ms C Ruane
Mr G Kelly

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

4.3 Motion: Assembly Commission Membership

The Speaker informed Members that he had received notification of the resignation of Mr Barry McElduff as a Member of the Assembly Commission.

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 79(4), Ms Caitriona Ruane be appointed to fill a vacancy on the Assembly Commission.

Ms C Ruane
Mr G Kelly

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support.

5. Executive Committee Business

5.1 Statement - Telecommunications in Northern Ireland

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mrs Arlene Foster, made a statement regarding Telecommunications in Northern Ireland, following which she replied to questions.

5.2 Consideration Stage - Business Improvement Districts Bill (NIA 9/11-15)

The Minister for Social Development, Mr Nelson McCausland, moved the Consideration Stage of the Business Improvement Districts Bill.

Three amendments were tabled to the Bill.

Clauses

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clauses 1 to 5 stand part of the Bill.

After debate, Amendment 1 to Clause 6 was **made** without division.

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clause 6, as amended, stand part of the Bill.

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clauses 7 to 18 stand part of the Bill.

After debate, Amendment 2 to Clause 19 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 3 to Clause 19 was **made** without division.

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clause 19, as amended, stand part of the Bill.

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clauses 20 to 22 stand part of the Bill.

Long Title

The question being put, the Long Title was **agreed** without division.

Bill NIA 9/11-15 passed Consideration Stage and stood referred to the Speaker.

6. Committee Business

6.1 Motion - Report on Statutory Committee Activity on European Issues May 2011 - August 2012

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes the Report of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (NIA/81/11-15) on Statutory Committee Activity on European Issues May 2011 - August 2012.

Chairperson, Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Debate ensued.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

The debate was suspended for Question Time.

7. Question Time

7.1 Regional Development

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Regional Development, Mr Danny Kennedy.

7.2 Social Development

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Social Development, Mr Nelson McCausland.

8. Committee Business (Cont'd)

8.1 Motion - Report on Statutory Committee Activity on European Issues May 2011 - August 2012 (Cont'd)

Debate resumed on the motion.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

9. Private Members' Business

9.1 Motion - The Economic Value of Northern Ireland's Historic Environment

Proposed:

That this Assembly welcomes the publication of the report 'A Study of the Economic Value of Northern Ireland's Historic Environment'; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to work with Executive colleagues to examine ways in which the report's recommendations could be implemented.

Mr S Hamilton

Mr P Weir

Mr P Frew

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

10. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.14pm.

Mr William Hay

The Speaker

21 January 2013

Northern Ireland Assembly

21 January 2013

Divisions

Division No. 1

Commitment to Inclusivity, Mutual Respect, Peace and Democracy - Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'times;' and insert:

'and calls on all political parties to give full effect to their commitment to the consent principle which recognises Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom.'

Mr G Campbell

Mr R Newton

Mr S Hamilton

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 47

Noes: 52

AYES

Unionist

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Rt Hon P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.

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

NOES

Nationalist

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

Unionist

Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea.

Other

Mr Agnew, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dickson, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Rogers and Ms Ruane.

Total votes	99	Total Ayes	47	[47.5%]
Nationalist Vote	41	Nationalist Ayes	0	[0.0%]
Unionist Votes	49	Unionist Ayes	47	[95.9%]
Other Votes	9	Other Ayes	0	[0.0%]

The Amendment **fell** on a cross-community vote.

Northern Ireland Assembly

21 January 2013

Divisions

Division No. 2

Commitment to Inclusivity, Mutual Respect, Peace and Democracy - Motion

Proposed:

That this Assembly reaffirms its commitment to the principles of inclusivity, mutual respect, peace and democracy; condemns all acts of violence and intimidation against police officers, elected representatives, other members of society, homes and property at all times; and calls on all political parties to support the spirit of the Belfast Agreement.

Mr M Nesbitt

Mr R Swann

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 62

Noes: 33

AYES

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

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Kinahan and Mr Nesbitt.

NOES

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

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

The Motion was **carried**.

Business Improvement Districts Bill

Marshalled List of Amendments

Consideration Stage

Monday 21 January 2013

Amendments tabled up to 9.30am Thursday, 17 January 2013 and selected for debate

The Bill will be considered in the following order-

Clauses and Long Title

Amendment 1

Clause 6, Page 3, Line 1

Leave out subsection (3) and insert -

'(3) In this Act "eligible ratepayer" means a person who on the prescribed date occupies or is entitled to possession of relevant property, whether or not rates are payable by that person in respect of it.'

Minister for Social Development

Amendment 2

Clause 19, Page 7, Line 26

At end insert -

'() section 6(3);'

Minister for Social Development

Amendment 3

Clause 19, Page 7, Line 27

At end insert -

'() section 17(2)(b);'

Minister for Social Development

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 16 - 21 January 2013

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
 - Libraries NI Annual Report and Accounts 2011 – 2012 (DCAL)
 - Second Legislative Consent Memorandum Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill (DETI)
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
 - (The department identified after each rule is for reference purposes only)
 - Draft S. R. The Plant Health (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 (DARD)
 - S. R. 2013/5 The Road Traffic (Fixed Penalty) (Offences) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 (DOE)
 - S. R. 2013/6 The Road Traffic (Fixed Penalty) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 (DOE)
 - For Information Only:**
 - S. R. 2013/8 The Parking Places (Disabled Persons' Vehicles) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 (DRD)
 - S. R. 2013/11 The Waiting Restrictions (Fivemiletown) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 (DRD)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
 - Department for Business Innovation & Skills Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006: Consultation on Proposed Changes to the Regulations January 2013 (DEL)
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
 - The single-tier pension: a simple foundation for saving (DWP)
 - Department for Work and Pensions Draft Pensions Bill (DWP)
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 22 January 2013

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 - Advancing New School Builds

The Minister of Education, Mr John O'Dowd, made a statement regarding Advancing New School Builds, following which he replied to questions.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

2.2 Statement - North South Ministerial Council Meeting in Inland Waterways sectoral format

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín, made a statement regarding the North South Ministerial Council meeting in Inland Waterways sectoral format, held on 12 December 2012, following which she replied to questions.

2.3 Statement - North South Ministerial Council Meeting in Language sectoral format

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín, made a statement regarding the North South Ministerial Council meeting in Language sectoral format, held on 12 December 2012, following which she replied to questions.

2.4 Statement - Public Expenditure: 2012-13 January Monitoring and 2013-14 and 2014-15 Technical Exercise

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson, made a statement regarding Public Expenditure: 2012-13 January Monitoring and 2013-14, and 2014-15 Technical Exercise, following which he replied to questions.

The sitting was suspended at 12.58pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Speaker in the Chair.

3. Question Time

3.1 Agriculture and Rural Development

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Mrs Michelle O'Neill.

3.2 Culture, Arts and Leisure

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín.

4. Executive Committee Business (Cont'd)

4.1 Second Stage - Planning Bill (NIA 17/11-15)

The Minister of the Environment, Mr Alex Attwood, moved the Second Stage of the Planning Bill (NIA 17/11-15).

Debate ensued.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

The Planning Bill passed Second Stage without division.

5. Adjournment

Ms Pam Brown spoke to her topic on the promotion of mental health services in South Antrim.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 7.46pm.

Mr William Hay

The Speaker

22 January 2013

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 22 January 2013

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
Business Improvement Districts Bill (NIA 9/11-15) (as amended at Consideration Stage) (DSD)
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
(The department identified after each rule is for reference purposes only)
 - S. R. 2013/4 The Single Use Carrier Bags Charge Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 (DOE)

For Information Only:

 - S. R. 2013/9 The Waiting Restrictions (Holywood) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 (DRD)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
Consultation on Proposals for Fixed Penalties for Offences Related to Taxi Operator Licensing (DOE)
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as at 22 January 2013

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
Marine Bill NIA Bill 5/11-15	21.02.12	05.03.12	06.07.12	05.07.12				
Superannuation Bill NIA Bill 6/11-15	12.03.12	26.03.12	28.09.12	26.09.12	22.10.12	06.11.12	19.11.12	10.01.13
Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill NIA Bill 7/11-15	12.06.12	25.06.12	26.10.12	24.10.12	20.11.12	03.12.12	11.12.12	18.01.13
Business Improvement Districts Bill NIA Bill 9/11-15	25.06.12	17.09.12	13.12.12	13.12.12	21.01.13			
Criminal Justice Bill NIA Bill 10/11-15	25.06.12	03.07.12	14.12.12	13.12.12				
Charities Bill NIA Bill 11/11-15	02.07.12	11.09.12	23.10.12	23.10.12	20.11.12	03.12.12	11.12.12	18.01.13
Welfare Reform Bill NIA Bill 13/11-15	01.10.12	09.10.12	22.01.13					
Education Bill NIA Bill 14/11-15	02.10.12	15.10.12	03.12.12	08.04.13				

Title & Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
/Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill NIA Bill 15/11-15	08.10.12	16.10.12	N/A	N/A	22.10.12	05.11.12	06.11.12	11.12.12
Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill NIA Bill 16/11-15	19.11.12	27.11.12	29.01.12					
Planning Bill NIA Bill 17/11-15	14.01.13	22.01.13	05.03.13					

**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
Civil Service (Special Advisers) Bill NIA Bill 12/11-15	02.07.12	25.09.12	15.02.13					

/ Bill progressing by accelerated passage

** Please note that any bills that received Royal Assent in the previous session have been removed from the table.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 28 January 2013

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Assembly Business

2.1 Motion - Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Alastair Ross replace Mr George Robinson as a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning.

*Mr P Weir
Lord Morrow*

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Statement - Outcome of the EU Fisheries Council December 2012

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Mrs Michelle O'Neill, made a statement regarding the Outcome of the EU Fisheries Council December 2012, following which she replied to questions.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

3.2 Statement - North South Ministerial Council meeting in Aquaculture and Marine sectoral format

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Mrs Michelle O'Neill, made a statement regarding the North South Ministerial Council meeting in Aquaculture and Marine sectoral format, held on 12 December 2012, following which she replied to questions.

4. Committee Business

4.1 Motion - Extension of Committee Stage: Welfare Reform Bill (NIA 13/11-15)

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 19 February 2013 in relation to the Committee Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill (NIA 13/11-15).

Chairperson, Committee for Social Development

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

5. Private Members' Business

5.1 Motion - Programme For Government: Commitments to Tackle Social Disadvantage

Proposed:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to outline what steps his Department is taking to deliver on the commitments relating to tackling social disadvantage contained in the Programme for Government, which the Department for Social Development is responsible for delivering.

Mr A Maskey

Mr M Brady

Mr F McCann

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

The sitting was suspended at 2.10pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.30pm, with the Speaker in the Chair.

6. Question Time

6.1 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 Jennifer McCann, also answered a number of questions.

6.2 Education

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Education, Mr John O'Dowd.

7. Question for Urgent Oral Answer

7.1 Co-operation between criminal justice agencies in response to the murder of Detective Garda Donohoe

The Minister of Justice, Mr David Ford, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer tabled by Mr Conall McDevitt.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) in the Chair.

8. Private Members' Business (Cont'd)

8.1 Motion - Review of Public Administration

Proposed:

That this Assembly acknowledges the significant workload and substantial costs involved in the delivery of the Executive's Local Government reform transition as proposed under the Review of Public Administration; believes that the Executive should provide financial support for the reform process, including for future rates convergence; and calls on the Executive to provide financial support to councils to cover the upfront costs of RPA, which yield no short term savings, and to ensure that these costs do not result in rate increases.

Mrs D Kelly

Mr C Eastwood

8.2 Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'Administration;' and insert:

'recognises that Local Government will be the beneficiary of the savings that result from reform; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to engage with the Minister of Finance and Personnel on financing reform and, in particular, on the issue of rates convergence with the aim of developing a solution that does not result in rate increases.'

Mr S Hamilton

Mr P Weir

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Amendment **fell** on division.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

9. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.32pm.

Mr William Hay

The Speaker

28 January 2013

Northern Ireland Assembly

28 January 2013
Division 1

Review of Public Administration - Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'Administration;' and insert:

'recognises that Local Government will be the beneficiary of the savings that result from reform; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to engage with the Minister of Finance and Personnel on financing reform and, in particular, on the issue of rates convergence with the aim of developing a solution that does not result in rate increases.'

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 36

Noes: 52

Ayes

Mr Agnew, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Dickson, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr G Robinson, Rt Hon P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

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

Noes

Mr Allister, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hussey, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McClarty, Ms McCorley, Mr B McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Molloy, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Byrne and Mrs McKeivitt.

The Amendment **fell**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 23 - 28 January 2013

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2013

Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Act (Northern Ireland) 2013

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

3. Orders in Council

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

The Sports Council for Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2012 (DCAL)

Legislative Consent Memorandum - Antarctic Bill (OFMDFM)

5. Assembly Reports

6. Statutory Rules

(The department identified after each rule is for reference purposes only)

- S.R. 2013/12 The Energy Performance of Buildings (Certificates and Inspections) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 (DFP)

For Information Only:

- S. R. 2013/10 The Roads (Classification) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 (DRD)
- S. R. 2013/13 The Waiting Restrictions (John Street, Castlederg) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 (DRD)
- S. R. 2013/14 The Parking Places, Loading Bays and Waiting Restrictions (Portadown) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 (DRD)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

8. Consultation Documents

Consultation on proposals to Reform Public Service Pensions from April 2015 (DFP)

Northern Ireland Executive - Welfare Reform Rate Rebate Replacement Arrangements (DFP)

Department for Social Development Provision of Discretionary Support 2013: A consultation on the service design (DSD)

9. Departmental Publications

Building an Active Travel Future for Northern Ireland (DRD)

10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 29 January 2013

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 Further Consideration Stage - Business Improvement Districts Bill (NIA 9/11-15)

The Minister for Social Development, Mr Nelson McCausland, moved the Further Consideration Stage of the Business Improvement Districts Bill.

No amendments were tabled to the Bill.

The Business Improvement Districts Bill (NIA 9/11-15) stood referred to the Speaker for consideration in accordance with section 10 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

3. Committee Business

3.1 Motion - Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements, Welfare Reform Bill

Proposed:

That this Assembly approves the Report (NIA 92/11-15) of the Ad Hoc Committee set up to consider whether the provisions of the Welfare Reform Bill are in conformity with the requirements for equality and observance of human rights; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to consider its recommendations.

Chairperson, Ad Hoc Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements, Welfare Reform Bill

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **negatived** on a cross-community vote (Division 1).

4. Private Members' Business

4.1 Motion - Rose Energy

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes the importance of the poultry sector to the Northern Ireland economy; further notes with regret the decision by the Minister of the Environment to refuse planning permission for the Rose Energy incinerator project; and calls on the Minister to outline the action being taken to find an alternative viable solution for disposing of poultry litter.

Mr T Clarke

Ms P Brown

Mr P Frew

4.2 Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out 'with regret'

Mr M McLaughlin

Mr C Boylan

Mr B McElduff

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.27pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) in the Chair.

5. Question Time

5.1 Employment and Learning

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Employment and Learning, Dr Stephen Farry.

5.2 Finance and Personnel

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson.

6. Private Members' Business (Cont'd)

6.1 Motion - Rose Energy (Cont'd)

Debate resumed on the motion.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made** (Division 2).

The Question being put, the Motion, as amended, was **carried** without division.

7. Adjournment

Mr Mickey Brady spoke to his topic on the Daisy Hill Plant Nursery in Newry.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 4.50pm.

Mr William Hay

The Speaker

29 January 2013

Northern Ireland Assembly

29 January 2013

Divisions

Division No. 1

Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements, Welfare Reform Bill - Motion

Proposed:

That this Assembly approves the Report (NIA 92/11-15) of the Ad Hoc Committee set up to consider whether the provisions of the Welfare Reform Bill are in conformity with the requirements for equality and observance of human rights; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to consider its recommendations.

Chairperson, Ad Hoc Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements, Welfare Reform Bill

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 53

Noes: 38

AYES

Unionist

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Other

Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dickson, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy.

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

NOES

Nationalist

Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McDevitt, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Molloy, Mr Ó hOisín, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Other

Mr Agnew.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Brady and Mr Eastwood.

Total votes	91	Total Ayes	53	[58.2%]
Nationalist Vote	37	Nationalist Ayes	0	[0.0%]
Unionist Votes	45	Unionist Ayes	45	[100.0%]
Other Votes	9	Other Ayes	8	[88.9%]

The Motion was **negatived** on a cross-community vote.

Northern Ireland Assembly

29 January 2013

Divisions

Division No. 2

Rose Energy - Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out 'with regret'

Mr M McLaughlin

Mr C Boylan

Mr B McElduff

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 43

Noes: 37

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dickson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr B McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Ó hOisín, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Boylan and Mr Mitchel McLaughlin.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr McCallister, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Clarke and Mr McQuillan.

The Amendment was **made**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 29 January 2013

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
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 JANUARY 2013

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
Marine Bill NIA Bill 5/11-15	21.02.12	05.03.12	06.07.12	05.07.12				
Superannuation Bill NIA Bill 6/11-15	12.03.12	26.03.12	28.09.12	26.09.12	22.10.12	06.11.12	19.11.12	10.01.13
Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill NIA Bill 7/11-15	12.06.12	25.06.12	26.10.12	24.10.12	20.11.12	03.12.12	11.12.12	18.01.13
Business Improvement Districts Bill NIA Bill 9/11-15	25.06.12	17.09.12	13.12.12	13.12.12	21.01.13	29.01.13		
Criminal Justice Bill NIA Bill 10/11-15	25.06.12	03.07.12	14.12.12	13.12.12				
Charities Bill NIA Bill 11/11-15	02.07.12	11.09.12	23.10.12	23.10.12	20.11.12	03.12.12	11.12.12	18.01.13
Welfare Reform Bill NIA Bill 13/11-15	01.10.12	09.10.12	22.01.13	19.02.13				
Education Bill NIA Bill 14/11-15	02.10.12	15.10.12	03.12.12	08.04.13				

Title & Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
/Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill NIA Bill 15/11-15	08.10.12	16.10.12	N/A	N/A	22.10.12	05.11.12	06.11.12	11.12.12
Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill NIA Bill 16/11-15	19.11.12	27.11.12	29.01.12					
Planning Bill NIA Bill 17/11-15	14.01.13	22.01.13	05.03.13					

**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
Civil Service (Special Advisers) Bill NIA Bill 12/11-15	02.07.12	25.09.12	15.02.13					

/ Bill progressing by accelerated passage

** Please note that any bills that received Royal Assent in the previous session have been removed from the table.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 04 February 2013

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Ruling

2.1 Use of electronic devices in the Chamber

The Speaker reminded Members of the ruling regarding the use of electronic devices in the Chamber.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Legislative Consent Motion - Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill

Proposed:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions in clause 62 of the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill, as introduced in the House of Lords on 18 October 2012, dealing with Estate Agency Work.

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

4. Committee Business

4.1 Motion - GP Annual Health Checks

Proposed:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make it mandatory for General Practitioners to provide annual health checks for their patients, to help promote good health, prevent ill-health and detect disease at an early stage.

Chairperson, Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Debate ensued.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

The Speaker took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

5. Private Members' Business

5.1 Motion - Feasibility of Free School Transport for all Pupils

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the wide-ranging benefits associated with using public transport; notes with concern the increase in car traffic during school term time; recognises the financial strain on parents paying school transport costs and the administrative costs to implement the current school bus pass system; and calls on the Minister of Education, in conjunction with the Minister for Regional Development, to conduct a feasibility study into providing free public transport for all school pupils.

Mrs J Cochrane

Mr S Dickson

Mr C Lyttle

Debate ensued.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

The debate was suspended for Question Time.

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 Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mrs Arlene Foster.

7. Private Members' Business (Cont'd)

7.1 Motion - Feasibility of Free School Transport for all Pupils (Cont'd)

Debate resumed on the motion.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

The Speaker took the Chair.

7.2 Motion - National Crime Agency

A valid Petition of Concern was presented in relation to this motion under Standing Order 28, on Friday 01 February (Appendix 1).

Proposed:

That this Assembly supports a Legislative Consent Motion in relation to the Crime and Courts Bill to give effect to the proposed National Crime Agency operating in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Justice to progress this as a matter of urgency.

Mr T Elliott

Mr R Hussey

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **negatived** on a cross-community vote with division.

8. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.41pm.

Mr William Hay

The Speaker

04 February 2013

Appendix 1

Northern Ireland Assembly

The undersigned Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly presented a petition of concern, in accordance with Standing Order 28, on Friday 01 February in relation to the following motion.

National Crime Agency

That this Assembly supports a Legislative Consent Motion in relation to the Crime and Courts Bill to give effect to the proposed National Crime Agency operating in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Justice to progress this as a matter of urgency.

- Mr Barry McElduff
- Mr Francie Molloy
- Mr Seán Lynch
- Mr Declan McAleer
- Mr Cathal Ó Hoisín
- Mr Fra McCann
- Mr Pat Sheehan
- Ms Sue Ramsey
- Ms Bronwyn McGahan
- Mr Daithí McKay
- Mr Chris Hazzard
- Mr Alex Maskey
- Ms Caitriona Ruane
- Mr Phil Flanagan
- Mr Cathal Boylan
- Ms Rosaleen McCorley
- Ms Maeve McLaughlin
- Mr Oliver McMullan
- Mr Mickey Brady
- Ms Megan Fearon
- Mr Pat Ramsey
- Mrs Karen McKeivitt
- Mr Colum Eastwood
- Mr Sean Rogers
- Mr Conall McDevitt
- Mr Mark Durkan
- Mr Joe Byrne
- Mrs Dolores Kelly
- Mr Patsy McGlone
- Mr Alban Maginness
- Mr Alex Attwood
- Mr John Dallat
- Mr Raymond McCartney

Northern Ireland Assembly

4 February 2013

Divisions

Division No. 1

National Crime Agency - Motion

Proposed:

That this Assembly supports a Legislative Consent Motion in relation to the Crime and Courts Bill to give effect to the proposed National Crime Agency operating in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Justice to progress this as a matter of urgency.

*Mr T Elliott
Mr R Hussey*

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 56

Noes: 39

AYES

Unionist

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Rt Hon P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Other

Mr Agnew, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dickson, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Hussey and Mr Kennedy.

NOES

Nationalist

Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Ms Ni Chuilin, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McCartney and Mrs McKeivitt.

Total votes	95	Total Ayes	56	[58.9%]
Nationalist Vote	39	Nationalist Ayes	0	[0.0%]
Unionist Votes	47	Unionist Ayes	47	[100.0%]
Other Votes	9	Other Ayes	9	[100.0%]

The Motion was **negatived** on a cross-community vote.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 30 January - 04 February 2013

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
Social Fund Annual Report 2011-2012 (DSD)
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
(The department identified after each rule is for reference purposes only)
 - S. R. 2013/15 The Rates (Temporary Rebate) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 (DFP)
 - S. R. 2013/16 The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 (DFP)
 - S. R. 2013/17 The Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 (DFP)
 - S. R. 2013/18 The County Courts (Financial Limits) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 (DOJ)

For Information Only:

 - Draft S. R. The Companies (Public Sector Audit) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 (DFP)
 - S. R. 2013/19 The County Court (Amendment) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2013 (DOJ)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
Northern Ireland Better Regulation Strategy - Annual Report 2011-2012 (DETI)
Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2012-2013 and Vote on Account 2013-2014 (DFP)
10. Agency Publications
Office of the Social Fund Commissioner for Northern Ireland Annual Report 2011-2012 (DSD)
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 05 February 2013

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

The Speaker informed Members that he would be absent from the Assembly next week on official Assembly business.

3. Private Members' Business

3.1 Motion - Internet Safety for Children

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the dangers for children associated with the internet; commits to building on the work which is already ongoing in this area at both Westminster and Stormont; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to take the lead on the publication of a cross departmental Internet Safety Strategy to help children enjoy the internet safely.

*Mrs S Overend
Miss M McIlveen
Mr M Durkan
Mr C Lyttle
Ms C Ruane*

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

3.2 Motion - Regulation of Social Networking Websites

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes the growing number of people and hate groups who use social networking websites to verbally abuse other users; further notes the use of these sites by sexual predators to groom victims; and calls on the Minister of Justice to explore the introduction of better regulation of these sites and tougher penalties for people who use the sites to commit crime.

*Ms R McCorley
Mr R McCartney
Mr S Lynch*

3.3 Amendment

Proposed:

; and further calls for additional policing resources so that online internet hate crimes are able to be fully investigated.

*Mr C McDevitt
Mr A Maginness*

Debate ensued.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

The sitting was suspended at 12.30pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) 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 Justice

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Justice, Mr David Ford.

5. Question for Urgent Oral Answer

5.1 Horsemeat found in meat production

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr Edwin Poots, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer tabled by Mr Joe Byrne.

6. Private Members' Business (Cont'd)

6.1 Motion - Regulation of Social Networking Websites (Cont'd)

Debate resumed on the motion.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made** without division.

The Question being put, the Motion, as amended, was **carried** without division.

7. Adjournment

Mr Simon Hamilton spoke to his topic on the future of the Strangford Lough Fishery.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 4.52pm.

Mr William Hay

The Speaker

05 February 2013

Northern Ireland Assembly

**Papers Presented to the Assembly on
05 February 2013**

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
7. Written Ministerial Statements
Future Configuration of Emergency Department Services in Belfast (DHSSPS)
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 6 February 2013

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
Marine Bill NIA Bill 5/11-15	21.02.12	05.03.12	06.07.12	05.07.12				
Superannuation Bill NIA Bill 6/11-15	12.03.12	26.03.12	28.09.12	26.09.12	22.10.12	06.11.12	19.11.12	10.01.13
Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill NIA Bill 7/11-15	12.06.12	25.06.12	26.10.12	24.10.12	20.11.12	03.12.12	11.12.12	18.01.13
Business Improvement Districts Bill NIA Bill 9/11-15	25.06.12	17.09.12	13.12.12	13.12.12	21.01.13	29.01.13		
Criminal Justice Bill NIA Bill 10/11-15	25.06.12	03.07.12	14.12.12	13.12.12				
Charities Bill NIA Bill 11/11-15	02.07.12	11.09.12	23.10.12	23.10.12	20.11.12	03.12.12	11.12.12	18.01.13
Welfare Reform Bill NIA Bill 13/11-15	01.10.12	09.10.12	22.01.13	19.02.13				
Education Bill NIA Bill 14/11-15	02.10.12	15.10.12	03.12.12	08.04.13				

Title & Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
/Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill NIA Bill 15/11-15	08.10.12	16.10.12	N/A	N/A	22.10.12	05.11.12	06.11.12	11.12.12
Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill NIA Bill 16/11-15	19.11.12	27.11.12	29.01.12	23.01.13				
Planning Bill NIA Bill 17/11-15	14.01.13	22.01.13	05.03.13					

**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
Civil Service (Special Advisers) Bill NIA Bill 12/11-15	02.07.12	25.09.12	15.02.13					

/ Bill progressing by accelerated passage

** Please note that any bills that received Royal Assent in the previous session have been removed from the table.

